

Setting the Pace

Learning to pace a class is akin to finding your own voice as a teacher—it takes experience and hard work, but it's well worth the effort. Here's why.

By Jason Crandell

From the rapid, rhythmic cadence of Ashtanga vinyasa to the "stop-and-come-look" tempo of [Iyengar Yoga](#), different styles of [hatha yoga](#) call for specific paces. The pace of class sets the tone for the practice, shapes the experience for the students, and produces different effects for the body and mind. These effects vary depending on whether you intend to elicit physical, energetic, or therapeutic effects, or a blend of all three. Pacing can also articulate the theme and sequence you've chosen for your class. (Learn more about the [Principles of Sequencing](#) in an article by Donald Moyer.)

For teachers who lead general hatha classes rather than teaching according to a set tradition, the pace of a class is equally important and can be even more challenging to determine. Selecting a pace is a largely subjective skill, and without generally prescribed parameters to follow, it's often difficult to know where to begin. Here we'll look at some of the factors that are most helpful—namely, knowing your intentions, discerning the ability of your students, and responding to your environment.

Begin with Intention

Before setting the pace, set an intention for the particular class. Ask yourself, "What am I trying to teach?" and "How do I want to guide my students' experience?" Consider what you want to elicit from your students both during and after class. Are you trying to give them a sweaty, active workout? Are you trying to develop their capacity to relax? Are you trying to teach them how to inhale completely, without strain? If you have a theme that you want to work with, a specific sequence, or even a specific pose, think about how your pace can best communicate that theme or pose.

Once you hone in on your intention, the pace can naturally unfold. For example, if you want to build your students' strength in standing poses while encouraging them to generate physical heat and mental stamina, you should maintain a steady and strong cadence. On the other hand, if you are teaching a sequence of hip openers that build to Padmasana (Lotus Pose) and you intend to develop mindfulness and surrender, you should move more gently.

As you consider what to teach in any given class—whether to focus on forward bends, twists, the action of the legs in standing poses—you should also take into account that the pace of class can balance the effects of the poses and the sequence. Keep in mind that your priority as a yoga teacher is to develop the students' experience of equanimity, steadiness, and ease regardless of the difficulty of the poses. As T.K.V. Desikachar translates in [Yoga Sutra](#) II.46, "Asana must have the dual qualities of alertness and relaxation."

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When you teach a strong sequence of standing poses, you may be accustomed to setting a pace that is steady and driving. This makes plenty of sense and is an option. However, your class may benefit from a tempo that balances the energetic effects of the asanas, particularly if they are strong. For example, deep backbends are by nature highly stimulating. Therefore, it is often best to teach deep backbends with a very steady, slow rhythm, encouraging deep relaxation and attentiveness, as students move more deeply into more difficult asanas. Conversely, you might also find an interesting balance if you teach a forward bend practice—which is typically slow and quieting—at an up-tempo cadence.