MAKE A
WEARABLE
SOLDER SKILL
BADGE

Learn to Solder

Tools and Techniques for Assembling Electronics

**Brian Jepson,
Tyler Moskowite
& Gregory Hayes**

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Learn to Solder

Learn the fundamentals of soldering—and pick up an essential skill for building electronic gadgets. You'll discover how to preheat and tin your iron, make a good solder joint, desolder cleanly (when things don't quite go right), and how to use helping hands to hold components in place.

This concise book is part of MAKE's Getting Started with Soldering Kit. Using the tools in the kit and some electronic components, you can practice soldering while making fun blinky objects. Then show the world you just learned a new skill by wearing the Learn to Solder Skill Badge.

- **Learn how to prepare your workspace**
- **Get to know the components you'll work with**
- **Use the best methods for soldering components in place**
- **Experience the perfect solder joint**
- **Know how to desolder when things don't go right**

Heat up the iron and start soldering today!

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Printed in the United States of America.

Published by O'Reilly Media, Inc., 1005 Gravenstein Highway North, Sebastopol, CA 95472.

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May 2012:   First Edition.

Revision History for the First Edition:
   April 27, 2012   First release
See *http://oreilly.com/catalog/errata.csp?isbn=9781449337247* for release details.

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Contents

Welcome

Welcome to MAKE's Getting Started with Soldering Kit, and congratulations on taking a big step into the world of DIY electronics. Once you get the hang of soldering, you can put together some of the many great kits that are available, fix electronics that are broken, and build inventions of your own. With this kit, you'll learn how to:

- Prepare and clean your soldering iron
- Assemble electronic circuits from kits
- Transfer circuit designs from a solderless breadboard to a prototyping PCB
- Correct soldering mistakes you've made

Basic Tools

There's a lot of great stuff in the box, and before you start using it, here's a tour of what you'll find in there. Figure 0-1 shows the soldering tools you'll be using most of the time.

Figure 0-1. *Basic soldering tools*

Deluxe soldering iron
> (Top left) This soldering station includes a variable temperature controller, a cleaning sponge, soldering iron, and a ringed holder.

Crosscut pliers
> (Left) You'll use these to trim away excess leads after you solder components in place.

Solder tube
> (Bottom) This is enough solder to get you started and keep you busy over many projects.

Helping hands
> (Right) For those times when you need a third or fourth hand, the helping hands let you hold items steady while you solder.

Advanced Tools

Most of the time, you'll only need the basic tools to get things done. But when you need to replace your soldering iron tip, correct a mistake you made while soldering, or need a tool to help keep components from overheating, you'll need the items shown in Figure 0-2.

Figure 0-2. *Advanced soldering tools*

Heat sink
> (Left) Clip this to sensitive components to help dissipate heat.

Desoldering wick
> (Bottom left) Use this to wick away excess molten solder.

Desolder pump
> (Center left) This pump will suck up molten solder when you have a lot of solder to remove.

Soldering tools
> (Center right) The scrapers, brush, and slotted probe come in handy when you need to move solder around or precisely position a component.

Replacement tips
> (Right) Tips don't last forever. When you've worn out your tip, use one of these as a replacement.

Project 1: Learn to Solder Skill Badge

Our Learn to Solder Skill Badge Kit (the 2011 model is shown in Figure 0-3) has been used to teach thousands of people of all ages how to solder at Maker Faires across the country. It's a simple, fun way to learn how to solder and also how to teach others to solder. After you build the one included in the box, you can order more from *makershed.com* and teach others how to solder.

Figure 0-3. *Learn to Solder Skill Badge, 2011 model*

Blinking or Color Change LED
(Top left) This is an LED (Light-Emitting Diode) with a twist. Normal LEDs give off a single color, and keep shining as long as you give them power. Also, normal LEDs require a specific voltage to operate: don't give it enough power, it won't light at all; give it even a little too much, and you could burn it out.

This LED is different in both respects: it has three elements (red, green, and blue) that are under the control of a small integrated circuit (IC) embedded within the LED. The IC causes the elements to change color in a repeating pattern. Because the IC controls the voltage that it delivers to the individual color elements, it's more tolerant of variations in the voltage you give it. For example, even though red LED color elements typically operate at around 2 volts, you're able to use a 3 volt battery with the pin.

The 2012 model uses two self-blinking LEDs instead of one self-color changing RGB LED.

CR1220 battery

(Lower left) This "coin cell" battery supplies power to the pin.

Printed Circuit Board (PCB)

(Center) The 2011 Learn to Solder Skill Badge features a friendly robot. The 2012 model will also have a robot, every bit as friendly.

Pin and clutch

(Top right) This is what holds the pin to your clothing.

Battery holder

This keeps the battery on the PCB.

Project 2: 555 Timer Blinky

The 555 timer blinky is a simple circuit that makes two LEDs flash in an alternating pattern. When one is on, the other is off. Figure 0-4 shows the components for this project, and Figure 0-5 shows the finished project. This is a slightly more challenging project than the skill badge.
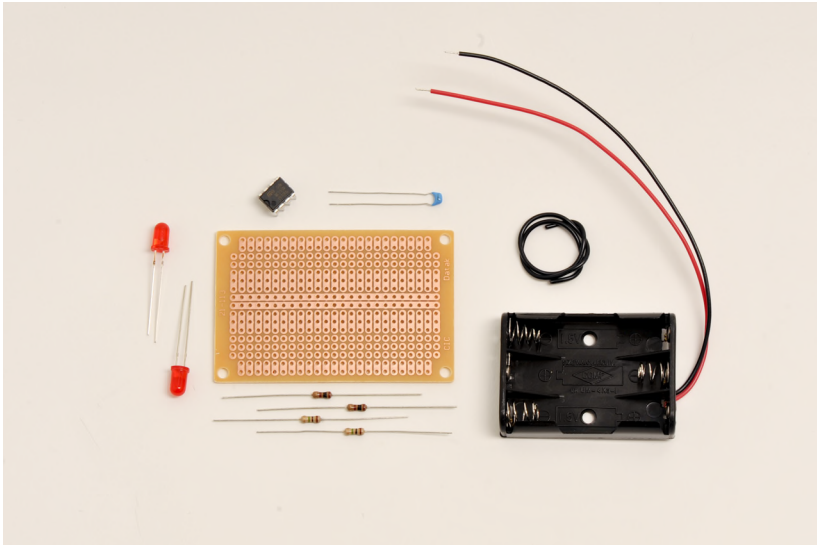

Figure 0-4. *555 blinky parts*

LEDs
> (Left) Unlike the LEDs used in the skill badge, these are your normal, run of the mill LEDs.

Protoboard
> (Center) Look back at the skill badge PCB. Notice how it was custom designed for a single purpose. Now look at this protoboard PCB: it's got a lot of different holes in convenient locations. You can build many kinds of simple electronics projects on a board like this.

555 Timer
> (Top left) The 555 timer is a special type of integrated circuit that can turn electrical current on and off in a repeating pattern. It's just what you need to blink an LED.

Capacitor
> (Top right) To customize the 555 timer, you need to connect certain components to it. The value (capacitance or resistance) of the component determines how quickly the 555 turns things on and off.

Hookup/Jumper Wire

(Top right) You'll need this to connect one thing to another.

Resistors

(Bottom) Resistors serve two purposes here: two are used to make sure the LEDs don't get too much current; the other two work with the capacitor to control the behavior of the 555 timer.

