

Sequencing for Yoga Teachers

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Within the physical practices of yoga, we work the body like we knead dough when making bread, so that it becomes transformed from an amorphous lump of unconscious flesh and bones into something that is vital and full of life. Through this work we find that both the body and the mind begin to wake up; they begin to unite with each other and with our everyday experience of life. As we continue to practice we gradually begin to find that we can extract from the body all of the juice of insight and consciousness that lies within it.

-- Richard Freeman, [The Mirror of Yoga](#)

Introduction

Teaching yoga is a joy, a practice, and a privilege. It is also an art. An empty yoga room is much like an empty concert hall: as attendees trickle in, you, the musician, have planned out the “set” you are going to play for your audience. The attendees are then taken on a journey of ups and downs, intensity and respite, through a potentially philosophical, spiritual, or deeply physical journey. It is the responsibility of the artist to create a powerful experience, and as a yoga teacher, your particular choice of yoga poses, your sequence, provide the notes for your melody.

Creating their own sequence allows yoga teachers to infuse their own passion and creativity, to specifically work towards certain goals and intentions, and to customize a class depending on students’ needs. Knowing how to appropriately sequence will also help with private lessons and give clients a personalized experience.

Just as there is no “right” way to teach yoga, there is not a right way to go about sequencing a class. There are as many ways to sequence a class as there are yoga teachers, and inevitably each teacher will come up with a system that works best for them. However, we can keep some basic fundamental principles in mind when sequencing, and also learn about useful systems created by experienced yoga teachers.

When starting to teach one’s own classes, a new yoga teacher might ask themselves, “how will I ever possibly fill up a 90 minute class?” With a limited number of poses and transition, it may be hard to create a novel and integrated class. Fortunately, as a teacher gains more skills and adds more poses to their repertoire, the question eventually transforms to, “how will I possibly fit everything I want to do into just 90 minutes?” Then begins the joy of creating an expertly crafted yoga class that is uniquely one’s own and uniquely beautiful.

Best of luck to you on your journey,

- Zach

Recommended Resources

- Alanna Kaivalya and Arjuna van der Kooij - *Myths of the Asanas: The Stories at the Heart of Yoga*
- Joseph Le Page and Lilian Le Page - *Yoga Teachers' Toolbox*
- Mark Stephens - *Yoga Sequencing*
- Online sequencing Tools (note: most of these cost money)
 - Jason Crandell <http://www.jasonyoga.com/study-online/yoga-sequencing/>
 - Sequence Wiz <http://sequencewiz.org/>
 - Tumme <https://www.tumme.com/>
 - Yoga Class Plan <https://www.yogaclassplan.com/>
 - Yoga Journal <https://teachersplus.yogajournal.com/sequences>

Set Your Intention

As yoga practitioners we understand the importance of setting an intention and taking time to reflect on why we do what we do.

Similarly, before we begin to sequence, it is important to take note of our fundamental principles. In his book *Yoga Sequencing*, Mark Stephens writes that we can set the intention for our sequences to be:

1. **Informed** - Drawing from accurate information and knowledge about the practice and the body.
2. **Effective** - the sequence is successful in bringing about the intended result of the practice.
3. **Efficient** - An efficient sequence moves toward the intended result in the simplest way.
4. **Beautiful** - Have your practice reflect your own inherent nature as a beautiful being.
5. **Integrated** - An integrated practice takes account for the entire experience, mind, body, senses, soul, and spirit.

Of course you can add your own intentions to your sequencing process, such as ensuring your sequence is memorable, interesting or unique.

Coming up with a Plan

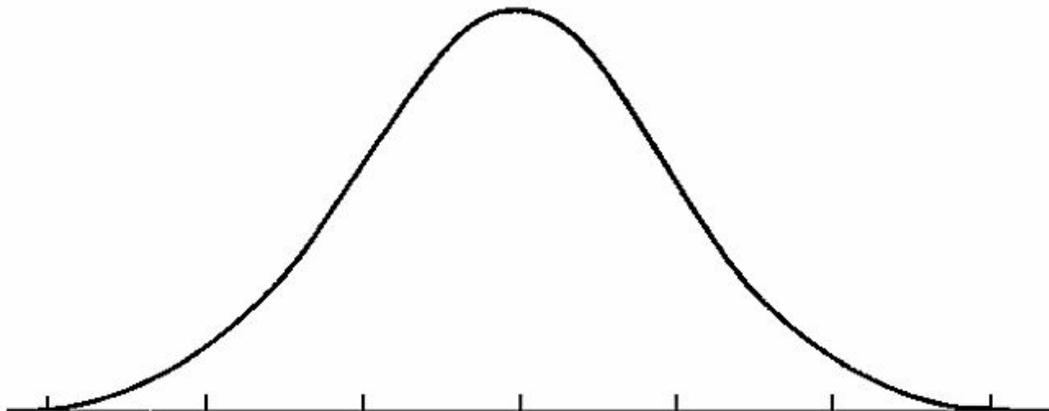
In beginning to sequence a class we can focus on five essential steps:

- Step 1: Create an Arc
- Step 2: Move through the major stations of the body
- Step 3: Appropriately Sequence
- Step 4: Add a theme
- Step 5: Be a Good Teacher

Step 1: Create an Arc

Every yoga class is a journey, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. This applies both on a metaphorical level and on a physical level: we must give the body time to both warm up and cool down. In fact, a yoga teacher can be sued for negligence if they do not allow sufficient time for the body to warm up and then a student gets injured! Let's be sure that doesn't happen.

We can easily chart the flow and intensity of our class with a simple bell curve:



This curve provides a very general view of how a class should go, and will greatly vary depending on students needs and type of class. A power yoga class, for example, will ramp up relatively quickly and stay at a high intensity for a majority of the time. A morning class might take longer to warm up, while a night-time class might start out strong but give an extra amount of time to cool down. A 90 minute class might have a few peaks with some time for rest in between.

We can then divide up a yoga class typical yoga class into simple sections, corresponding to the 5 esoteric elements: earth, water, fire, air, and ether.

1. **Earth:** this is the “**Initiating the Yogic Process**” or grounding part of your class. This can include a short meditation, a chant, pranayama, or simply sitting in child’s pose.
2. **Water:** this is the “**Warming the Body**” part of class, where it is best to articulate through as many joint motions as possible. This can include cat cows as well as sun salutations.
3. **Fire:** this is the “**Pathway to the Peak**” and “**Peak Exploration**” phases of yoga class, where we put the more active and challenging poses.
4. **Air:** allows time for “**Integration**” of all the poses from class. This will include some longer stretches and a general slowing down.
5. **Ether:** this is the “**Resting**” phase of practice, which includes any last and final poses, along with a luxurious savasana.

The phase of your yoga class will influence almost everything: the difficulty of the poses, how long they are held, how quickly people are breathing, the pace of your cues, and even the language that you use as a yoga teacher.

Step 2: Move Through the Major Stations of the Body

One of the major reasons yoga is such an incredible transformative practice is because it targets every muscle group across entire body. While many sports and common exercises focus on certain repetitive movements (like biking or running) and sometimes even one particular side (like baseball or bowling), a well-balanced yoga class will stretch and strengthen the entire body as a whole. This is why yoga such a beneficial practice, no matter what type of athlete walks into your class.

To create a well balanced yoga class, a good yoga teacher will attempt to bring the body through a variety of shapes and positions to stretch important muscles. This can be done by either making sure the sequence contains all the stations of the body, or making sure to include each yoga pose type, as shown below:

<u>Stations of the Body</u>	<u>Yoga Pose type</u>
1. Supine (on back)	● Backbend
2. Prone (on belly)	● Forward bend
3. Standing (on two feet)	● Balance
4. Sitting (on tailbone)	● Core
5. Kneeling / Crouching (on shins or squatting)	● Twist
6. Inversions (heart over head)	● Side bend
7. Balancing (one leg, two arms, or head)	● Hip opener
	● Inversion

Step 3: Appropriately Sequence

Now that we know the general arc of our class and which poses we want to make sure to include, we can link together these poses into an integrated class.

Yoga is constantly evolving, with new poses and styles being invented almost everyday. However, most vinyasa, power, and “flow” yoga classes have stuck to a same general framework that works for most bodies and experience levels. This framework is inspired by the Ashtanga Primary series and modified to fit the abilities of most bodies and to minimize risk of injury.

