

General Principles of Sequencing

These sequencing guidelines are designed to help yoga teachers plan safe classes that will work for the majority of yoga students. These principles are a basic guide map to put cues and poses together in a logical order that will fully prepare your students to safely practice yoga. One of our goals as yoga instructors is to support our students in a safe and well-rounded practice on the mat. By taking the time to create a balanced sequence, you can be assured that you are opening and educating your students bodies progressively and logically.

Many students who come to yoga classes do not have a consistent practice. Their bodies can be stiff and/or weak. They also might not have a very good connection to their bodies and their proprioception might be weak. Thus, for new instructors (less than 5 years of experience), it is recommended that you stick to a guide map for the most part. Over time, and with more experience and knowledge, you will really begin to integrate the knowledge and 'know' it in your body. Then you will be able to innovate safely and use more intuition in your classes.

Sequencing of Cues and Vocal Instructions

Basic guidelines

- Use the 3 C's of cueing- Clear, Concise & Confident
 - Clear- speak clearly and enunciate your words.
 - Concise- speak directly to the point without unnecessary words. Also, say exactly what you mean.
 - Confident- speak with confidence and authority. Be sure that you are loud enough that everyone can hear. Think about speaking from the diaphragm and sending your voice to the corners of the room.
- Avoid filler words like "um", "now we are going to", "we're gonna", etc.
- Avoid the use of basic directional words like up, down, forward or back. Be more specific and use a landmark or direction.

Examples:

- Towards the back wall.
- To the left side of the room.
- To the long edge of your mat.

Cueing a movement

- Verb + Body part + Location

Examples:

- "Reach (verb) your arms (body part) to the sky (location)"
- "Step (verb) your right foot (body part) forward in between your hands (location)"
- "Push out through (verb) your back heel, (body part) towards the back wall (location)"

When instructing students into a pose:

- Lead with the breath. Instructing them to inhale and exhale when needed not only reminds them to breathe, but makes the breath central in their practice, reminding them of its importance.
- Specify the foundation of the posture, without being super rigid, as it will vary for all people. Just as we view bodies from the ground up, teach them to build the posture from the ground up.
- Cue the main *movement* to get into the pose. For example: Shifting the hips back and lengthen the torso forward in Trikonasana.

While in the pose:

You will not be able to give all cues for every platform while they are in the pose, so you must be mindful on what you choose. It is also not possible to do all of the following every time, especially during a faster paced flow. Thus, pick the most pertinent and beneficial.

- Give universal and general instructions before introducing specifics and internal *actions*.
- Try not to jump around with your instructions. Lead them in a logical manner, usually from the ground up.
- Consider naming the benefits or why we do this pose. What is this pose doing for our energy system and Chakras?
- Look around and observe your students. Give verbal cues to help your students where they need it.
- Remind them to breathe.
- Remind them to observe their body, breath, and mind.
- Bring their attention back to the theme or intention.

When exiting the pose:

- Instruct coming out of the pose, so that students do not dissipate energy or focus.
- The order of instructions: tell them what to anchor first (stabilizing cue), then the breath, then how to come out safely.
- Encourage them to maintain the extension of the spine when coming out of the pose.
- Be just as thorough with coming out of the pose, as with going into the pose, keep them safe and focused.

When linking two poses:

- The order of instructions for linking is the same as moving out of a pose; tell them what to anchor first (stabilizing cue), then the breath, then how to come out safely.

Basic Segments of a Class

1. *Welcome/Opening*

This can be done on a one-on-one basis, to the entire class, or a mixture of both. Although the class technically hasn't started yet, this segment should not be overlooked. It is all-important to connect with your students and let them know that you are fully present. It can also work as a centring technique for you, allowing you to fully arrive for your students. You will find your own way of doing this, but you do want to make sure you introduce yourself, the class style, and connect with any new students or students with injuries. Maybe take this time to remind students of any important information like drinking plenty of water, resting when they need to, or reminding them to turn their cell phones off.

2. *Centring*

As instructors we use this time to draw the students inward. Allowing them to connect mind, body, and spirit. A class theme or peak pose can be introduced at this time. You can also ask your students to set an intention now. Intentions are most rewarding when they are clear, concise, and they speak to the student personally. It can be helpful to offer a few different suggestions, so that your students may pick one that speaks to them.

