

Five Coaching Tips

This workshop is for new instructors; experienced instructors who want some other perspectives; and for individual students who want some notes on how to be a good practice partner and improve their own skills faster. We'll look at several simple ways to level up your teaching and practice them with some drills and sparring games.

Minimum/Recommended/Ideal gear : Mask, sparring gloves, fencing jacket, and a safe fencing longsword. You can bring another type of weapon (e.g. rapier, sabre) if you can find another attendee who will use a suitable matching weapon to do the exercises.

If the example exercises don't work with your weapon pair, find a new one - the point is to practice coaching, not to practice the actions.

Tip #1: One thing at a time

- Give one piece of feedback after a given repetition, no more.
- If you provide more, your student won't possibly be able to hold all of that in their mind during their next attempt.
- When you're fixing several things, work through them in sequence
- If you're not sure which issue to start with, a useful rule of thumb is "start from the ground up".

Exercise: Durchwechselln

- Fencer advances and feints to the coach's chest
- Coach begins a parry
- Fencer drops the point, passes under the coach's parry, and finishes the thrust on the other side

Tip #2: Positive feedback only

- Positive in the sense of "constructive"
- How many ways are there to not do something? Lots!
- Giving a positive "do X" instruction helps someone move immediately in the right direction

Exercise: Short-edge parry, cut riposte

- Fencer steps forward and drops the point to draw an attack
- Coach obliges
- Fencer does a sweeping/sixte parry with the short edge to clear the blade
- Fencer ripostes with a simple cut

Tip #3: Don't mix messages

- Don't say "great" and talk about what they're doing wrong in the same breath
- Decide if the rep is good enough or if it needs fixing, and commit to either one.
- You can always give the feedback on the next rep - if the problem is persistent it'll show up again
- If you're fixing several problems (one at a time), always give a positive "great" for at least one rep, before you move onto the next problem.
- Helps keep the situation clear and supports student motivation
- This is a special case of Tip #1: "one thing at a time"

Exercise: Counter-riposte by flanconade/mutieren

- Fencer steps forward and launches an attack
- Coach parries and ripostes with a thrust to the chest
- Fencer parries and drops their point over the coach's weapon, aiming a thrust at the lower flank
 - With longsword it helps to turn over to the short edge to achieve this. Natterzunge

Tip #4: Five rep rule

- Once you notice a problem, wait for five reps before stepping in and giving feedback
- Often they'll be able to fix problems themselves in these five reps
- If they're still showing a problem, now you can step in
- If they've fixed the problem and added a new one, start the five rep count again when the new problem shows up

Exercise: Attack, hand-hit

- Student steps forward and throws a cut, aiming to put the point just in front of the opponent
- Coach attempts to parry
- Student lifts the blade out of the way of the parry, steps sideways and throws a second cut at the coach's hand

Tip #5: External focus cues

- This is the most important piece of advice in this workshop
- Definition of a cue: a piece of feedback to hold in mind during execution
- Strive to always give an external focus for the cue
 - Example: Instead of the hand, consider talking about their sword or their glove
 - Example: To talk about foot alignment, try referencing their shoelaces
 - You can use analogies to help characterise the movement pattern
- There's loads of research evidence that this produces better coaching outcomes
- In particular, it makes for much more "robust" learning, with better retention over time
- Note that you can still describe a movement with internal body language - what matters for this piece of advice is what you're telling them to keep in their mind *while* they perform the movement.
- **Book recommendation:** The Language of Coaching, by Nick Winkelman: <https://www.thelanguageofcoaching.com>

Exercise: AIP Drill

- Start at advance-lunge or advance-pass distance
- Student takes one step forward
- Coach has two options:
 1. Step backwards
 - ◆ Student pauses, and reset the drill to the starting point
 - ◆ If the coach chooses this, step back immediately as the student's step *starts*, not as it *ends*.

2. Stand still

- ◆ Student immediately continues from their step into an attack, which should hit easily.

(For more notes on this drill, see my workshop "Moments to Go")

This document may be freely shared with credit. Please borrow or adapt exercises and ideas. Feedback and questions are welcomed: send to Tea Kew on Facebook, or to tea@fechtlehre.org. If you would like me to come teach at your club or event, get in touch and we'll try and make it work.

Further content will be regularly published on <https://www.fechtlehre.org> - please bookmark and check back regularly to stay up to date.