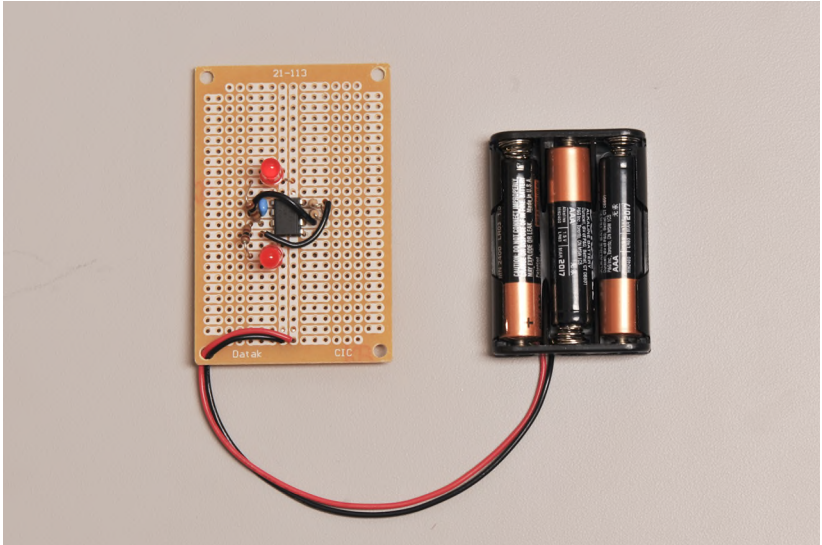*Battery Box*

(Right) This holds 3 AAA batteries.

Figure 0-5. *Finished 555 blinky*

Contact Us

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Want to carry MAKE books or kits in your store? Send a note to *resellers@makershed.com*.

1/Getting the Workspace Ready

Before you can start soldering, you need to get your iron ready. This involves a few steps. First, you'll have to attach the tip to the soldering iron. Then, you'll need to prepare the station: make sure your sponge is moistened, set the temperature, and "tin" the tip by applying some solder to it.

At the end of this chapter, your soldering iron will be assembled, clean, and hot enough to begin soldering.

Solder contains harmful chemicals. Wash your hands after soldering as well as after handling solder or the solder station sponge. Though it may be tempting to snack while you're working, keep any food or drink away from your soldering area.

1: Attach the Tip

Locate the soldering iron (make sure it's unplugged and cool), a soldering iron tip, and the tip nut that holds the tip in place. Insert the tip into the soldering iron as shown in Figure 1-1, and push it in as far as it will go. It will not require much force to insert it.

WARNING: Make sure the soldering iron is unplugged and cool.

Figure 1-1. *Inserting the tip into the tube*

2: Secure the Tip

Slide the tip nut over the tip, and screw it in place. You can use pliers to tighten it (see Figure 1-2). Be careful not to overtighten it, since you will eventually need to replace it when the tip gets worn from all the projects you'll be making with it.
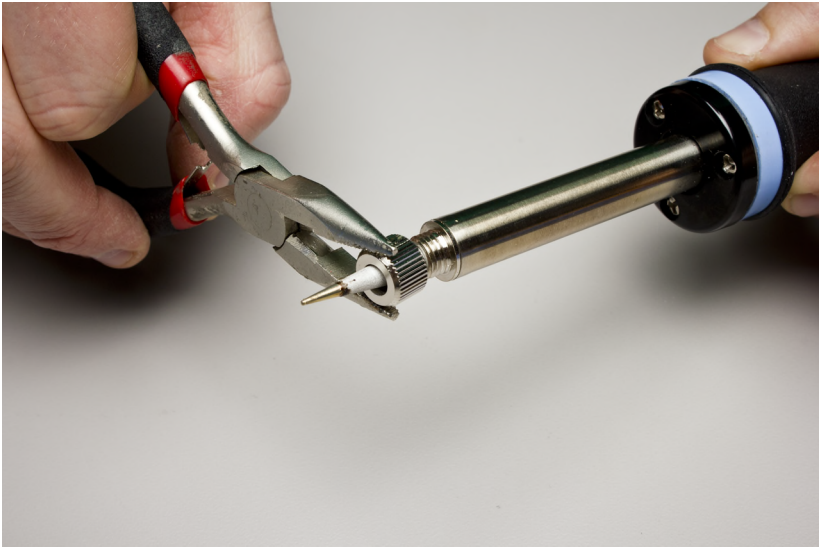
Figure 1-2. *Making sure the tip stays put*

WARNING: Over time, the tip nut might become loose. Let the iron cool down before you tighten it.

3: Wet the Soldering Station Sponge

You'll need to perform this step (and the remaining ones in this chapter) at the beginning of each soldering session.

As you use the soldering iron, you're going to be wiping the tip a lot, so you need to keep the solder station sponge moist. Pour a little clean, fresh water on the sponge as shown in Figure 1-3. Don't soak it, but make sure it's completely moistened.

NOTE: If your water has a high mineral content, use distilled water for wetting the sponge.

Figure 1-3. *Wetting the sponge*

4: Set the Station's Temperature

Plug your soldering iron in, and set the heat setting to the mark shown in Figure 1-4 (pointing at the 3 o'clock position on the dial). Give the iron a couple minutes to warm up.

Figure 1-4. *Setting the temperature*

⚠️ WARNING: The iron will get very hot, and certainly hot enough to burn you. Don't touch the tip and don't touch the tip to anything other than solder or components you are soldering together.

5: Wipe the Iron's Tip

Wipe the tip on the sponge as shown in Figure 1-5, being sure to turn the iron a few times as you wipe it, so you wipe all of its surfaces. It will make a sizzling sound as the water in the sponge comes into contact with the tip. The figure shows a sponge that's been used a few times. Notice the little blobs of solder that have come off the tip over time. A clean tip is critical to successful soldering. Even a small layer of oxidized material or other crud will limit the amount of heat that's transferred to the component you're soldering. Wipe the tip often, and keep the tip clean.
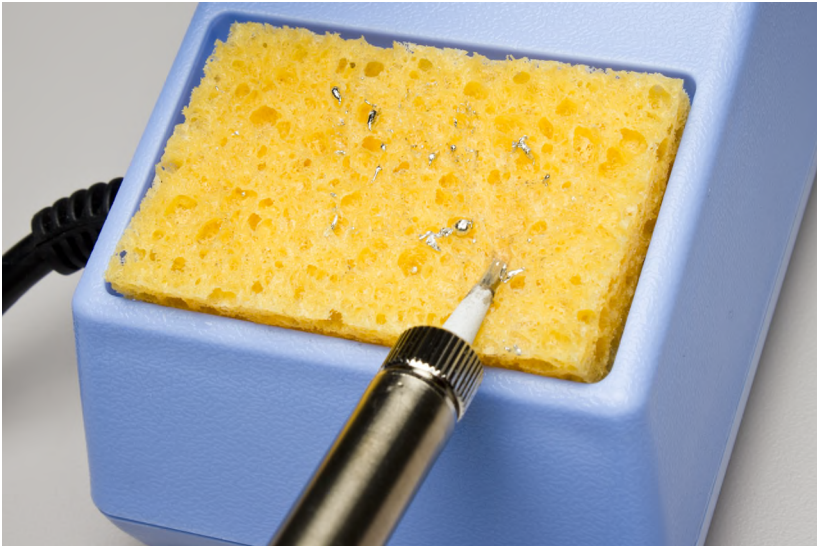

Figure 1-5. *Wiping the tip clean*

6: Tin the Iron's Tip

Before you begin soldering components, you should put a thin layer of solder on the tip as shown in Figure 1-6. This will have two effects: burning off any crud that shouldn't be there, but also providing a thin layer of liquid solder. This layer makes for a very effective heat transfer between the soldering iron and whatever you're soldering. Give the tip one more quick wipe on the iron and place the soldering iron into the holder until you need it.
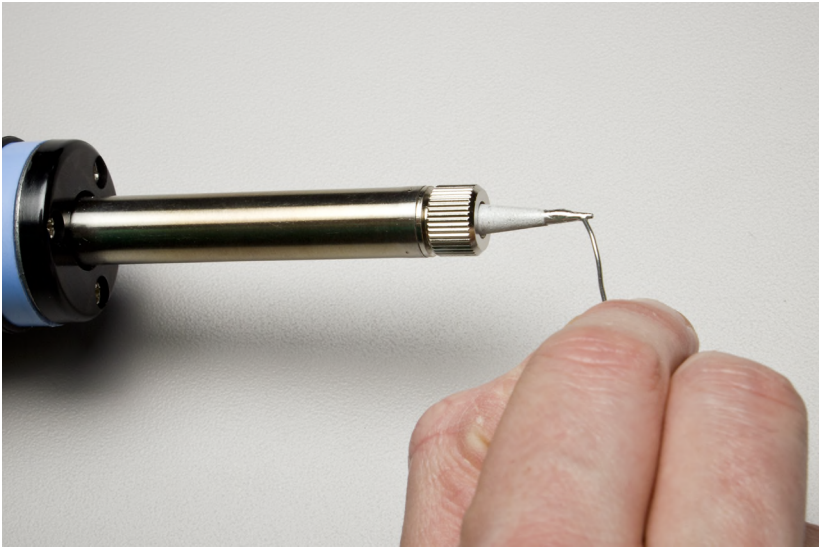
Figure 1-6. *Tinning the soldering iron tip*

NOTE: A small puff of smoke will appear as the *rosin flux* in the center of the solder is activated. The rosin serves two purposes: to clean the soldering iron (and the joint that you are soldering) and to help the solder flow freely. Avoid inhaling this smoke.