The **standard vinyasa sequence** goes as follows:

1. **Warm up:** Move through all three planes of the body, being sure to mobilize the spine through lateral flexion, forward flexion, extension, and axial rotation. Breathing exercises can also warm up the body.
2. **Sun Salutations:** Typically three sun salutations A and B (six total)
3. **Standing Sequence I:** Frontal plane poses (externally rotated hips/femurs)
4. **Standing Sequence II:** Sagittal plane (internally rotated hips/femurs) + transverse plane poses
5. **Standing balances:** One legged balances, such as tree or dancer’s pose. Can also do external rotation hips first and then internal rotation.
6. **Optional peak sequences:**
 - a. Core work
 - b. Deep hip-openers
 - c. Hands and forearm balances
 - d. Deep backbends (and counterposes)
 - e. Inversions
7. **Sitting poses:** Seated stretches and twists
8. **Supine poses:** Poses on the back, such as happy baby and reclined twist
9. **Savasana:** traditionally 5 min/30 minute class

Typically, each mini sequence would have around 3-6 poses each and done twice, one for each side.

There are of course, other ways to sequence a class, beyond the vinyasa template.

If you are teaching Hatha, a good place to start is the **traditional Sivanandan Hatha Sequence** taught at Ashrams around the world.

1. **Opening chants:** Dhyana Slokas, Shanti Mantra
2. **Breathing exercises:** Kapalabhati, Anuloma Viloma
3. **Sun Salutations**
4. **Legs:** Leg stretches, Double leg lifts
5. **Inverted sequence:** Headstand, Shoulderstand, Plough, Fish
6. **Forward & backward bends:** Sitting Forward Bend, Cobra, Locust, Bow
7. **Twists, standing, & balancing poses:** Half Spinal Twist, Crow or Peacock, Standing Forward Bend, Triangle
8. **Relaxation:** Final Relaxation
9. **Closing chants:** Maha Mrityunjaya Mantras, Peace Mantras

Notice how the asana section focuses on 12 specific postures in one specific order. Hatha traditions emphasize mastering these twelve basic asanas first, from which variations are then added to further deepen into the practice.

Finally, if you want a more abstract structure to follow that gives you as a teacher a lot of room to, you can use the following:

1. **Setting Intention:** Bring a direction to the beginning of class
2. **Unifying practice:** Start with an Om or Mantra to get all the students in the same space
3. **Centering Practice:** Center people within themselves by focusing on the breath or doing a pranayama practice
4. **Warm up:** Go from single joint motions to greater joint motions, being sure to mobilize the spine through lateral flexion, forward flexion, extension, and axial rotation.
5. **Heating:** Get the blood pumping and the muscles warm
6. **Purification:** Burn away impurities and tensions with challenging poses
7. **Neutralizing:** Do counterposes to the purification poses and allow time to rest
8. **Flexibility:** Hold the poses for longer to get deeper stretches
9. **Closing Seq:** Bring the students to savasana slowly
10. **Savasana:** Spend time here to integrate the practice
11. **Meditation:** Bring the students back to their internal experience
12. **Closing:** Finish the class with a bell, Om or chant

Step 4: Add a Theme

Earlier it was mentioned that a yoga class is like a work of art. Well, a good piece of art needs a coherent theme or story to integrate all the pieces into a complete whole. To make this happen, it helps to have a consistent theme.

Anatomical focus

An easy way to sequence a yoga class is to simply focus on a specific body part or joint, a certain shape of the body, or a category of poses. Examples include: hips, back bends, heart openers, shoulders, inversions, twists, balance poses, arm balances, forward bends, chakras, and meridians. You could even teach a class for rock-hard abs or buns.

Peak pose

It is common for yoga teachers to choose a relatively challenging pose and spend the entire class working up to that pose. Some examples of challenging poses include: bird of paradise, dragonfly, elbow wheel, forearm stand, king pigeon, and diving dancer.

A message

It is great to give a unifying message to a yoga class, such as any feeling, idea, intention, spiritual lesson, inspiring quote, moving poem or story. Examples include: open heart, see the world in a new way, nature, archetypes, mythology, medicine wheel, letting go, listening to our body, self-love, ayurveda, grounding, unconditional love, balance, awareness, transformation, wholeness, and yin/yang. Some possible intentions that come from the *Anusara Yoga* manual are:

Joy	Enthusiasm	Softness	Surrender
Yielding	Acceptance	Love	Kindness
Compassion	Non-clinging	Playfulness	Spaciousness
Contentment	Devotion	Gratitude	Discrimination
Gentleness	Steadfastness	Willpower	Courage
Humility	Sensitivity	Patience	Endurance
Forbearance	Concentration	Resilience	Mindfulness

Part of a series

Many teachers prefer not to teach in a weekly model, but rather organize their classes as part of a series, such as a 4-week series or 40 day detox. Examples of series could be: seven chakras, five elements, 10 classes to headstand or handstand, 8 weeks to jump-start your practice, or moving through a medicine wheel.

