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Considerations when using an ‘S’-shaped tool rest

Some time ago, I bought the ‘S’-shaped “bowl” tool rest from Woodcraft. It seems like a decently heavy, reasonably thick hunk of iron. It has one side with a small radius and a second side with a larger radius, curved in opposite directions, and a detachable post so you can turn it upside down to use either half on the inside or outside of a turning. Quite flexible; seems like a good idea. When you reverse the post, you have to be very careful to make sure it’s extremely tight so the rest can’t move. I accomplish this by clamping it firmly in the lathe banjo and turning it as far as I can, up to a reasonable torque. It’s tight!

The other day I was turning a 12” maple bowl and had to stop for dark (I turn outside) not long after I got into the hollowing. Things were going reasonably well. It was pretty curly, and I was wishing I had a bowl saver. Anyway, the next day I resumed hollowing, and my tools wouldn’t cut. I sharpened them very carefully – they were definitely sharp. I tried about four different bowl and spindle gouges, and I just couldn’t get a good bite. I would get a nice thin curl at entry, but as soon as I started trying to remove wood, the tools would suddenly seem dull -- I was getting some subtle chatter and a lousy cut with lots of damaged end grain even though I was not pushing hard and was trying to “let the wood come to the tool”. What’s going on here? I specifically put on the ‘S’ rest to minimize the unsupported distance. Hmm... I wasn’t using that the day before because I hadn’t gotten far enough in. Light bulb! This was the only factor that had changed. I put the normal straight tool rest back on, and, sure enough, like magic my tools started cutting cleanly again. Whoa.

I had been working near the unsupported end of the long side of the ‘S’ rest. In retrospect, it must have been vibrating, but it wasn’t obvious to me as such at the time. What I learned here is to work as close to the tool post as possible. Of course this makes a lot of the tool rest arm unusable. I would have to say I now question that purchase. I doubt I’ll be using it again. It’s a shame – it seemed like a good idea. Live and learn...

*Always use common sense. Things that work in one situation may not work in another.
Follow all Safety Rules. If it feels wrong, it probably is; stop and rethink.
Your Mileage May Vary*