



Choosing the Proper Fly Fishing Leader and Tippet

by Cameron Larsen

Selecting the correct tapered leader and tippet for the type of fishing you are about to do is crucial. Nothing can spook fish quicker than an oversized tippet for the particular situation. On the other hand and under-sized tippet can result in the fly fisher losing their trophy before they even get a photo opportunity. We will start at the very basic of leader and tippet selection and then get more specific, and hopefully conclude with enough information so we'll always have the proper leader and tippet for all upcoming fishing scenarios.

What is Leader and Tippet?

Leader and tippet is the final connection between the fly fisher and their fly. It is the section of line after the fly line and before the fly. Its purpose is to transfer energy from the fly line down to the fly, allow for natural presentation of the fly, and then be strong enough for the fly fisher to retrieve any fish that might strike at the naturally presented fly. Sounds simple enough, but this is fly fishing, and fly fishers have been around a long time. And as a group we seem to think about everything related to our sport a lot, and therefore probably have over complicated things a tad.

The leader in fly fishing is tapered. It is thicker at the butt section, then at the tippet section. It is usually divided into three sections; the butt is tied directly to the fly line, and is the longest portion of the leader, about 60%. The mid-section is next and its purpose is to taper down to the tippet without losing a lot of strength. The final section is the tippet; it is the actual section that is tied to the fly. It is the thinnest section, it needs to be strong, yet allow for a natural drift, without alarming the fish that you're offering is connected to a person that will pull back.

Commercial leaders by and large achieve all this in one smooth product. Although there are still knotted leaders out there, by and large knotless leaders are the choice. It is possible to construct you own leaders and many people do. But that is the topic of another article. A fly fisher does, however need to know how to attach new tippet portion to the fly line, I prefer the double surgeon's knot, but the blood knot is also popular. Learn how to tie these knots before fighting that monster! A poorly tied knot will reveal itself at the most opportune times.

X Factor

Now comes the fun part. A new set of numbers to learn. Different numbers then choosing flies or fly rods. Fly fishing is overwrought with numbering systems, and unfortunately leaders and tippets you are just going to need to learn. They are sized on the X numbering system. So when you hear someone say they are switching to a 6X, you now know they are talking about their tippet. X measures the diameter of the leader minus .011. So a 6X would measure .005. A 0X would actually measure .011. One really only need to remember the HIGER the X, the smaller the diameter. The other number worth noting the test or breaking factor, a 4 lb test leader will break when more than 4lbs pressure is applied. This is worth noting, and many a trophy is lost when violating that #.

There are many variable to consider when selecting the right X, but the two most common are the size of fish you are going after, and the size of fly you are using when going after them. A quick guide is as follows:

X	Fly
0	2-6
1	4-8
2	4-10
3	6-12
4	6-14
5	12-16
6	16-20
7	20-24
8	24 and smaller

Length

One must also think about the length of the leader itself. Leaders are sold these days anywhere from 4 feet to 15 feet. There are many things to consider when deciding on length, some are variable like wind and water clarity. Other variable are static like size of fish, current, etc.

Typically the easier it is to spook a fish, the longer the leader you will need to use. The industry seems to have settled on 9 1/2 feet as a good all-around length. For everything from trout to steelhead to tarpon. It is a good length to handle for all levels of fly casters, and it gives enough distance between the splash down of the fly line and the fly as to not spook most fish under most circumstances.

From this standard we can then begin to think of reasons we might need to adjust. Spring creeks or spring fed lakes will probably require 15 feet of leader. Whereas sinking tip lines used in spring runoff will use as leaders as short as 4 feet. A weed choked largemouth bass pond will require a shorter, stouter leader, and therefore you will be able to muscle your fish away from snags. But a trout caught in a spring creek will have the advantage because your leader will easily break off due to its lightness. Windy days might require one to shorten up a bit to ease in casting. When switching from nymphing to dry flies one might need to lengthen a bit.

Summary

I hope this has clarified and not complicated things a bit. What all this means is one must carry a good assortment of tapered leaders and even more importantly tippets with them at all times. There are many times I switch sizes in the same day. If I am fighting fish deep in faster current during the day, I might go down one X factor, and then in the evening if I am dry fly fishing in shallow slow water, I'll go up two X factors.

Not having the correct tippet can handicap one's ability to land fish, either by breaking off if too small, or spooking them if too large. It is a nominal expense compared to the rest of your equipment, and a bad place to start watching that fly fishing budget. So make sure you're well stocked for every imaginable situation before you hit the water. I guarantee you at some point you will be glad you are