Go Make Your Learn to Solder Skill Badge

With your workstation all set up, you're ready to try your hand at soldering. The Learn to Solder Skill Badge ("Project 1: Learn to Solder Skill Badge" on page viii) is a great place to start. It's so simple, we think you can even try it before you read any more. But before you try the second project ("Project 2: 555 Timer Blinky" on page x), you should definitely give the rest of this guide a read.

2/How to Solder

With your soldering iron prepped, you're ready to begin soldering. This chapter has many helpful tips and techniques for soldering effectively, safely, and neatly.

Working with Solder

Solder is made of metal with a core that contains flux, which cleans the connection as you solder. When the metal melts, the flux begins to flow onto the joint. Some solder lead-based, but the solder in this kit is lead-free. To melt solder, heat it with the soldering iron as shown in Figure 2-1.
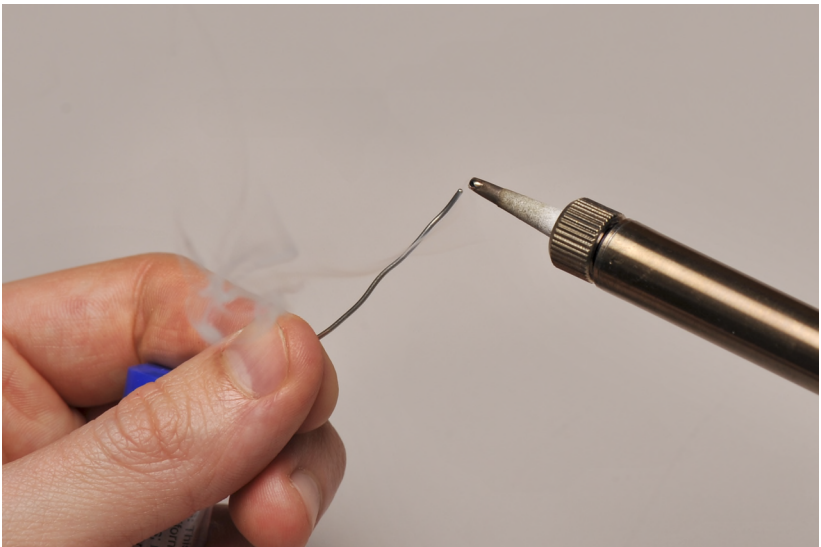

Figure 2-1. *Melting some solder*

Try melting some solder, but be careful not to drip it on yourself or anything other than a work surface. You can try pushing tiny balls of solder around on your work surface to see how it flows. If you have some bare hookup wire or similar metal, try heating it up by holding the soldering iron to it (don't hold the wire while you're heating it). Touch a piece of solder to the wire, but

choose a point that's an inch or so from where the soldering iron is touching. How close do you have to get to the soldering iron tip before it melts?

Keeping the Circuit Board from Moving

When you're soldering, you've got a lot to juggle: the soldering iron, the solder, and the two things you are connecting to each other. The helping hands let you place the items you're soldering in a stable position. Use the clips to hold the item in place as shown in Figure 2-2. But once you start inserting items into the board, you need some way to keep them from moving. "Placing a Component in the Board" on page 11 shows you how to do that.

Figure 2-2. *Holding a PCB in the helping hands*

Tinning Solder Pads

You'll sometimes come across things that need a layer of solder to work right. For example, on the Learn to Solder Skill Badge, you need to put a bump of solder in place to give the battery a snug fit. With solder pads that are this big, you need to heat the pad with the iron really well; the pad is so large that it's going to take longer to heat. It's best if you melt the solder by pushing it onto the pad rather than pushing it directly against the iron. This makes sure that the solder flows thoroughly over the pad. If the solder doesn't melt, try tinning the tip again first.

Start with a little blob as shown in Figure 2-3, and spread it around evenly. When you've got the desired thickness, first pull the solder away, then pull the soldering iron away. Doing it in this order will avoid leaving chunks of solder behind.
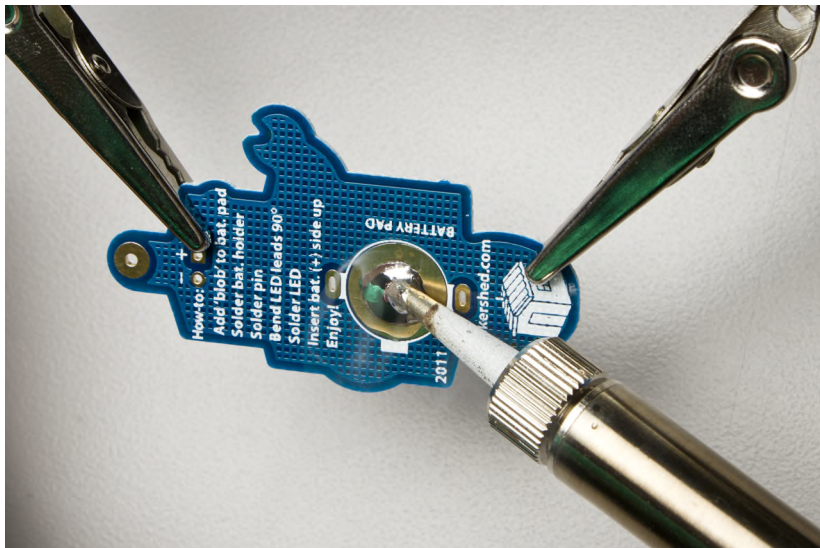

Figure 2-3. *Laying down some solder*

Placing a Component in the Board

You don't want components falling out of the board while you're soldering. In fact, you'll often insert a component with the board upside down (see Figure 2-4), then flip the board over when you put it in the helping hands. So the components have plenty of opportunity to fall out. To keep the component in place, bend the leads out as shown in Figure 2-5.

In some cases, you may need to quickly tack a component in place to keep it from moving. See "Stabilizing and Straightening Components" on page 14.

Don't try to place every component at once. Start with low-profile (shorter) components, solder them in one at a time, and move on to higher-profile components.
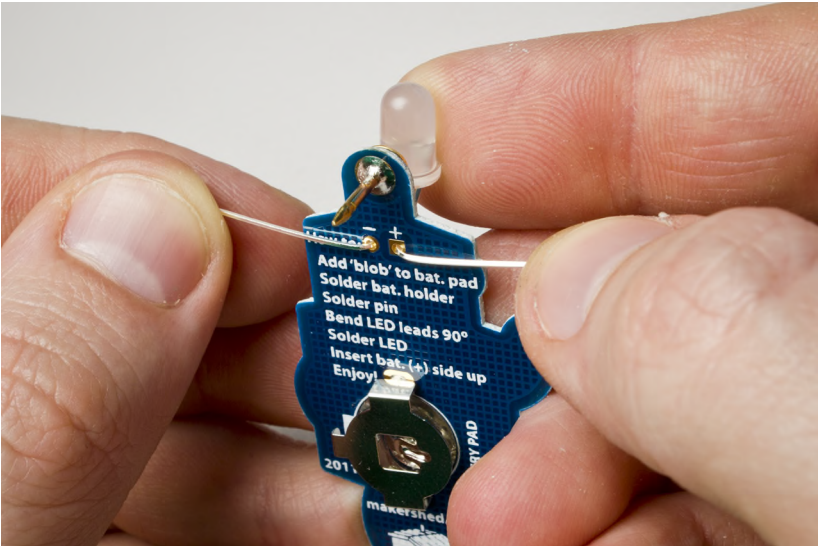
Figure 2-4. *Inserting an LED*

Figure 2-5. *Bending out the leads*

Knowing Which Way a Component Goes In

Some components don't care which way you put them in: resistors, some capacitors (such as the one that comes with this kit), and many other components fall into that category. On the other hand, LEDs are *polarized*; electrical current will only flow through them in one direction. So if you put your LED in backwards, it won't light up at all. You can determine an LED's polarity in a couple of ways: First, the longer of the two leads is the positive (+), and the shorter is negative (-).

