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An Over/Under Proposition: The “Magic” Of Proper Cable Wraps

It beats dumping the whole thing on the floor, thinking a snake-pit mess will be easy to untangle, because this is even more time consuming.

June 08, 2012, by Paul LaPlaca

Very early in my career, I worked in the field as a sound recordist for WNED, a television station in Buffalo, New York.

My first day on the job, we finished doing a video shoot, and being the low person on the depth chart, it fell to me to pack up and put things away.

Never to be forgotten were the gasps of true horror as I proudly grabbed an XLR cable by its end with one hand and began rapidly winding it around the other hand and its related elbow.



If you've never seen this done, it's quite impressive – the cable gets wrapped in seconds flat, and with all of the flair and showmanship of a third-rate magician!

However, I was about to be “schooled,” because as at least some of you know, this bit of “slight of hand” is NOT the way to properly wrap a cable, be it audio or any other variety.

I bet the majority of us started out in this business with the firm conviction that the “hand-elbow” cable wrap method is not just the best way, but the only way. Oh, the foibles of youth.

Wrapping in this manner (and this goes for AC extension cords, too) forces the entire length of the cable to twist in one direction perpendicular to its length, putting undo stress on the conductors and shield. It also imprints a “memory” that returns when the cable is laid out again – it will maintain the pigtail, corkscrew twist that's been forced upon it.

Cable dressing and neatness are extremely important at all professional audio gigs, and especially so in corporate/industrials, the market my company serves. There's no better way to impress a client than crawling around on your hands and knees to fight with a bunch of unruly cables that refuse to lay flat. Not!

When my co-workers in Buffalo finally recovered from the aneurysms that my “magic tricks” had unwittingly caused, these kind souls patiently demonstrated to me the right way to coil a cable: the over/under wrap. (This method also goes by a few other names but we'll stick with over/under here.)

It's actually pretty simple, especially with just a bit of practice.

Essentially, as the cable is being picked up with one hand, it should be gently coiled into like-size loops that are collected in the other hand, which is positioned up/out.

This motion is gentle, and intuitively will follow the way that the cable “wants” to be wrapped. It becomes a natural feel, the hands work to guide the cable where it wants to go, but in an organized fashion.

What’s actually happening is that picking up the cable always introduces a certain amount of twist, and this is countered by (again, gently) a twist in the opposite direction.

Now, let’s be more specific. If right-handed, start with one end of the cable in the left hand, then grab the cable about 18 inches down and pull it straight, holding this section horizontal to the floor. Make a clockwise loop with the right hand, gently twisting the cable between your thumb and fingers also in a clockwise direction. Right and left hands should meet at the top of the loop facing each other in a mirror image.

Most microphone and smaller loudspeaker cables should be looped roughly 12 inches in diameter, depending on the length, material and thickness of the cable. If it feels like the loop should be bigger, then it probably should.

The next step is to create a loop that twists in the opposite direction to counter the twist of the first loop. Again, use the right hand to grab about 18 inches of length, away from the loop, and twist this length counter-clockwise, bringing the right hand in to meet the left.

This causes the cable to create a loop that falls on the back of the hand - the “under” portion of the wrap. The first and second loops cancel each other’s twist.

Continue wrapping the rest of the cable this way, but keep in mind that it doesn’t have to be exact. Sometimes the cable will want to go in one direction a couple of loops before taking an opposite twist. If a cable has been abused in the past, it may take a while for it to develop a new “memory.” It also helps to run the entire cable out straight and then remove any twists.

(Go [here](#) for more information on this technique.)

Once the wrap is complete, the loop can be secured with a Velcro fastener. These are available in a variety of sizes and colors from numerous vendors, and they can even be silk-screened with your company logo.

Note: when a cable is wrapped this way, first, always say “abracadabra!” Seriously, it’s important to always unwrap the cable end from the side of the loop that it ended on. Pulling the end through the loop to the other side can create a series of half-hitch “pretzels” down the entire run.

If this starts happening, stop immediately and get the loop back together, then try again. Hey, it beats dumping the whole thing on the floor, thinking a snake-pit mess will be easy to untangle, because this is even more time consuming. Not to mention the damage the cable could incur from undue strain.

And now, for my next trick...

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[← Return to article](#)

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