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How to Tie a Bow Tie

Tie a self-tie bow tie that sits straight and stays put, sized correctly for your collar, without needing a video halfway through.

3-day guide · 3 chapters · Self-Directed Learning Framework

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Every guide on this site is produced with the Self-Directed Learning Framework: instead of an article that explains a topic at you, it turns the topic into a structure you work through — each chapter with one outcome, a starting action under twelve minutes, the minimum you actually need to know, a worked example, a checklist, and exercises using your own situation. No filler, no re-reading required.

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Setting Up: Size and the Uneven Ends

> **Outcome:** "I can set my bow tie to the right size and start with the ends at the right lengths, so the knot has a fair chance of coming out even."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Check whether your bow tie has a sliding adjuster on the neckband. If it does, find the size markings and set it to your shirt collar size.

The minimum you need to know

Most self-tie bow ties are adjustable, with a small slider or hook-and-eye on the neckband. Set it to your shirt's collar size before you start. A band that's too loose gives a floppy bow, and one that's too tight pulls the bow down and makes it twist. Fixed-size bow ties need to be bought in your collar size. With your shirt on, collar up and top button done, put the tie around your neck with the two ends hanging down the front. Then pull it so one end hangs about 1.5 inches (4 cm) lower than the other. Throughout this guide, call that the long end. That small difference matters. If the ends start level, the knot uses up more of one side and the finished bow comes out uneven. A good check: the shaped part of the short end (where it widens into the bow shape) should sit just above the shaped part of the long end.

Worked example

Worked example: why the first attempt came out lopsided. Someone's first try leaves one bow wing noticeably smaller than the other. They had started with both ends exactly level. On the next attempt they set the tie to their 16-inch collar size and let one end hang about 1.5 inches (4 cm) lower than the other before starting. The wings come out within a few millimetres of each other, close enough to straighten by hand.

Checklist

- [ ] Neckband set to your collar size (or the right fixed size bought)
- [ ] Collar up and top button done before starting
- [ ] One end hanging about 1.5 inches (4 cm) lower than the other
- [ ] Long end identified and kept as the one you'll move most
- [ ] Shaped part of the short end sitting just above the shaped part of the long end

Exercises

1. Set the size and the uneven drop three times, until you can do it without looking down.
2. Start once with level ends and once with the 1.5-inch drop, tie the knot both times after Chapter 2, and compare.

Tying the Bow, Move by Move

> **Outcome:** "I can tie the complete bow tie knot from the starting position to a finished bow, in the right order and without a mirror for the first moves."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

From yesterday's starting position, do only the first two moves: cross the long end over the short end, then bring it up behind and through the neck loop. Stop there.

The minimum you need to know

The bow tie knot is the same knot as a shoelace bow, so if Chapter 1 of the shoelace guide made sense, this will too. In order: (1) Cross the long end over the short end, close to your neck. (2) Bring the long end up behind the crossing and through the neck loop, then let it hang down in front. Snug this first knot up to the collar. (3) Fold the short end into a bow shape: double it back on itself at its widest point and hold it horizontally across your collar. This is the front wing of the bow. (4) Drop the long end straight down over the front of that horizontal bow, holding everything in place with your other hand. (5) Fold the long end back on itself at its widest point, then push the fold through the small loop that has formed behind the front bow. It goes from front to back, through the gap between the front wing and your collar. That last push is the move everyone finds awkward. Push it with a finger instead of trying to pull it through. Finally, tug gently on the two folded wings to tighten the knot in the middle.

Worked example

Worked example: getting through move five. On the first two attempts, someone pushes the long end straight through flat, without folding it, and ends up with a dangling end instead of a second wing. On the third try they fold the long end back at its widest part first, so it already looks like half a bow, then push the folded edge through the loop behind the front wing with their index finger. The second wing appears, and a gentle pull on both folds tightens the centre knot.

Checklist

- [ ] Long end crossed over the short end, close to the neck
- [ ] Long end brought up through the neck loop and the first knot snugged to the collar
- [ ] Short end folded into a horizontal bow across the collar
- [ ] Long end dropped down over the front of the bow and held in place
- [ ] Long end folded at its widest point before pushing it through the back loop
- [ ] Knot tightened by pulling on the folded wings, not the loose ends

Exercises

1. Tie the full sequence once slowly, naming each of the five moves out loud.
2. Practise moves 3 to 5 around your knee or a chair back, where you can see what your hands are doing.
3. Tie it three times at your neck, using a mirror only to check the result.

Fixing a Bow That's Lopsided, Loose or Drooping

> **Outcome:** "I can adjust a finished bow tie that's uneven, loose or tilted, instead of untying it and starting again."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Tie a bow tie now and look at it in a mirror. Name its one biggest problem, if it has one: uneven wings, loose centre, or tilted.

The minimum you need to know

A self-tie bow is adjustable after it's tied, and that's how it's meant to be worn. Each of the three common problems has its own fix. Uneven wings: pull gently on the loop of the smaller wing and the loose end of the larger one, alternately, in small tugs, and the sizes move towards each other. If the difference is large, re-tie with a slightly longer or shorter starting drop (Chapter 1). Loose centre: hold both wings and pull the folded edges apart, then press the centre knot flat between your thumb and finger. Tilted bow: the bow usually tilts because one side of the neckband is tighter, or the first knot from move 2 isn't centred. Hold the knot and slide it straight, and make sure the band sits evenly under the collar all round. A slightly imperfect, hand-tied bow is normal. Perfect symmetry is the look of a pre-tied one.

Worked example

Worked example: fixing a drooping bow at a wedding. An hour into a wedding reception, a guest notices in a mirror that their bow has loosened and tilted to one side. They don't untie it. They hold the centre, slide it level, pull the folded edges of both wings apart to tighten them, then nudge the larger wing down with a small pull on its loose end. Thirty seconds later the bow is straight again, and the slight asymmetry of a hand-tied knot is still there.

Checklist

- ☐ Biggest problem identified: uneven, loose or tilted
- ☐ Uneven wings corrected with small alternating pulls
- ☐ Loose centre tightened by pulling the folded edges apart and pressing the knot flat
- ☐ Tilt corrected by sliding the knot level and checking the neckband all round
- ☐ Re-tied with an adjusted starting drop if the wings were very uneven

Exercises

1. Deliberately tie one bow with very uneven wings, then correct it without untying.
2. Loosen a finished bow on purpose and tighten it again in under a minute.
3. Tie, check and adjust three times in one sitting, and notice how much less adjusting the third one needs.

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