

Choose the Right Hook for the Right Fish

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This is an article that will help you to *know your fishing hooks*. It will explain what hooks are, what each one does, and how to choose the right hook for the fish you're going to try to catch.

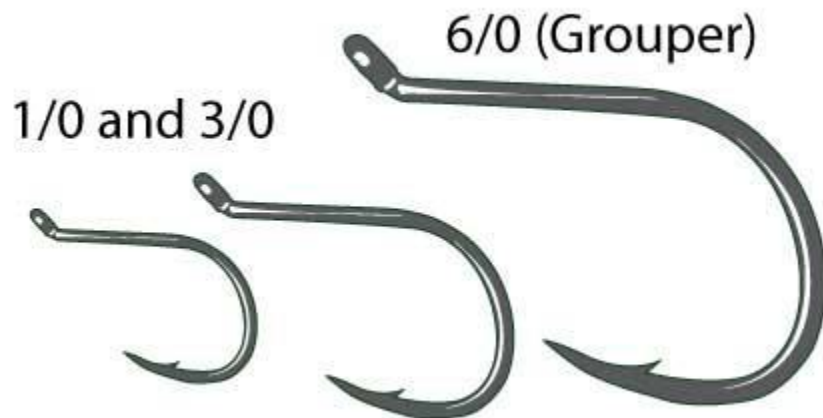
What is a Fishing Hook?

You can catch fish without hooks, obviously. Among the artifacts archaeologists find at sites where ancient people lived (before they received a light bill from the electric company), hour-glass-shaped stones are often found – particularly if there are large bodies of water around. They were used as weights on nets woven from vegetable fibers. And along with those weights we find fish hooks. The earliest of fishing hooks were known as "Gorge" hooks. A big stinky chunk of something dead was wrapped around the hook-carved (mostly) bone artifact, and a fish swallowed it, hook, line, and sinker. Fish were also channeled into tight man-made channels where we live, and nets dropped behind them. It's likely that the first fish was hit with rocks or found dead. That might sound disgusting, but it's the truth; the first meat-eaters ate what something else killed first and left behind. Hooks have been around for a very, very long time.

Modern hooks made of steel are simply copies – refined, but copies nonetheless – of the same shapes and physical characteristics of the ancient ones we estimate to have showed up 10,000 years ago on coastal sites around the Gulf of Mexico, and in sites in the Pacific Northwest. Hooks made today – while made of modern materials – have the same characteristics of hooks made in bone those many thousands of years ago.

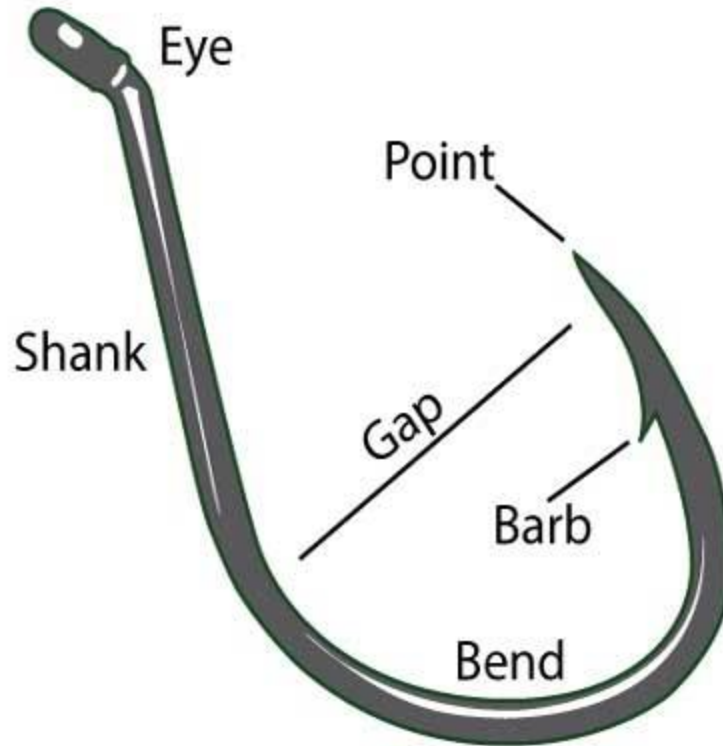
Do you know the difference between hook sizes? Or shafts? Or gaps? The way hooks are built make one size perfect for one species and completely wrong for another. The hook on the left (below) is a hook that will catch just about anything, but is commonly used to fish small