The intention of this section is to:

- Centre and focus the students
- Draw the students' attention inward
- Establish breath
- Begin to wake up and warm up the body

- Introduce a theme or intention
- Release stress
- Become fully present
- Mentally prepare for the class
- Release their day

3. *General Warm-Up*

Experts recommend about a 15-minute cardiovascular warm-up before stretching muscles. Of course, for an hour class, 15-minutes is a long time. Thus, it is important to use your discretion and know your students. For a flow or power class, Sun Salutes are perfect. A cardio warm-up increases blood supply to major muscle groups and raises the temperature of muscles about two degrees Celsius. This increases muscle flexibility, which, in turn, increases mobility in the joint. Of course, teaching in a heated studio helps to start this process and Ujjayi heats the body up as well.

Some styles of classes do not use a cardio warm-up (e.g. Yin, Restorative), so then it is important that the teacher sequences the warm-up effectively by starting with range of motion movements, light muscle engagement, and simple stretches.

Physical therapists and sports medicine specialists agree that not warming up properly is one of the main causes of injury. Therefore, the warm-up is essential.

4. *Body of the Class*

Targeted Warm-Up: Post Preparation

In a targeted warm-up you prepare the students' bodies, specific joints, or muscles groups for the postures to come. To design this, you need to know what poses work what muscles/joints, the component parts (see Principles of Practice). You also need to know where the class is going. Always start with the easiest and working towards the hardest poses. For example: If you want to open the hips for Bhujapidasana, you could start with Vira II, move into Baddha Konasana, Malasana, and then Firelog.

Many poses work more than one muscle group/joint. For example: To prepare your students for Urdhva Dhanurasana you would need to warm up the shoulders and the hip flexors.

This is also important to understand when designing a fitness fusion class. You could do a general warm-up of running on the spot or doing front kicks. However, if you then ask your students to do Urdhva Dhanurasana they probably would not be open enough in the hip flexors. In fact, these two movements tighten the hip flexors, so it would be counterproductive. The targeted warm-up is not a separate part of the class; it is infused into the body of the class. Once you decide the hardest poses or exercises for the class, the component parts need to be identified in order to design the rest of the class.

Sequencing Categories of Poses

- Standing poses- These are the safest way to open the body, because muscles support the pose and prevent students from going too far. Work from the easiest poses to the hardest poses. In general: Externally rotated, neutrally rotated, twisting, backbends. Linking like with like.
- Heating Inversions
- Backbends
- Cooling Inversions
- Seated Poses

Guidelines for sequencing within a category

- Work from the easiest to the hardest. For example: Vira II is easier than Trikonasana and Trikonasana is easier than Ardha Chandrasana, for most people.
- Think of the muscles you are stretching and the difficulty of the stretch. For example, Prasarita Padottanasana is an easier hamstring stretch than Uttanasana.
- Sequence together poses that have the same or similar foundations. The frequently used transition from Vira I to Vira II is an exception, as it is extremely complex to perform well. It demands a lot of mobility in the front hip joint. This transition is only for intermediate to advanced students who really know their body well.
- Adho Mukha Svanasana is a great home base for your students and yourself. You can remind them to reconnect to breath and intention, while you prepare for the next part of the class.
- In general, twists can warm-up for backbends. Backbends can also warm-up for twists or be released by doing a twist. Twists neutralize and relieve the back muscles after a sequence of poses or after a more challenging pose.
- Return the body to neutral after asymmetrical poses or poses which take the alignment out of Tadasana (backbends and forward bends). The blueprint poses of Tadasana, Dandasana, and Cat/Cow are perfect for this.
- Inversions are either heating (Headstand, Handstand, and Forearm Stand) or cooling (Shoulder Stand and Plough) depending on the experience of the student. As a general rule, heating ones should precede backbends. Cool ones follow both backbends and active inversions.
- Counterposes are postures that go in the opposite direction and are used to balance us from the work we have just done. They are centring and neutralizing, bringing the body back to balance. They are a great opportunity to remind students to stay present, watch their breath, or reconnect with the theme or intention.
- Transitional poses are asanas that neutralize the effect of another Asana. Often intense postures need transitional poses to 'unwind' out of the intense pose. The pose may be a resting posture to enable you to catch your breath, to centre and compose yourself, or to neutralize the spine following a vigorous sequence. For example, after backbends you may do twists before practicing forward bends. Or following Headstand, you may rest in Child's Pose to calm and centre.