Based on the current state of affairs

If a teacher is at a loss for a theme, they can always check the calendar or simply ask their students what is coming up for them. Some examples include: solving a problem like headaches, menstruation, back-pain, and detox/digestion, or relevant to the time of year, like morning or night, spring or winter, holidays, and the phases of the moon. In general, it's best to avoid politics or get overly personal.

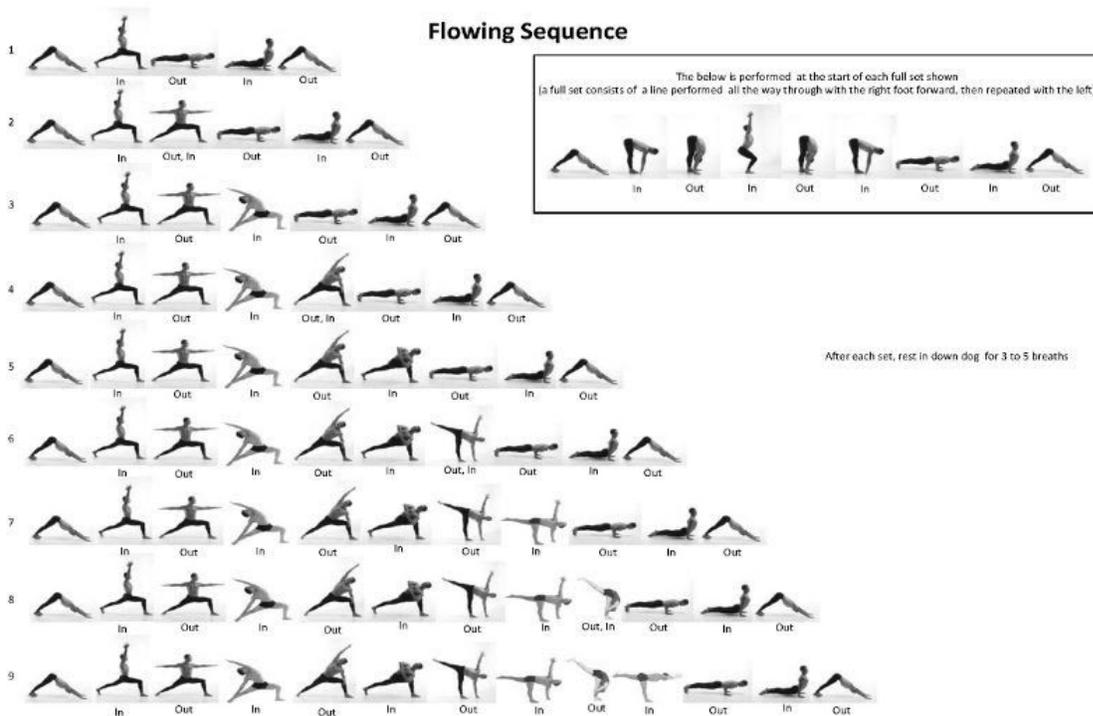
Catered to your audience

Sometimes we might want to create a class for a specific group. It could be for workers in an office setting, or for hikers at the end of a long hiking day. Some classes are marketed as yoga for dudes, yoga for wild woman, or queer yoga. Other examples include yoga for dancers, bikers, weight lifters, the elderly, or moms.

Pick a specific sequence or teach one

Some corporate studios and some traditions, like YogaWork, CorePower, or Bikram yoga, all have a specific sequence that their teachers adhere to. As a student, it is convenient to know exactly what to expect when taking a yoga class. As a teacher, you might stick to the same sequence for a month, a year, or even your whole career!

Another option is to teach your students a sequence piece by piece, and have them complete it towards the end of class. This could mean building it up, or adding a new pose each time and making sure students have it, not dissimilar to how a dance routine might be taught. Below is one example of how to do this:



Step 5: Be a Good Teacher

Lastly, it's important to remind ourselves that there is more to a class than just the physical set of postures. Class begins before the scheduled time, and ends long after it is over. Along with "sequencing" the 60-90 minutes of class, it is important to remember what to do before, during and after as a good yoga teacher.

