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Burn Test

One of the easiest ways to get a general idea of composition is to do a burn test on your fabric or yarn.

Disclaimer: Use caution when lighting things on fire. Make sure you aren't holding the thing you're burning by your hand. Do it over something that won't burn like a pot or pan, glass pie dish, or rock. Make sure you aren't burning it over something plastic. Do it in a well-ventilated area - some fibers smoke is hazardous. Always have water or something to put out the fire nearby. It's fire. Don't be careless.

Begin by taking a small section of the yarn or fabric and cutting it away.

Protein Fibers: generally protein fibers smell like burnt hair. (Don't know what burnt hair smells like? Try burning your own. Remember to remove the hair from your head first. It's a distinctive smell.) Protein fibers burn slowly and will extinguish as soon as you remove them from the flame. Protein fibers will curl away from the flame. Burned protein fibers will easily crush into a gritty ash. Fibers from mammals (like sheep, goats, camelids, etc) will often give off a bit of dark smoke. Silk when burned will give off little to no smoke.

Cellulose fibers burn well. They give off a smell of burnt paper, wood or dry leaves. Ash is fine and soft, and if there is smoke it will be gray or white. Cellulose fibers will often continue burning for a little bit after being removed from the flame, and the ash will hold its form if it is not disturbed.

Synthetic fibers are a mixed bag. Rayon and other synthetics derived from cellulose will often react similarly to cellulose fibers, although the finish on some will cause the flame to flare before settling into a normal burn. Most other synthetic fibers (nylon, polyester, acrylic, to name a few) will burn readily, and will often flare. The yarn or fabric will often drip dangerously, and the fumes are often hazardous and smell bad. No ash is left but very hot beads will harden and will not crush. Smoke is dark colored.

Observation

Often more details can be determined by looking at the fibers. Angora and mohair will often have a halo. Cotton feels very different to the touch than flax, ramie or hemp. Synthetics will often have a stiffer feel to them. Practice makes perfect. The more fibers you expose yourself to, the more likely you will recognize differences.