Second, look closely at the bottom of the LED and examine the ring that bulges out around it. There is a flattened part of that ring that indicates the side of the LED that's negative (-). You can see this flattened side on the right in Figure 2-6.

With ICs, this also matters. Every pin has a specific function, and there will be one or more pins for positive (+) and one or more pins for negative (-).
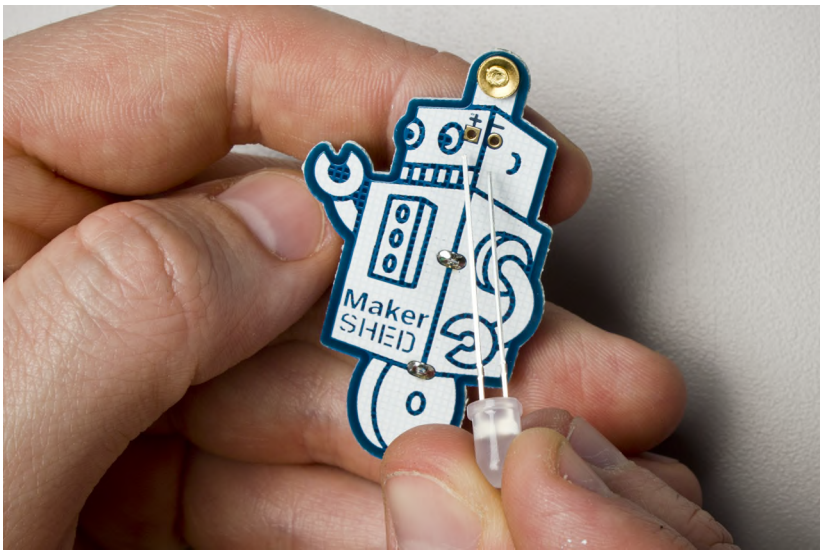

Figure 2-6. *Polarity—LEDs have it*

Stabilizing and Straightening Components

ICs present a unique problem. They don't have long enough leads for you to bend out effectively, which means they are more likely to slip and slide while you're soldering them. So do the best you can with that (see Figure 2-7), but flip the board back over after you solder the first joint. In most cases, you'll find that the IC has shifted. But since you only have one joint soldered, you can easily move the IC into the position you want. Once you've done this, flip the board over and solder the remaining connections.
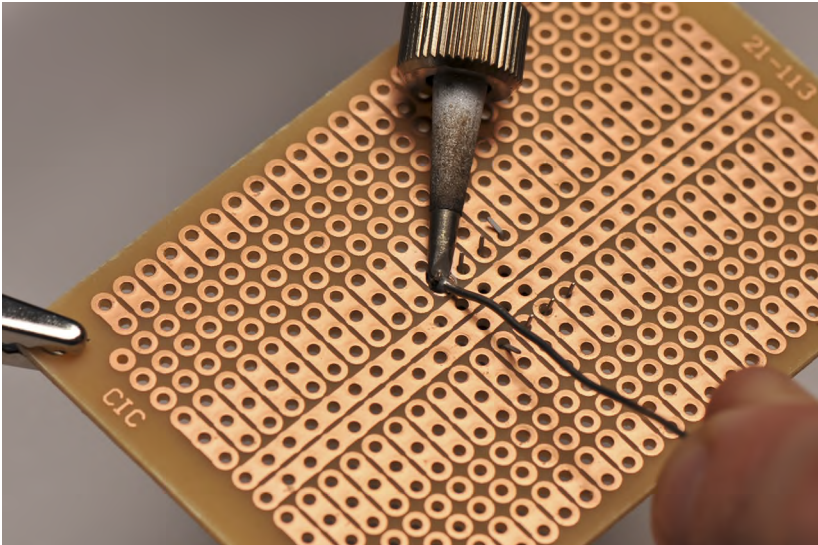

Figure 2-7. *Tacking down an IC*

Safely Soldering Sensitive Components

You need to avoid applying too much heat to a component, or you might damage it. One way to help avoid this is to clamp the heatsink to the component as shown in Figure 2-8. This will draw heat away from the component, protecting it somewhat.
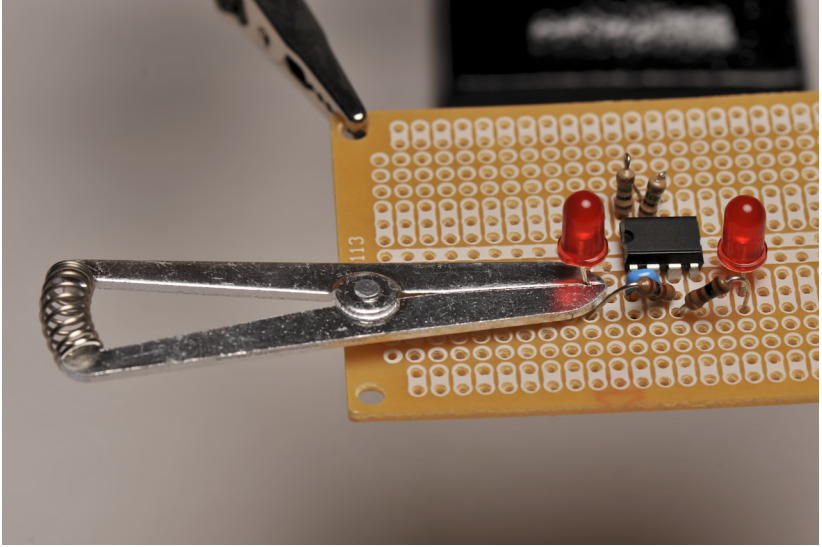

Figure 2-8. *Keeping heat away from the component*

Soldering a Component in Place

Wipe the soldering iron on the sponge and hold it so it's touching both the solder pad and the lead that protrudes through. Avoid using the soldering iron to melt the solder. Instead, heat up both the lead and the pad so that the solder melts when you touch it to them.

This must all be done quickly: within a second of touching the iron to the joint, push a small amount of solder into the joint, and let it flow around the joint as shown. Give it a second to flow, take the solder away, then wait a second, and take the iron away. With practice, you should be able to do all of this in three to four seconds per joint. Figure 2-9 shows how you'd solder the pin to the skill badge. Figure 2-10 shows an LED being soldered.

