

Why You Need an Awl for Screw Starting When Hanging Pictures with Wire

Hanging a picture frame with wire is one of those tasks that seems simple until you are standing in the middle of the room with a level in one hand and a screwdriver in the other. The wire sags, the frame tilts, and the screws refuse to bite into the wall at the angle you want. Over the years I have hung dozens of frames in old plaster, new drywall, and even the occasional brick wall, and the single tool that changed everything for me was a small, pointed awl for screw starting.

It is not the most glamorous tool in the box. But when you are working with a hanging system that relies on picture wire, d-ring hangers, and wall anchors, a good awl for screw starting makes the difference between a frame that stays level for years and one that drifts crooked after a week. Let me walk through why this matters and how to use it properly.

The Real Mechanics of Hanging a Picture with Wire

Picture wire is not just string. It is a braided wire rope that can hold significant weight, but only if the screws and wall anchors that support it are seated properly. When you hang a frame, the wire runs between two d-ring hangers on the back of the frame, then hooks over a pair of screws or hanging brackets in the wall. The tension in the wire and the angle of the screws determine whether the frame hangs level.

If the screws are not started straight, they can pull out over time, or the frame can shift. That is where the [awl for screw starting](#) comes in. It creates a precise pilot hole that guides the screw exactly where you want it. No wandering, no stripped drywall, no misaligned brackets.

Why Not Just Use a Screwdriver or Drill?

A screwdriver or drill can work, but they have limitations. When you are marking a spot on the wall, especially after using a stud finder to locate a stud or measuring with a tape measure to center the frame, you need an entry point that is both accurate and stable. A drill bit can walk across the surface of the drywall or plaster before it bites, leaving a small gouge or a hole that is slightly off. A screwdriver tip can slip and scratch the paint.



An awl, specifically a bradawl or a screw starter, gives you control. You press it into the wall at the exact mark, twist slightly, and it creates a neat dimple. That dimple becomes the guide for the screw. When you then drive the screw with a screwdriver, it follows the pilot hole without resistance. This is especially important when you are using a wall anchor or a masonry bit for a brick wall. The awl prevents the anchor from spinning out of alignment.

How I Use an Awl for Screw Starting in My Own Work

I have a small metal awl that I keep in my tool pouch alongside my wire cutter, pliers, and level. The handle is worn smooth from years of use. Whenever I hang a frame, I follow the same routine.

First, I use the stud finder to check for studs behind the wall. If I find one, I mark the spot with a pencil. If not, I plan to use wall anchors rated for the weight of the frame. Then I hold the frame up and use the tape measure to mark where the hanging brackets or d-ring hangers will go. Once the marks are on the wall, I take the awl and press it into each mark. A firm twist and the awl sinks in about an eighth of an inch. That is all it takes.

Then I drive the screw. It goes in straight every time. The screw head sits flush against the wall, and the hanging bracket or wall anchor fits snugly. After that, I attach the picture wire to the d-ring hangers on the back of the frame, loop the wire over the screws, and use the level to check. Adjusting the wire tension with a turnbuckle or a crimp bead is easy when the screws are solid.

Choosing the Right Awl for the Job

Not all awls are the same. A general-purpose bradawl with a rounded handle works fine for most drywall and plaster. For harder surfaces like brick or concrete, a more robust screw starter with a sharp point and a metal cap can take the pressure. Some awls have a diamond-shaped tip that cuts a clean hole in plaster without cracking it. I prefer one with a comfortable grip because I use it repeatedly on multiple frames in a single day.

If you are hanging a heavy frame that requires a french cleat, you still benefit from an awl. The cleat itself screws into the wall, and starting those screws straight is just as important. A french cleat system puts the entire weight of the frame on those screws. A misaligned screw can cause the cleat to pull away from the wall over time.



Common Mistakes People Make

The most common mistake I see is skipping the pilot hole entirely. People assume that a sharp screw will bite into drywall on its own. Sometimes it does, but often the screw goes in at a slight angle, especially if the screwdriver is not perfectly perpendicular. That angle causes the screw head to sit crooked, which makes the wire loop slide off to one side. The frame then hangs tilted, and you have to start over.

Another mistake is using a drill bit that is too large for the screw. A pilot hole should be slightly smaller than the screw shaft. An awl creates a hole that is exactly the right size for most drywall screws. If you are using a wall anchor, the awl hole gives the anchor a starting point that prevents it from spinning as you drive it in.

I have also seen people use a hammer to tap a nail into the wall as a guide. That works, but it creates a larger hole that may not hold the screw threads as well. An awl leaves a smaller mark that the screw threads can grip.

Tools That Work Together

A proper hanging system is more than just an awl. You need a wire cutter to trim the picture wire to the right length. You need pliers to crimp the crimp beads that secure the wire loops to the d-ring hangers. You need a level to check that the frame is straight. A tape measure ensures the screws are spaced evenly. And if the frame is heavy, a stud finder helps you locate a solid anchor point.

But the awl is the unsung hero. It is the tool that makes the rest of the process go smoothly. Without it, you are guessing at the angle and depth of every screw. With it, you have precision.

A Practical Example

Last month I hung a 30-pound framed mirror in my hallway. The wall is old plaster with a layer of drywall over it. I used a masonry bit to drill pilot holes for the wall anchors because the plaster is brittle. But before the masonry bit touched the wall, I used the awl to mark each spot. The awl punched through the surface layer without chipping the paint. Then the masonry bit followed the same path. The anchors went in perfectly, and the mirror has not budged.



For lighter frames, I often skip the masonry bit and just use the awl followed by a screw. The awl creates enough of a hole for the screw to start without splitting the plaster. That is the beauty of this tool. It adapts to the material.

Final Thoughts on Getting It Right

Hanging a picture with wire is not complicated, but it rewards attention to detail. The difference between a frame that stays level and one that sags over time often comes down to how well the screws are seated. An awl for screw starting is a small investment that pays off every time you hang a frame. It saves you from frustration, from patching holes, and from rehanging the same picture twice.

If you do not already own one, pick up a good bradawl or screw starter. Use it on every picture you hang. Your wire will stay taut, your frame will stay level, and you will wonder how you ever managed without it.