live bait, like: shrimp or scaled sardines (what we call "whitebait"). The hook on the right is more appropriate for large fish like offshore species, including grouper and American red snapper. You can catch big fish with small hooks but it's very hard to catch small fish with big hooks. Fish aren't the smartest of sentient beings that we eat, but they're not completely stupid, either. The more natural a bait appears - - natural but slightly injured -- the more likely it will become the target of the predators you seek. But if that bait acts unnaturally (like it would if it was dragging a giant metal hook) it does not look appetizing to the fish.



What do Fishing Hooks Do?

Well, fishing hooks hook fish, of course. That might sound stupid, but as you will see there are a number of different shaped hooks, and if you intend to release a fish without harming it, you might want to choose what's called a "circle" hook. But if you're trolling a long piece of squid or a live threadfin sardine or goggle-eye bait for marlin in tropical waters, that same circle hook will slip out of the fish's mouth nine times out of ten exciting strikes. So a hook is used to catch fish, but if you have no intentions of keeping it at all, pick what we call "circle" hooks. (More on that in the next section).



A circle hook and its parts.

Picking the Right Fishing Hook

Hooks come in different sizes and shapes. Let's look at the most popular ones you're likely to encounter in recreational fishing. There are a couple that are a little different that are used by commercial fishermen and women on both longline as well as "vertical" (with a rod and reel just like us) anglers, but for the sake of this site, we're only going to talk about hooks used for fishing our way: recreational.

What is the Point?

The first thing to remember about hooks is that all points -- the tip that actually enters the fish and allows you to set the hook -- are different. There are two categories. One is called a **Needle Point -- which means it is sharp but round, much like the point of a needle. The second kind**

is called a **Cutting Point**. These are more triangular when you look down at the business-end of the point. We prefer the triangular cutting-point hook, but both work well as long as you keep them sharp.

The Eye of the Hook

The next important difference between otherwise similar hooks is how the eye is positioned relative to the shank of the hook. If it is just an extension of the shank, and parallel to the shank, it is called an **Inline eye**, and the hook an **inline hook**. If the eye is offset, the hook is said to be an **Offset hook**. And each of the two eyes require a different knot. To tie a hook to the leader on a parallel, or inset eye, **use a loop knot**. If you are using an offset eye, you **should use a Snell knot** -- which keeps the line going through the bent-eye and parallel to the shank. Use the wrong knot on the wrong hook and it will not set as well.

Circle Hooks

Circle hooks are the most popular hook, and are called **Circle hooks** because the barb is curved inwards slightly to create a round shape. This ensures that when a fish eats the bait, the hook will not (usually) get hung up inside the fish's throat, stomach, or intestinal tract. You can imagine that there would be a big difference in the long term injury if a hook is embedded in the animal's soft internal tissues, rather than if it slips into their mouth – where our predators regularly crunch things like fish bones, whole fish, and even crabs and barnacles they eat off of seawalls. A circle hook should be your choice of hook when you are using live or dead natural bait, and even some of the naturally-flavored and naturally-smelling soft plastic baits. That's a circle hook in the image above, with the definitions attached to it, like "Bend" and "Barb" and "Shank", "Point" and "Eye". The definitions need no explanation, we hope. Those elements are the same on all hooks.