If you hold the iron to the component too long, you run the risk of damaging either the component or the solder trace on the PCB.
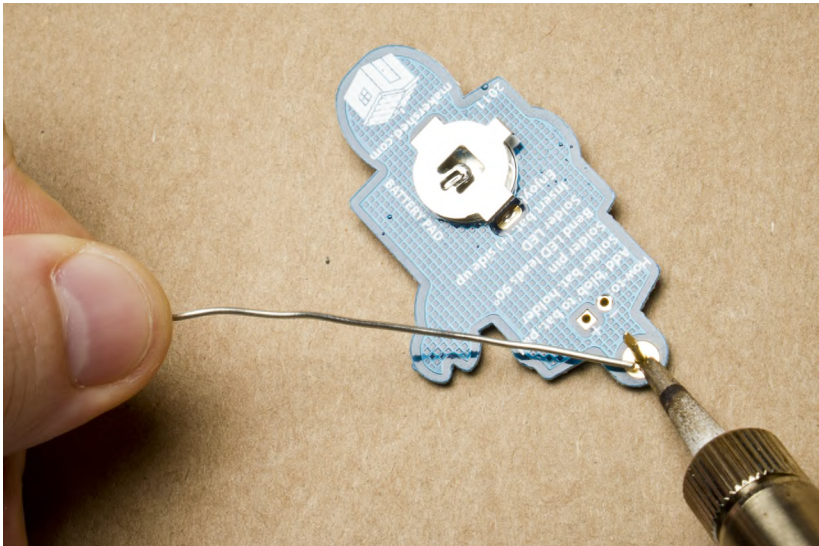

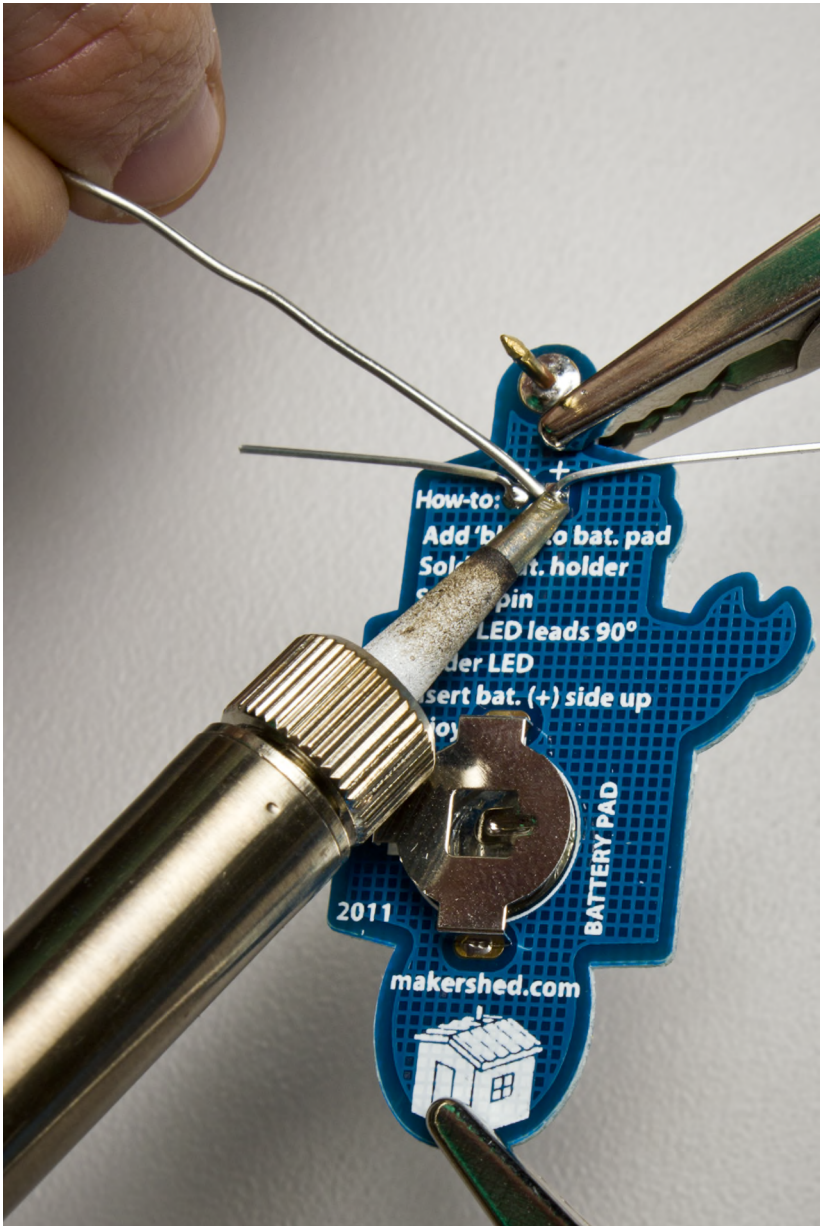
Figure 2-9. *Soldering a pin*

Figure 2-10. *Soldering an LED*

Trimming Your Leads

After you solder a component in place, you need to tidy things up. Grab the cutters from your kit, and trim the leads as close to the solder joint as possible (see Figure 2-11 and Figure 2-12). Don't cut into the solder joint; the idea is to trim the excess wire lead.

When you clip it, the wire lead will fly away from the clippers very fast, and could injure someone. The best way to keep this from happening is to use one or two fingers to hold the lead you're clipping. With one finger, you can put enough pressure on it to keep it from flying away.
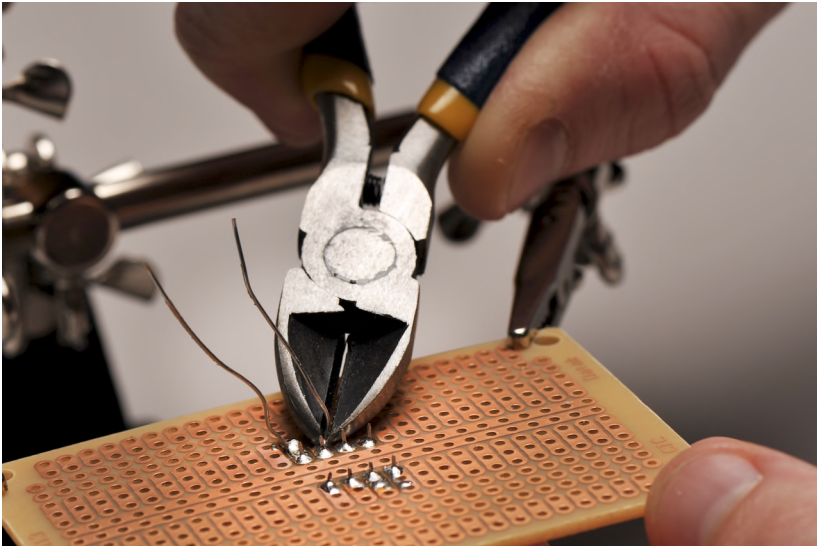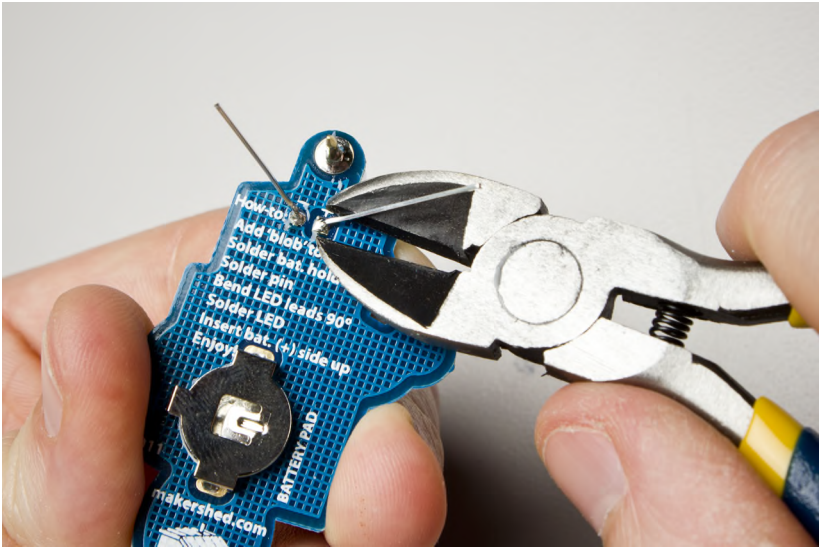

Figure 2-11. *Trimming leads on the 555 blinky*

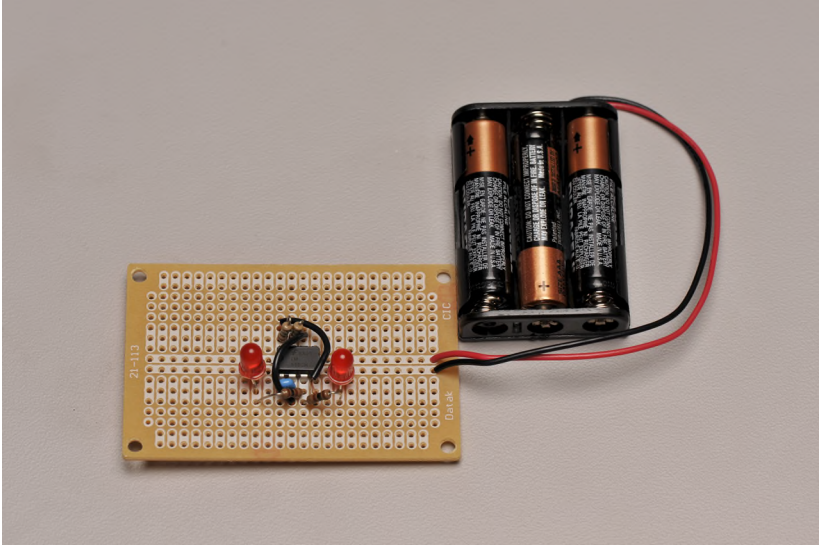Figure 2-12. *Trimming leads on the Learn to Solder Skill Badge*