<u>Beginning of class</u>	<u>Middle of class</u>	<u>End of class</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Arrive early ● Familiarize oneself with the space ● Greet individuals as they come in ● Tell people if they will need props ● Welcome class ● Ask questions ● Give class permission to adjust practice ● Establish consent for adjustments ● Intention, idea, quote ● Chant, mantra, meditation, breath 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Informed sequence ● Physical Adjustments ● Well spoken, articulate ● Talk to students ● Off the mat ● Carry theme/intention ● Demonstrations ● Precise Instructions ● Informative teachings ● Hold space ● Cool Down ● Deeper stretches ● Savasana ● Come out slowly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Intention, Om ● Namaste, chant ● Gratitude ● Announcements, Flyers, Email List, offerings ● Be available after for questions and comments ● Say goodbye as students leave ● Return space as you found it

Step 6: Modify your Plan (optional)

There is a saying, “No general ever won a battle without a plan; no general ever won a battle following that plan.” As yoga teachers we must be willing to be flexible and adjust our plan depending on the present-moment needs of our students.

In this case it will help to know how to modify both specific poses and sequences for level I, II and III students.

Fill in column #2 with some common yoga poses you like to bring into a yoga class. Then, offer more challenging and less challenging variations.

Less Challenging	Pose	More Challenging

Exercises

Create a class:

Choose a theme from Step 4 and present a 3-6 poses that would go along with your theme.

Create a workshop:

Think about a message or teaching you wish to share with the world, and create a 2-3 hour workshop around it.

Create a retreat:

Come up with a retreat and consider all that goes into your retreat. Think of what meditations, sequences, classes, additional activities you want to have, as well as the kind of food and environment you want to create.

Title:

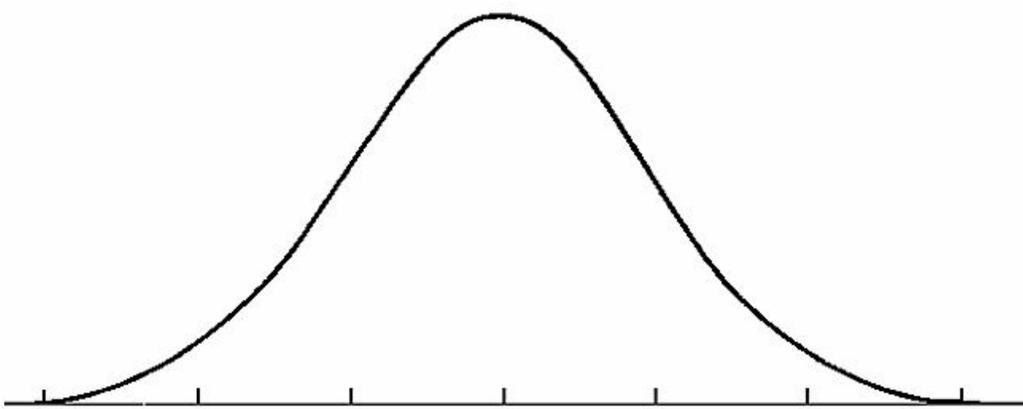
Theme:

Target audience:

Sequences:

Additional Activities:

Peak pose sequencing tool

Peak Pose:		
	To stretch	To strengthen
Body part or joint		
Poses that do this <i>(then label 1, 2, 3 in terms of difficulty level)</i>		
Full sequence:		
		

Class Preparation Sheet

Type of class (all levels, beginner, etc.) and duration (60, 75, 90 minute):

Intention:

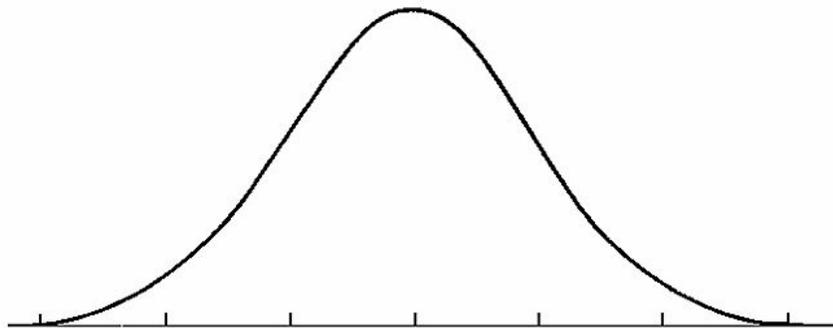
Theme:

Poses to include:

- Backbend:
- Forward bend:
- Balance:
- Core:
- Twist:
- Side bend:
- Hip opener:
- Inversion:

Props needed:

Sequence:



Notes: