Creating handmade chains is an easy way to add distinction to your jewelry designs.

by Hazel L. Wheaton

The beauty of making chain by hand is threefold: It elevates your work to a higher level of artistry; it allows you greater scope to customize your chain; and it’s surprisingly easy to do. The key to making a chain is to remember that either the connection point or the link itself must be perpendicular to the link that precedes it in the chain. It seems like an overly simple thing to state, but keeping that one detail in mind will help you design any number of your own chain styles.

All you need to make your own distinctive chains are a few hand tools and some free time. I used brass, sterling silver, and copper for mine, but you can use whatever metal you like. With the addition of a simple clasp, any of these chains could support a pendant, act as a base for dangling charms, or be worn on its own.
materials

All measurements are for 18-in. (45.7 cm) chains.

Flat teardrop chain
- Brass wire: 22-gauge (0.6 mm), round, half-hard, 68 in. (1.73 m)

Simple square-wire chain
- Sterling silver wire: 20-gauge (0.8 mm), square, half-hard, 27 in. (68.6 cm)

Teardrop chain
- Copper wire: 20-gauge (0.8 mm), round, half-hard, 68 in. (1.73 m)

suppliers

Use flush cutters to cut 22-gauge (0.6 mm) round brass wire into 1¼-in. (32 mm) lengths. With this wire gauge and link size, the chain will take three links per inch, so you’ll need approximately 68 in. (1.73 m) of wire to make an 18-in. (45.7 cm) chain.

With your thumb, brace a wire piece at its midpoint against a 3 mm mandrel. Bend the wire around the mandrel to form a U-shape.

NOTE: I used the shank of one of the smallest punches in my dapping set as a mandrel.

Use flatnose pliers to squeeze the wire ends together above the mandrel. Use your pliers and fingers to adjust the wire ends so that they are parallel and even.

NOTE: Squeezing the wire ends close to the mandrel will form a round link; squeezing them a small distance from the mandrel will form a teardrop shape.

Slide the link off the mandrel, and repeat to form all the wire lengths into teardrops.

Thread one end of a second teardrop link through both connecting loops of the first link.

Use your roundnose pliers to make connecting loops in the wire ends of the teardrop link you just added. Repeat until the chain has reached your desired length.
**SIMPLE SQUARE-WIRE CHAIN**

1. Use flush cutters to cut 20-gauge (0.8 mm) square sterling silver wire into 1½-in. (38 mm) lengths. Each length of wire will form a 1-in. (25.5 mm) link, so you’ll need approximately 27 in. (68.6 cm) of wire to make an 18-in. (45.7 cm) chain.

2. Use roundnose pliers to make a plain loop at the end of one piece of wire, and center the loop on the wire stem. Make the loop at a point about one third of the way up the jaws of the pliers.

3. Make another loop at the other end of the wire, in the opposing direction and perpendicular to the first loop.

4. Use two pairs of pliers (either chainnose or flatnose) to check that the loops are perpendicular to each other. If necessary, twist the link slightly to make sure the loops are properly positioned. Repeat to form all the links.

5. Open the loop in the end of one link just as you would open a jump ring. Slide the loop of a second link through the open loop, then close the loop. Repeat to connect all the links until your chain is your desired length.

**TIP:** Use a permanent marker or painter’s tape to mark the spot on your roundnose pliers jaw where you make your wire loops; this is an easy way to ensure your loops are a consistent size.

**sizing up or down**

Handmade chains are fully customizable — you can increase or decrease your wire gauge, swap out round for square wire (or vice versa), or increase or decrease the size of your loops to make the exact chain you want. Keep in mind that if you increase your wire gauge, you must increase the size of your loops to maintain the chain’s flexibility, and you need to cut longer pieces of wire to make your links. If you’re working on a new pattern, be sure to take the time to make three or four test links before you cut all your wire.

**a clean end?**

Good flush cutters will leave your wire ends “clean enough” for most chains, but it’s always a good idea to take it a step further to rid your wires of any unwanted burrs or sharp edges. Filing by hand is a painstaking process; to speed things up, use a cup bur in a flex shaft. For square wire, you can use the side of a sanding disk to maintain a flat end or, again, use a cup bur if you want a more rounded end.
**OPPOSED TEARDROP CHAIN**

Use flush cutters to cut 20-gauge (0.8 mm) round copper wire into 1 ½ in. (38 mm) lengths. With this wire gauge and link size, the chain will take five links per 2 in. (51 mm) of chain, so you’ll need approximately 68 in. (1.73 m) of wire to make an 18-in. (45.7 cm) chain.

Use your thumb to brace a wire at its midpoint against a mandrel. Bend the wire around the mandrel to form a U shape. Make sure the ends of the wire are even. Repeat to form all the wires into U-shapes.

**NOTE:** I used the shank of a 7.1 mm dapping punch as my mandrel.

With your fingers, squeeze the connecting loops together until they overlap completely and are even. If necessary, use roundnose pliers to align the loops.

Thread a U-shaped wire through both of the connecting loops in the first link.

Make connecting loops in the ends of the U-shape you just added. Squeeze them together until they overlap, and then repeat the process until the chain is your desired length.

**add a clasp!**

Of course there are a lot of prefabricated clasps available for purchase, but making a clasp for these chains is as simple as making the chains themselves!

The only must-add step when making a clasp as opposed to a chain link is work-hardening. Because your clasp will need to be the most stable link in the chain, be sure to take the time to lightly forge its curves with a chasing hammer on a steel bench block.

The clasp can either connect directly to the end of your chain, or you can slip a jump ring onto each end of the chain to connect to the clasp. The clasp can be as plain or as fancy as you wish, but keep in mind that a heavy clasp on a fairly simple chain will pull forward, and you’ll end up with your clasp as your focal piece after a few hours of wear.