Going From Solderless Breadboard to PCB

The beauty of protoboard is that it mirrors the layout of a solderless breadboard, which is used for prototyping electronic circuits. Once you have your project laid out and working on a breadboard, you can easily transfer it to the protoboard. As with a solderless breadboard, the protoboard has rows and columns that are tied together. The layout is slightly different, though. Where the breadboard has two rails (one for positive, one for negative) on both the top and bottom as shown in Figure 2-13, the protoboard that comes with this kit has its rails in the center of the board.

Figure 2-14 shows the project from Figure 2-13, but laid out on a protoboard instead of the solderless breadboard.

Figure 2-13. *The 555 blinky project on a breadboard*

NOTE: The breadboard diagram in Figure 2-13 was made with Fritzing, an open-source initiative to support designers, artists, researchers and hobbyists to work creatively with interactive electronics. For more information, see *http://fritzing.org/*.

Figure 2-14. *The 555 blinky project on a protoboard*

Soldering Jumper Wire

Jumper wire can be treated a lot like other components (see "Placing a Component in the Board" on page 11): make sure there's enough bare wire poking through so you can bend it outward enough to hold it in place. The notched probe included with this kit can be helpful with placing jumper wire in the right place (see Figure 2-15).
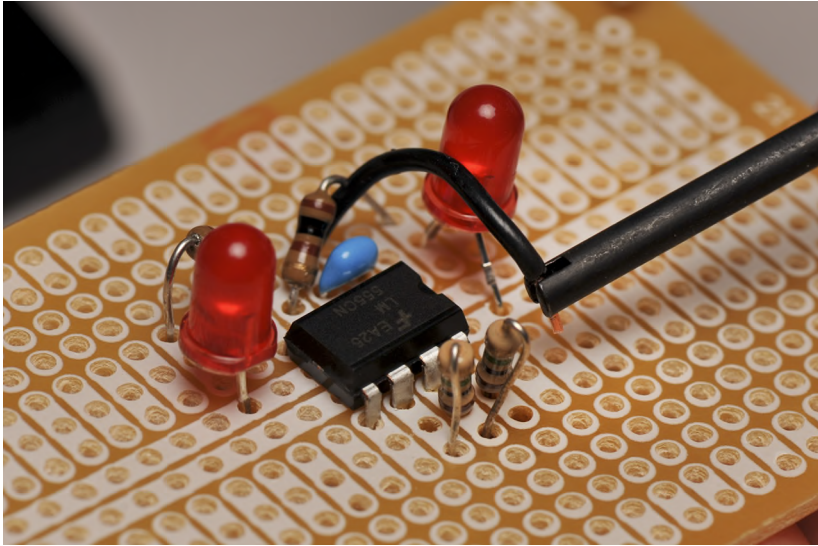

Figure 2-15. *Placing the jumper wire*

Bridging Joints with Solder

When you're working with the protoboard, you will sometimes need to bridge joints that are close to each other. This is preferable to using jumper wire since your board remains uncluttered on the top. It doesn't always look great on the bottom, though, because you end up with a lot of solder in some places. Figure 2-16 shows the start of a bridge: feeding the solder into the gap between solder joints. Figure 2-17 shows a bridge being formed.
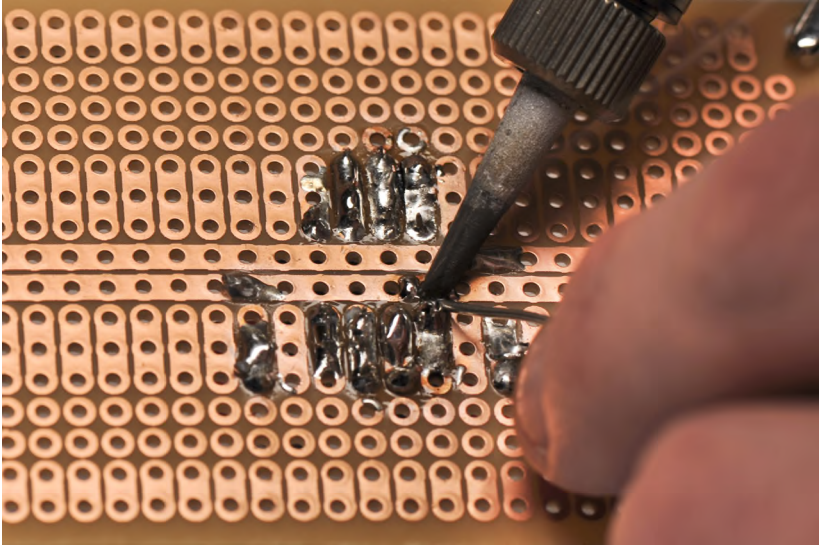
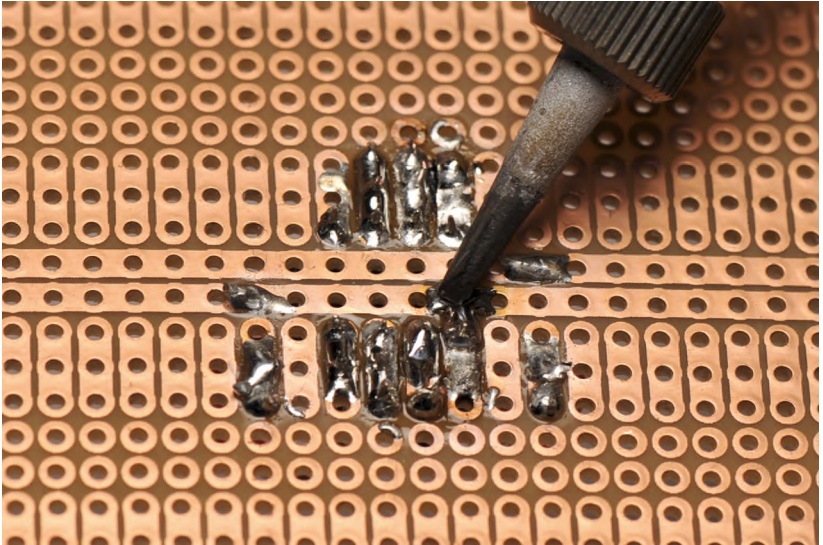Figure 2-16. *Feeding solder into a gap*

Figure 2-17. *Forming a bridge across the gap*

Relieving Strain on Cables

If you have something heavy dangling off your board, such as a battery box, it's very likely that the solder joints will come undone. If you pass the wires through the large holes on the board before soldering them down (Figure 2-18), you can add some strain relief (Figure 2-19) that will help prevent this from happening. If you have a small drill, you can also drill out a couple of holes close to where you are going to solder the connection, and loop the wire through there. This will be even more rugged than using the larger holes.
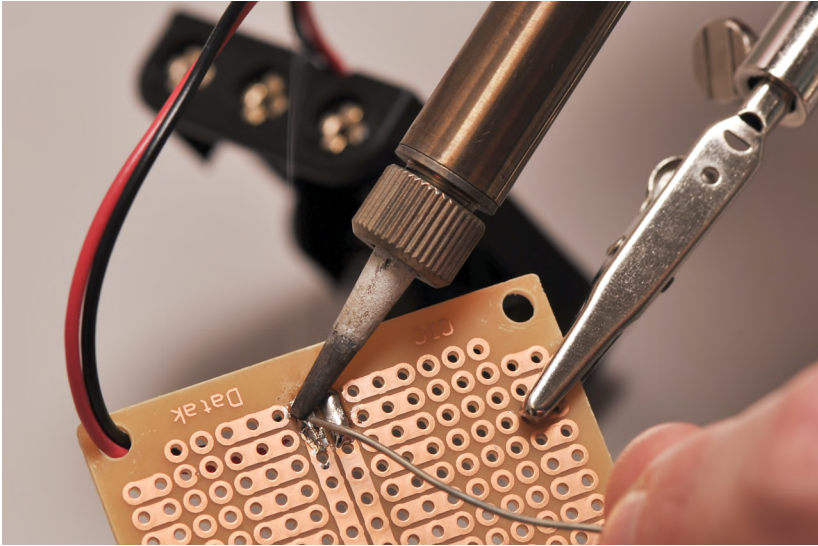

