

The Basics: Tools, Workspace, Vision, Organization

Choosing Pliers

To open and close jump rings you need 2 pairs of pliers. Sounds easy—but wait—there's more!

There are pliers found in the hardware store that have ridges along the inside surface of the jaws. You definitely don't want those because they leave marks on most metal.

There are pliers found in craft shops that are meant for occasional use in jewelry making—they are lightweight, usually have short handles, and are great to carry around in a small toolbox. You don't want those because the lightweight means they are prone to slip when you try to get a solid grip on a jump ring. The short handles mean that the end of the handle will dig into your palm—resulting in a very sore hand after a period of extended use.

When we look at pliers most often used to make chain mail, there are still many choices. The ones I use the most are **flat nose pliers**. I like the stability of the grip on the ring they provide. And I like the fact that the flat nose distributes the pressure over more of the ring's surface—and is less likely to leave a mark.

I also use **chain nose** pliers, or the tips of **bent nose** pliers, when I have to reach into a tight spot to close a ring (because the tips of these come to a point). They are also helpful when a ring you need to close is filled with other rings, leaving very little space to maneuver the ends closed.

I know that there are maillers who prefer to use chain nose or bent nose pliers most of the time. And that's OK, because the real test is whether your tool choice works for you personally and whether it enables good ring closures and quality workmanship.

If you are just starting out, try using what you have, or buy a couple of pairs of inexpensive pliers that are suitable for chain mail. Look for long handles. Look for reasonable heavy weight pliers. Decide if you want plain vinyl handles or padded ones or molded rubber ones. Ask your local craft store if you can try some out in the store. Talk to vendors at craft shows. Ask questions at your bead group meetings. This photo shows an example of what I'm talking about.



If you decide you enjoy making chain mail projects, then it may be time to invest in some quality pliers. I really like Tronex pliers because they are a quality tool made in the USA. The long, ergonomic handles fit my hands nicely, and I don't have to exert a lot of pressure to keep a secure grip on a jump ring. I regularly use the flat nose with a short jaw, flat nose with a short wide jaw, and the chain nose pliers. See photo of Tronex brand.



Additional tools

If you add beads to your chain mail, then you will also need **cutters** for cutting wire, **round nose** pliers for making loops, and **crimping pliers** for adding crimps to flexible beading wire. These tools also come in a range of prices and quality. Get the basics, and then decide if you want to invest in better ones.



Workspace

You can work almost anywhere! You just need tools that do the job and a flat surface to set out your rings. I work at a table in my studio, on a lap desk in the car, and many places in between. My recent discovery is a flexible mouse pad that has a no-slip foam bottom, and a bright blue fiber surface—it makes a great mini work surface that travels well. There's also a large version of the mat (20"x15") that I use on my work table.

Good Vision

Just as important, you also need to be able to see well. That means decent lighting and some form of magnification. You must be able to see if each ring has been closed tightly.

The lighting can range from a battery powered, portable light to a plug-in task light, to an Ott brand floor lamp. The magnification can range from drug store readers to an Optivisor that sits on your head, to custom Craft Optics telescope eyeglasses. I've tried all of these—and they all work.



Organization strategies

When we do craftwork of any kind, we soon acquire a lot of “stuff” that needs to be organized in some fashion so we can find what we want without a lot of searching. Here are some of my solutions to this perennial problem.

Quart size zipper bags (labelled) contain all my findings, beads and spools of craft wire.



Gallon size zipper bags (labelled) hold instructions, sketches and materials for every project in process. When a project is completed, the bags (without any supplies) get filed in my filing cabinet.

Plastic boxes from the Dollar store hold the quart bags of supplies. These boxes fit on open bookshelves.

Cardboard file boxes from an office supply store hold the gallon bags of projects in process. (Yes, I have so many I need boxes!) They stack under my worktable.

A cabinet with doors holds supplies such as labels, computer paper, file folders and more.

Bookshelves also hold plastic boxes of supplies, reference books, catalogs, trays of jewelry samples, trays of special beads, and photography supplies and props.

A rolling drawer unit fits under my computer desk and it holds sticky notes, envelopes, stamps, note pads, pens, markers, paper punch, stapler, calculator, binder rings, and paper clips.

Wooden pliers racks hold my pliers—the kind where the ends of the handles fit into holes in a block of wood.

My stash of jump rings is contained in EZ Locking Caddies and carry bags by Craft Mates. Each caddy has 14 compartments. To open a lid, you have to push a button and lift the lid at the same time. This helps prevent accidental messes. A carry bag holds up to 7 caddies.



How I open and close Jump rings

To Open a Ring

1. I use 2 pairs of pliers to hold the sides of a jump ring with the opening at the top (12 o'clock).
2. I prefer flat nose pliers because they provide more leverage, are easier on my wrist, and are less likely to mark the metal.
3. Notice that the pliers in my left hand hold the side of the ring steady (pointing to the ceiling), while the pliers in my right hand turn that side of the ring towards me. (Reverse this if you are left-handed.)



To Close a Ring

4. I use 2 pairs of pliers to hold the sides of a jump ring with the opening at the top (12 o'clock).
5. I bring the ring ends back together by rotating the wrist of my dominant hand and exerting a bit of inward pressure. I often hear a “click” as the ends touch.
6. The goal is to have the two ends lined up exactly, with no space between them.
7. I move the ends back and forth by small amounts to adjust the fit. If I go a bit past where they are even, they will spring back and match exactly.
8. I spend the time to close each ring carefully—this is the mark of a professional finish to my work.