5. *Cool down/Ending*

Most of the documented health benefits of yoga fall into these calming categories, thus it is very important to allocate enough time for this part of the class. This can consist of seated postures, relaxing and cooling poses like Shoulder Stand, meditation, Savasana, Pranayama. In an hour class this segment will be about 10 minutes.

Additional Considerations

- Level of the class/students (you can assess them in the first few postures)
- Location/type of facility
- Time of day
- Season of the year
- Students' injuries
- Number of variations
- Number of postures
- The importance of rest
- The role of breath
- Heating and cooling poses
- Strengthening a muscle and then stretching it
- Resting one body part as you work another
- Repeating in order to get more than one set
- Transitions between postures and between groups or sequences of postures

- Accumulation of mental or muscle fatigue
- Efficient use of time
- Risk factors and contraindications are considered in sequencing the class, as well as sequencing instructions
- When linking, it is safer and easier to teach 2 - 4 poses at a time. In the beginning, consider linking fewer poses together, so that you don't get confused or lost. Make a distinction between linking as 'choreography', which may be pretty, but does not illuminate, and linking as a tool to help find a fuller, clearer expression or a series of postures.
- Finally, a sequence of poses need not be an endurance test. You can build strength and stamina much more effectively via longer holds and more precise instruction.

Types of Classes

All types of classes still follow the general format. They will all have a warm-up, a targeted warm-up, an apex where the hardest (most heating) poses are, and then a cool-down.

Well-Balanced Class

- Will move the spine in all directions: forward folding, back bending, twisting, and side bending.
- Includes Sun Salutations, standing postures, balancing, arm balancing, inversions and seated postures.

Themed

- Designing the entire class around a theme. The theme can be physical body (i.e. backbending), subtle body (Chakras), mental (i.e. focusing the mind with the moving meditation), or spiritual (i.e. focusing on gratitude, kindness etc.)

Peak Pose

- To design a class with a peak pose you must understand the component parts (see below). The entire class is designed around preparing the student for the 1 or 2 peak poses. The component parts are properly warmed-up and taught. The peak pose should go at the apex of the class, not the end. You will still need a cool-down after the peak pose(s). It can also be beneficial to do the peak pose more than once, so that they can go deeper or explore something new each time.

Component Parts

Doing an Asana effectively and safely is a complex puzzle of many moving parts. The pieces must fit together to see the full expression of the pose. When all of the moving parts are warm and educated, they fit together well and the energy of the Asana is realized. In order to get a student to this place in their practice, a good sequence will warm-up all necessary areas on the body and educate the student.

The component parts of a posture are broken down into 3 categories: flexibility, strength, and education. For a student to find their full expression of a pose, these 3 areas must be addressed. Component parts might be targeted areas that may need to be warmed-up, or muscles that need to be strengthened, or *actions* that need to be educated to do the posture safely. They may also be actions that need to be learned or imprinted to realize the full expression of the posture. The poses and stretches used to prepare these component parts do not always look like the final pose.

Knowing the component parts will help you decide what prep poses you need in your class to build your students up to the harder poses in class. This ability is crucial when teaching beginners or a peak pose sequence. Explaining in clear and concise terms all of the component parts will help your students to develop their practice and progress onwards. You would first identify the areas that need attention and the actions that need to be imprinted. Remember that you can not do all of the component parts in one class. Focus on one or two of them, so that your students can really learn and develop their knowledge.

In the beginning, this is a science that needs to be practiced and carefully planned. With years of experience, it will become more intuitive.

Breaking Down a Pose into its Component Parts

When teaching how to flow from high lunge to Vira II:

- First teach the foundation carefully, cue them to spin the back heel down. Then teach the tucking under of the front hip, so that the knee points forward (component part). Have them press down into their foundation to lengthen spine (component part for the transition).
- Tell them to maintain this alignment when lifting and educate them that when they flow up to Vira II to do it by rooting into the floor and maintaining the length of the spine.
- Once in Vira II, have them check the front hip and knee again.
- Consider teaching the flow several times adding a little new information each time.