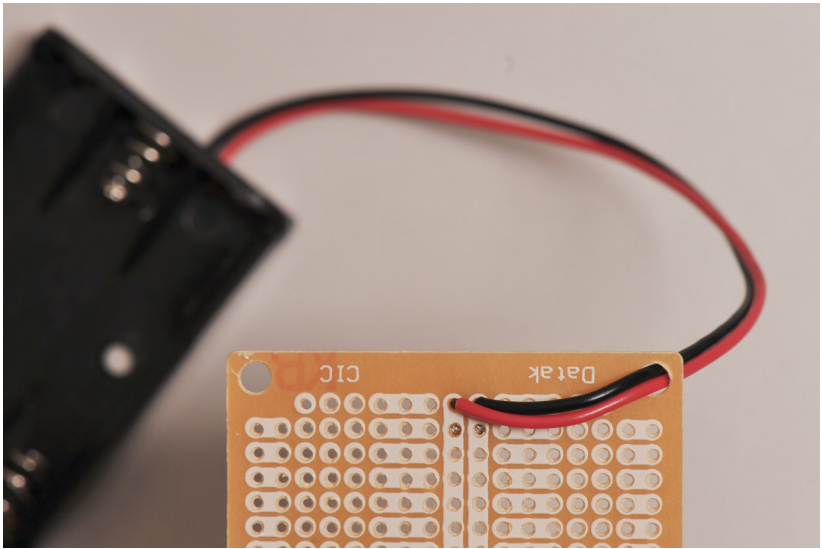**Figure 2-18.** *Soldering the battery holder wires*

Figure 2-19. *Strain relief*

Getting the Perfect Solder Joint

It's not hard to get a great solder joint, but it's also easy to be sloppy. Here are some pictures of good and bad joints to help you out.

Figure 2-20

Here's a good solder joint on the positive (+) pad: solder surrounds the joint and makes a little peak. This joint had just the right amount of solder and just the right amount of heat.

Figure 2-21

The joint on the negative (-) pad is sloppy. The solder didn't flow around the joint, and some of it is spread out across the lead. You can try to fix it by holding the iron to the joint for a couple seconds; the solder should flow down the lead and onto the joint.

Figure 2-22

The joint on the positive (+) pad has too much solder, and it's balled up. You can use the desoldering wick or solder sucker to remove the excess. After you do that, hold the iron to the joint for a couple seconds to get the solder to flow around it.

Figure 2-23

Here are two joints for comparison: one good, one blobby.
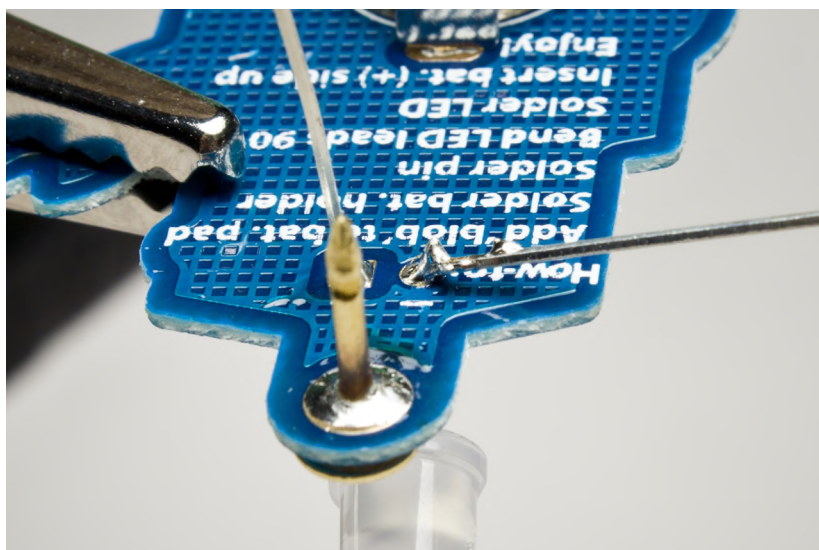
Figure 2-20. *A good solder joint*
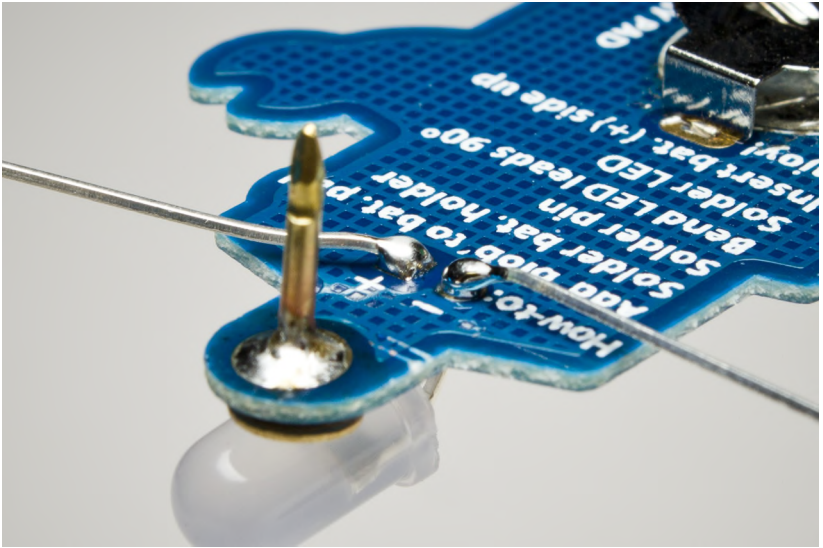

Figure 2-21. *A messy solder joint*

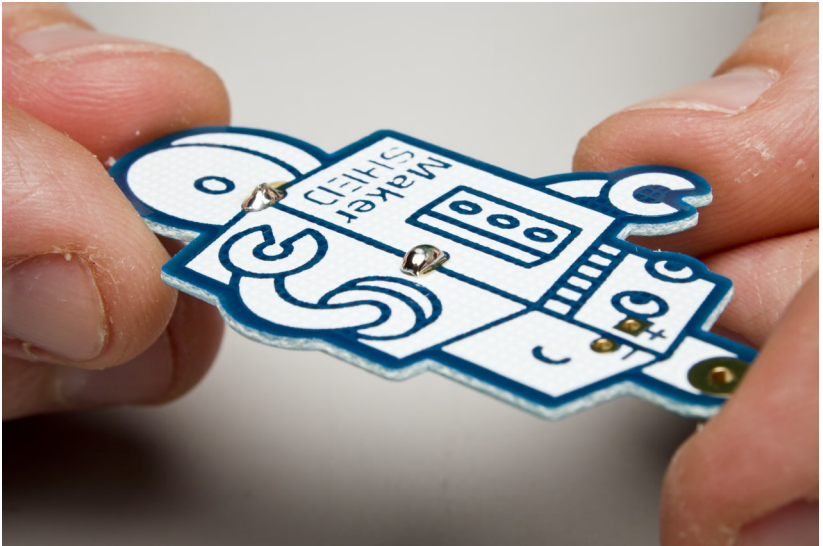Figure 2-22. *A blobby solder joint*

Figure 2-23. *Comparing two joints*

3/Desoldering

If everything went right the first time, you'd never learn anything. This section shows you how to recover from little soldering mistakes, and also includes a gallery of various solder joints so you can compare your work.