J-Hooks



The J-Hook is different than a circle hook, in the following ways:

- a. It is *not* shaped like a circle because it's barb and tip are not bent in towards the shaft.**
- b. Because they're shaped like the letter "J".**

J-hooks are the oldest hook shape used by recreational anglers, and are still – by far – the best hook to use if you are trolling live bait behind a moving boat. The shape of the hook and the fact that the barb doesn't point inward dramatically, improves the percentage of hits you get that will end up actually setting the hook and catching a fish. If you're trolling live or dead bait, use J-Hooks.

Treble Hooks



Treble stands for Three, and treble hooks are made from three "J" hooks with their shafts welded together. They're the perfect hook for artificial lures like swimming or topwater plugs. You do not use them on lures that touch the bottom, because they easily get stuck on anything from you to the shirt you're wearing to the ears on people on

your boat or anybody within the distance your rod can reach with three or four feet of string on it connected to a very dangerous collection of hooks. If that was too long a sentence, be careful using these things; they will catch anything and everything including yourself and the fish. It is close to impossible to get one out of a fish without killing the animal or at least dramatically reducing the chances it's going to survive.

Speciality Hooks: Worm Hooks



We will call these "Worm" hooks because they work so well for largemouth bass fishing.

With a long "rubber" (actually plastic, but called by many old-timers rubber worms) shape much like an Earthworm, bass lures benefit greatly from the offset shank on these specialty hooks. But largemouth bass are not the only fish attracted to artificial lures made from soft plastic. A wide range of saltwater lures will work best if rigged on hooks like this. In fact, the very popular – and very effective – rig called the "Texas" rig is, in fact, designed to attract saltwater fish using these lures originally designed for freshwater. The red one on the right has a barbed point connected to the eye of the hook. You stick this into the soft plastic bait, and sink the barb into the body. It's a good idea to let the point stick out when you first put the lure on the hook, and then "back it in" a little bit so it avoids grass or other junk in the water. If a fish squeezes the lure even a little bit -- which it will if it picks up the bait -- the tip/point of that hook will easily slip out of the plastic and into the fish's mouth. It's a trick developed by worm guys fishing for largemouth bass, but holds completely true for modern steel.

Specialty Hooks: Long Shanks



Long shank hooks like this one are best-suited for fish that have very toothy mouths, and can reach above the bait or lure to cut the leader they're attached to. This happens a lot with fish like Mackerel – both Spanish as well as their bigger cousins the King Mackerel. But they also work well to hold a bait and keep it straight on simple bottom rigs like the Fishfinder, where a long-shank hook often works best for longer baits, like a strip of fresh or frozen squid (an outstanding and very effective combination for all saltwater species because of smell and presentation near and on the bottom).

Understanding Hook Sizes

Below is a picture of two hooks and the hook scale guide -- one an old and somewhat rusty 'J' hook, and the other a less-but-still-rusty circle hook with an offset eye. I got the picture from the collection of images we have laying around. They might be too rusty to use on a snook, but for this article they are fine.



Hook Scale and Sizing

7	6	5	4	3	2	1
		1/0				
2/0	3/0	4/0	5/0	6/0	7/0	

Back to the hook scale guide. I just ran it out to #7, which is very tiny and 7/0, which is very large. Hooks get as small as a #20, which we cannot see without a magnifying glass. Or a 20/0 or more which is a hook larger than a human hand. 1/0 is the *median* of the hook scale. So if someone tells you they are using a #4 hook, it will be very small. If they say we are using a 4/0 it is pretty big.

Hook size should be based on the size of your bait most of the time, and not necessarily the size of the fish you are going to catch. There are exceptions to that. The most common hook we use for all around inshore fishing is the 1/0 (the median). It is good for most inshore baits and all species inshore like snook, reds, trout and so on. I am helping to design a bunch of hooks for inshore and offshore fishing.

There is a lot to know about hooks such as the difference between a cutting point and a needlepoint. The gauge of metal and its penetration qualities. How it is forged. Which type to use for what species. If the circle hooks or J-hook has an in-line or offset hook point or even a offset eye. You have to use certain knots on offset eye hooks or the hook will not be as effective. Or should you use a circle hook or a J- hook. All depends on many variables.

