

# Five Coaching Tips

*May Melee 2023*

This is a workshop aimed at instructors, assistant instructors and anyone else who wants to be more effective at giving advice to your friends in training. It's "system agnostic" - you don't need to train any specific historical treatise for this. Nor do you need to subscribe to a particular model of how to coach or train: the information here about how to give advice will help you do it more efficiently regardless.

## Exercise

For all the stages of this workshop, we'll be using a simple set play to practice coaching on:

- Fencer starts out of distance (two steps to hit), ready to cut
- Fencer steps forward and throws their cut, threatening the coach with the point
- Coach goes to parry
- Fencer drops the point underneath and finishes by thrusting to the other side of the coach's sword

This is the "durchwechseln" in Liechtenauer, or an 'attack by disengage' in modern fencing language. The exact interpretation and implementation is not relevant to the workshop - you can do any version you like. Or even replace the exercise entirely.

## 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".

## **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

## **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 things clear and supports student motivation
- This is a special case of Tip #1: “one thing at a time”

## **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

## **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>

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