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# CUEING FOR PILATES

*Why this art form  
is essential to  
effective instruction*

*By Kerrie Lee Brown*

Cueing is the art of getting a client to move efficiently through an exercise, so they get the most out of the instruction. Cueing can mean different forms of teaching – for instance, performing a movement with a specific intention, quality or with the correct muscular engagement and muscle firing patterns. A quality instructor must be well versed in different types of cueing which will help address each individual client. This learned skill of communicating effectively with clients on all levels is the key to top-notch cueing.

Whether you're a Pilates instructor or personal trainer, proper cueing for your method of exercise is crucial for effective instruction which will result

in best results for your clients. Experts agree that Pilates instructors need an extensive repertoire of cues, including broad categories of tactile (touch), auditory (verbal) and visual (demonstration). Each of these types of cueing can be further divided into relevant and useful subcategories such as directional cueing, which makes use of the surrounding environment to guide the client.

## FORMS OF CUEING

According to Executive Director of Education for STOTT PILATES®, Moira Merrithew, cueing is often broken down into tactile and verbal forms - each can be equally effective depending on the individual client. "It is important to remember that each category can be broken down further," Moira says. "A verbal cue can deal with imagery, anatomical function, or sensory perception. Even tactile cue can be used to bring awareness to a specific area or to help in firing an individual muscle or muscle group."

Proper cueing is crucial for high-caliber mind-body instruction. "The exercise we teach requires the whole body to work as a unit," continues Moira. "It (cueing) is a learned discipline where the focus is on movement patterns which require a higher degree of participant skill and kinesthetic awareness. Our instructors cue the firing of our intrinsic musculature to execute refined patterns. When cueing these muscles in particular, the local and global

stabilizers, our aim is to achieve stability with mobility and control of each pattern."

## THE FIVE BASIC PRINCIPLES

Without question, the cues that are emphasized most are those that incorporate modern theories of exercise science and spinal rehabilitation and involve biomechanical theories of breathing, pelvic placement, rib cage placement, scapular movement and stabilization, and head and cervical spine placement. By introducing these principles and reinforcing them through a workout, awareness of how the body moves is developed. This mind-body awareness ensures focus on precision and control to help realize the full benefits of an exercise program. Cues that are founded in these principles ensure clients are maintaining a kinesthetic awareness of the body.

Furthermore, cues that relate to proper breathing technique promote effective oxygenation of the blood, focus the mind on each task and help avoid unnecessary tension during exercise. Encouraging exhaling deeply helps activate the deep support muscles of the body. Activation of the deep stabilizing muscles (pelvic floor and transversus abdominis) are integral in maintaining stabilization of the lumbo-pelvic region and should be encouraged and incorporated into the breath pattern of every movement.

Effective cues will also emphasize stabilization of the pelvis and lumbar spine both statically and dynamically in all positions and throughout all movements. Cueing pelvic stability during an exercise will ensure optimal performance of the movement and help prevent any unnecessary stress on the lumbar spine. The abdominal muscles must often be recruited to maintain the rib cage, and indirectly, the thoracic spine, in proper alignment. Instructors must cue participants to prevent the rib cage from lifting up in the supine position or deviate forward in a sitting position, causing the thoracic spine to extend.

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Instructors should remain aware of cueing stabilization of the scapulae and shoulders and realize the importance during the initiation of every exercise. When stability is absent, there is a tendency to overwork muscles around the neck and shoulders. Since they lack a direct bony attachment to the rib cage and spine, the scapulae have a great deal of mobility in making a greater range of motion available to the arms. Although the scapulae move with the arms, a sense of stability, not rigidity, should always be maintained.

Regarding head and cervical spine placement, the cervical spine should hold its natural curve and the skull should balance directly above the shoulders when sitting in neutral. This position should also be maintained when lying on the back. In most instances, the cervical spine should be encouraged to continue the line created by the thoracic spine during flexion, extension, lateral flexion and rotation. Continually referring to these biomechanical principles will ensure that the cues an instructor is providing will help all clients or groups perform the exercises to the best of their ability.

### **INEFFECTIVE CUES & UNDERSTANDING YOUR CLIENT**

According to research, one of the most overused cues in the Pilates industry at large is ‘slide your shoulders down.’ “While this may be effective with a small percentage of client groups, it can also have some very detrimental effects on others,” says Moira. “In many participants, sliding the shoulders down may overly

depress them, produce compression on nerves of the neck and shoulders and decrease the range of motion in the shoulder joint. To be more effective, instructors should look at each client their individual needs to determine what the optimal cue is for them.”

“It is important to understand what type of a learner the client is and then be able to select cues that will be appropriate for that individual. Someone who is a “thinker learner” will want to know the intricacies of a movement and may not respond as well to visual images. In this case, using phrases such as ‘feel the head of the femur rotating freely within the hip socket’ may elicit a better response.

To conclude, an effective Pilates instructor will be able to relate to any type of client, no matter how they learn best, by having a well stocked tool box of cues available at a moment’s notice. A good practice exercise for instructors on their own is to go through 5-10 repetitions of an exercise and use a different cue for each repetition. Instructors should be clear in their own mind why they are teaching a client a particular exercise or modification. This will ensure they will be able to develop a rapport with any client who walks in their door.

More importantly, emphasizing positive reinforcement when working with clients is crucial to effective cueing, and therefore effective Pilates instruction. Many clients will react quicker if they are told why they are doing a particular exercise a certain way as



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opposed to it being thrown at them because it comes next on the chart. So next time you’re thinking about how to approach your client with a new exercise or movement – remember to think about their individual needs and how to approach them with the change. It’ll make all the difference. **OSF**

For more information on Cueing or Pilates Education, visit [www.stottpilates.com](http://www.stottpilates.com)

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