Desoldering is the "undo" command for soldering. With this technique, you can remove solder from a joint, allowing you to free the component so you can reorient it as needed. There are two tools for this: the *desoldering wick* (sometimes called *desoldering braid*) and the *solder sucker*.

The Desoldering Wick

Pull a small length of wick out of its spool (Figure 3-1). You don't need much, but if you don't use it all, you can wind the wick back into its spool.

Figure 3-1. *Pulling out some wick*

Preparing the Wick

Before you use the wick, hold it as shown in Figure 3-2, and push inward. This will cause the wick to spread out, giving you more surface area to work with.
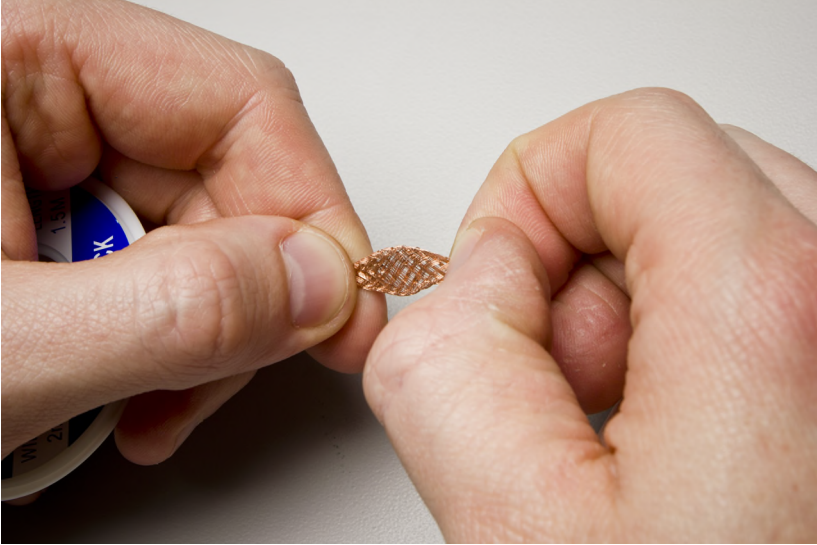

Figure 3-2. *Spreading the wick*

Desoldering with the Wick

Position the wick over the joint, and press down on the wick with the soldering iron as shown in Figure 3-3. The heat will pass through the wick and melt the solder. As this happens, the wick will soak up the solder, removing it from the joint. When you're done, you can trim off the used portion of wick with your wire snips.

Figure 3-3. *Desoldering*

WARNING: The wick will get very hot, so take your hands off it as soon as you press the soldering iron to it (the soldering iron will hold it in place).

Desoldering with the Solder Sucker

The solder sucker is another tool for removing solder. It's best for removing excess solder, and you can use it to clean things up a bit before you use the wick. To use the solder sucker, press the plunger down until it locks. Use the soldering iron to melt the solder around the joint, and quickly bring the solder sucker's nozzle to the joint (Figure 3-4). Press the button on the sucker, and it will pull the solder right up into the tube. When you press the plunger again, any solder in the tube will be ejected.

Figure 3-4. *Using the solder sucker*

4/What's Next?

Now that you've learned the ins and outs of soldering, it's time to do more. You can share this book with a friend so they can learn, or you can teach them yourself. And the world is full of wonderful things you can make now that you know how to solder.

Teach the World to Solder

Before you can teach someone to solder, you need to figure out what you want them to try making. You can purchase more Learn to Solder Skill Badge Kits from *http://makershed.com*. Here are a few tips for teaching soldering to others:

Keep Your Hands Off the Tools
> You're there to teach, not to solder. And your students will learn best if they always have their hands on the tools. If you grab the tools from them and do part of the work, they won't learn from it.

Be Patient
> Try to remember what you went through the first time you tried to solder. It takes time, and you did things incorrectly, and maybe you even made mistakes that required desoldering. Let your students learn from their mistakes, and let them take their time.

No Food or Beverages
> Even with lead-free solder, there are chemicals in the flux that aren't good for you. If you allow food or drink near the work area, it could get contaminated. Keep food and drink away from where you're working.

Make Sure There's Plenty of Light
> The components you work with while you solder are small, and hard to see. Make sure to use a well-lit workspace for teaching.

Keep Spare Parts Around
> Beginners will break things. Pick up some spare resistors, LEDs, and other common components, and have them on hand in case you need to replace a damaged component.

Make More Things

Maker Shed (*http://makershed.com*) carries many electronic kits that you can apply your newly-learned soldering skills to. Here's just a few of them:

Supercap Racer Kit

One of the latest in our popular Mintronics line of DIY kits is this tiny race car designed by George Albercook. Once assembled, this little racer (Figure 4-1) will run around getting its juice from a supercapacitor. Capacitors are like little batteries. Supercaps store and release power faster than ordinary ones, so they're great for making quick-charge gadgets and power-on-demand circuits.
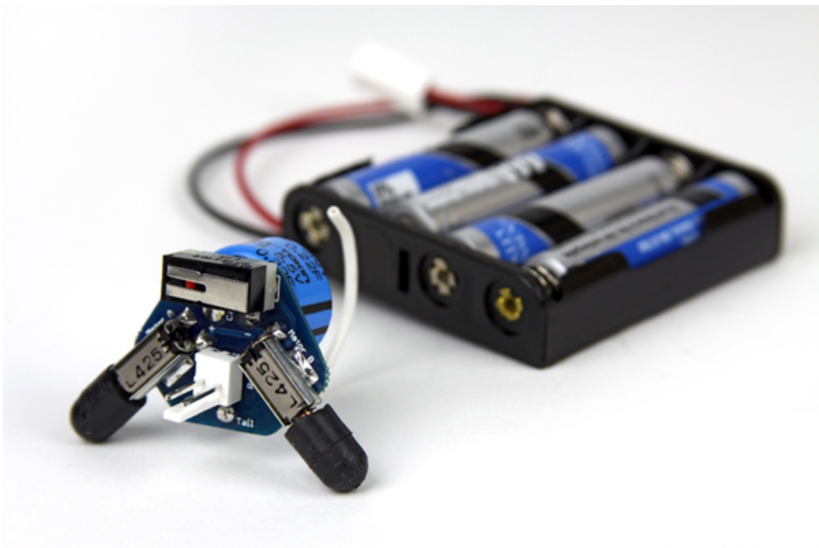

Figure 4-1. *Supercap Racer Kit*

Wee Blinky Kit

The Wee Blinky kit (Figure 4-2) is an easy-to-solder two (2) LED blinker cir-
cuit. It comes with a 9V battery snap, but will work with almost any voltage
from 3V to 12V. A 9V battery is required but not included. It's tiny, it blinks,
and it's a great kit to hone your soldering skills since it's cheap too!

Figure 4-2. *Wee Blinky Kit*

MintyBoost

The MintyBoost (Figure 4-3) is a small and simple USB charger for your iPod or other MP3 player, your camera, cellphone, and any other gadget you can plug into a USB port to charge.

Figure 4-3. *MintyBoost USB Charger Kit*

About the Authors

Brian Jepson is an O'Reilly editor, hacker, and co-organizer of Providence Geeks and the Rhode Island Mini Maker Faire. He's also been involved in various ways over the years with AS220, a non-profit arts center in Providence, Rhode Island. AS220 gives Rhode Island artists uncensored and unjuried forums for their work and also provides galleries, performance space, fabrication facilities, and live/work space.

Tyler Moskowite, a programmer, engineering intern at Make Magazine, and student at Santa Rosa Junior College, has been tinkering with electronics for almost half his life. He picked up Arduino, then Android, and with the release of the ADK he has found his niche.

As a photographer for Make Magazine, Gregory Hayes has ruined more clothes than he ever did as a handyman, hiked more miles with a heavier load than he did as a backpacker, done more research than he did as a writer, and gotten closer to more human hands than advised by any epidemiologist. Taught to solder at the age of seven and forced to solder for his supper at the age of nine, he's now content to let others enjoy the lion's share while he stands by watching safely from behind glass.