One thing to remember is companies that make hooks have different tolerances and hook point gaps. The bite, the throat and gape of selecting a hook is as important as any piece of your fishing equipment.

If you buy an Owner hook at *1/0*, and buy a *1/0* hook from Eagle Claw, the hook point gap is different.

Here is a list of terms you will see on hook packages. There are more, but this is a good list to learn. The next step is to learn to apply them to the fishing situations that each should be used for, which is covered in the article linked here.

- **Circle hooks**
- **J-hooks**
- **Kahle hooks**
- **Needle Point hooks**
- **Cutting Point hooks**
- **Long shank hooks**
- **Short shank hooks**
- **Light wire hooks**
- **Heavy wire hooks 2x, 3x, 4x etc. (thickness of the metal)**
- **Offset eye**
- **Offset hook point**
- **Stainless hooks**
- **Hardened forged hooks**
- **Chemically sharpened**
- **Open Eye hook**
- **Needle Eye**
- **Ringed hooks**
- **Trailer hook**
- **Barbless hooks**
- **Holding its edge or point**

***We cover more on hooks at all our fishing seminars and in some Ask A Captain questions!**

The Right Hook for the Right Job.

In closing, there are a few things to remember:

- **Use Circle Hooks unless you have a good reason not to. Good reasons are soft rubber lures, where the specialty "worm" hooks make the lure work best, and trolling, where J-hooks out-set circle hooks 10-to-1.**
- **Use smaller hooks than you might think you need. Big fish will eat baits and be perfectly landed with the tiniest of hooks. You can catch a 10-lb. Rainbow trout on a #24 hook if you wrap black thread around the hook and make it look and act like a little black sugar-ant. You will not catch that fish in that gin-clear water with a 1/0 like we use to catch a 10-pound snook.**



Hooks have not really changed much since ancient people living around water used them in fresh water or salt, deep water or shallow. They tied hooks together, they carved them out of bone and stone, and they wrapped and braided and chewed and tied hafting materials to the parts and the hook, put bait on them, and suck them into waiting waters. In Florida we find every species we target now -- and a lot we do not consider edible -- at the campfires of paleolithic hunters. As the

ice ages came to an end, and the big animals started to get scarce and then extinct, fish became their primary source of protein in many cases. Learning the difference between different hooks -- and indeed fishing itself -- goes way back. Enjoy it.

- **Keep hooks sharp! Dull hooks do not set well. Keep a stone so you can keep them sharp.**
- **Use only bronze hooks whenever possible. Stainless steel hooks take too long to rust enough to fall out of the fish's mouth. A bronze hook rusts quickly -- so much so, in fact, that if they're even slightly dampened (especially with salt water) or too humid where they're stored, they will rust. Rusty hooks are bad for you, and should be thrown out whenever you notice that they're rusted. Dispose of them safely, too.**
- **Learn about removing a hook stuck into you or a friend. Unless they're really badly sunk into a muscle, they're pretty easy to take out.**
- **Buy in bulk. A pack of 25 hooks can make the per-hook cost half of what it is if you buy a six-pack. Buy them in bulk packs of at least 25 or more. You will lose them.**
- **Use the lightest hook you can for the species. This is disputable, and granted, you will have some big fish bend a light wire hook, but if you're having trouble getting fish to bite in very clear water, a lighter wire hook will often make the difference and draw strikes during difficult feeds. We list the best hooks and tackle for each species we talk about, so you should be able to match the hook to the hookup.**
- **Pick the right hook. Do not use Treble hooks with bait, and do not replace single-hooks on topwater lures to save fish. The lure will not work the same, and its effectiveness will be diminished. The best lures in the eyes of many anglers are jigs -- bottom lures that have lead or metal heads and wire J-hooks attached inside the head. They bounce, they make noise, and they will hold a live shrimp as quickly and easily as they will hold a piece of plastic painted-up to look like a shrimp. Use the right hooks for the right conditions. Use long wire shanks if you're fishing kingfish, and use circle hooks for whitebait.**