When teaching Ardha Chandrasana:

- First teach Utthita Trikonasana, a complementary pose. Accentuate the rotation of the front leg from deep in the hip socket (component part) and the action of using the quads to straighten the leg with this rotation (component part). This set-up prepares their body and teaches about the external rotation and straight leg needed in Ardha Chandrasana. These component parts are easier to learn in Trikonasana than while in the more precarious balance of Ardha Chandrasana.
- Also in Trikonasana, emphasize the rotation of the bottom ribs up to the ceiling (component part). It is easier to do this in Utthita Trikonasana than in Ardha Chandrasana.
- Once they are in Ardha Chandrasana remind them of the component parts, from the ground up.

When teaching Dhanurasana.

- Stretch out the hip flexors (component part). Have High Crescent lunge in the practice. Cue it specifically to focus on the hip flexors. Example: Draw you belly to spine, as you push out through the back heel (counter-actions that ensure the student is stretching the hip flexor).
- Stretch out the shoulders; Uttanasana with the fingers interlaced behind the back, Purvottanasana.
- Have several backbends, building in intensity, to warm-up the muscles of the spine (component part).
- Emphasis on the internal rotation of the legs (component part): Cobra, Tadasana.
- Teach the opening of chest and broadening the collarbones; standing backbend and Purvottanasana.

Then begin to put it all together in the mixed level class:

- Salambasana: Talk about drawing the belly towards spine and the opening of the chest (use the same language you used earlier).
- Salambasana again: Talk about the spinning of the inner thighs (use the same language you used earlier).
- Dhanurasana: Do peak pose 2 times. Touching on the all of the component parts that you taught: Spinning of the inner thighs, drawing the belly in, and opening of the chest.

How to Design a Sequence for a Flow Class

1. Create 'threads' that link 'like with like' in order to keep the hips and foundation stable. The threads form the basis of the Flow class. Example of linking 'like with like': Vira II to Trikonasana because the foundation is the same and both are externally rotated standing postures. In general, link no more than three or four standing poses on each side. This is because it becomes very challenging to remember the sequence and teachers start to forget poses. In addition, students' alignment starts to falter because they are tired.

Examples of threads:

Vira II --- Exalted Warrior --- Trikonasana --- Parsvakonasana

Crescent ---- High lunge twist ---- Parsvottanasana ---- Parivrtta Trikonasana

Garudasana ---- Vira III ----- Standing Split

2. Sequence the threads from easiest to hardest.
3. Then decide the 'interludes' that you will have in-between the threads. Interludes are poses or sequences can be many different things including core, backbends, arm balances etc. These can vary depending on your peak pose, what you are trying to educate your students on, or what is 'missing' in your threads to make it a well-balanced class. So look over your threads and decide what your hardest poses will be to help you decide what to do in your interludes.

For example: If we are going to offer Urdhva Dhanurasana as one of the hardest poses in the class, but we have no stretches for the hip flexors in the threads then we probably want to add an interlude that will target a stretch for the hip flexors.

Examples of interludes:

- Knee to nose/shoulder/tricep from Down-dog
- Vasisthasana Series
- Arm balances
- Dolphin and Dolphin plank series
- Backbending series on the belly
- Chaturanga push-ups or holds
- Utkatasana/balance series
- Child's pose series

4. Link threads and interludes together by stepping to downward facing dog, Tadasana, or adding a vinyasa.
5. Then add a warm-up and Sun Salutes. For your warm-up again look at your peak pose, what you are trying to educate your students on, or what is 'missing' in your threads to make it a well-balanced class.

For example: If the class is really focused on backbending them maybe you do a bit of side bending in the warm-up to help round out the class, so it is well-balanced.

6. Continue on to the following, in this general order:
 - Peak pose (if doing)
 - Arm balances (if doing)
 - Heating inversions (if doing)
 - Backbends (if doing)
 - Cooling inversions (if doing)

You will not do all of these in every class, but this is a *general* order of how to sequence the poses. Of course you might do an arm balance as an interlude of the peak pose might be in your last thread. Just use the above order as a guideline.

7. Add a cool down that is directly related to what you practiced in the class. Again look to your sequence to help you decide what to include in the cool down. Look at your peak pose or what is 'missing' in your sequence to make it a well-balanced class. Of course, end in Savasana.

For example: If you work the core a lot then stretch the hip flexors in the end. Or if you did no twisting, add a twist.