

Scripted Starts and Flawless Finales

Make your openings
and closings memorable.

Most group fitness instructors introduce and close their classes with some remarks to participants. Style will vary depending on personality, but openings and closings are always important opportunities. Petra Kolber, 2001 IDEA Fitness Instructor of the Year, says, “People may not always remember the actual choreography, but they will recall the first and last 5 minutes. Since we only have one chance to make a great first impression, being prepared for the beginning and ending is key for success.”

Great actors don’t show up on set and improvise as soon as the cameras start rolling. They *practice* putting their own personality into the words scripted for them. You, as an instructor, can learn a lot from this. Practice delivering your opening and closing scripts and you’ll be as polished as a professional actor. Scripted starts and polished finales offer participants a rehearsed “show” with all the pertinent information delivered in the best order possible.

Openings

Here are some topics to consider for the class opening, defined as “everything that happens between the official class start time to the moment when the warm-up sequence initiates.” Include these in any order and use your preferred nomenclature, personality, tone and body language.

Welcome. Formally welcome all participants and invite them to share the experience. This shows that you know it’s time to begin and are dedicated to your time together.

Intensity. Identify how you want participants to gauge their intensity. There are many options, but the most common are the traffic light system (“Work in the green, yellow and red, as you define those colors for you today”); the Borg original or amended scale of perceived exertion; talk tests; and heart rate monitoring. Denver-based June Kahn, 2009 IDEA Fitness Instructor of the Year, recommends telling participants at the outset, “An hour from now, I’ll ask you if you

chose the intensity that you needed today to get closer to your fitness goals.”

New students. Identify new people in a comfortable way based on the facility’s group dynamics. Examples (from one extreme to the other) include “I require all new people to introduce themselves to the whole class” and “I see some new faces today, so just know I would love to

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meet you after class.” Don’t let a new attendee slip through the cracks without noting his or her commitment.

Gratitude. “Thanking students for coming to class shows that you’re aware they make sacrifices with their time, jobs and responsibilities,” says Keli Roberts, owner of Keli’s Real Fitness, 2003 IDEA Fitness Instructor of the Year, who is based in Pasadena, California. Be sincere in your expression of gratitude, Roberts recommends, and tell students you don’t take them for granted. “It goes a long way toward member retention,” she says.

Sound and equipment. If there is a key aspect of the music that merits attention, mention it at the start of class; for example, “I’ve compiled today’s playlist based on your Facebook posts this week” or “Since our theme today is breathing, all songs will thematically tie to the breath in some way.”

Tell participants which pieces of equipment they will be using. Set up equipment in the exact orientation you want participants to mirror. “I don’t just tell them which pieces of equipment to get out,” says Ankie Feenstra of the BodyWork Gym in Mykonos, Greece, “but I have them organize their playground in the most systematic fashion for how we will be using the toys as the class progresses.”

Teaser. A teaser gives participants a reason to stay, above and beyond the overall experience itself. The teaser is a *specific* aspect of class that has a “buzz” to it. It’s something to look forward to. California-based Jay Blahnik—1996 IDEA Fitness

Instructor of the Year and co-creator of Indo-Row® and ShockWave—creates a teaser early on by telling participants they will build teamwork by finishing with a race. “Planting that seed at the start builds excitement, lets them know they’re all part of a team and that all aspects of class will come together for one larger purpose at the end.”

Theme. Setting a theme gives everyone a shared focus. Bobbie Adams, a tai chi instructor based in Chicago, uses the same introduction for each class but changes the theme. “On some days, our theme is balance,” she says. “On others, we focus on slow speed, aromatherapy, breathing or trying the last movements of every sequence with our eyes closed.”

Issues. Issues such as low-back disorders, joint pain and injury recovery are common. Address these by asking, “Does anyone have any special issues I should be aware of before class today?” Follow up with information that stays within your scope of practice as a fitness professional, such as offering modifications and giving permission to proceed at a self-selected pace.

Purpose. Regardless of how often you change choreography, mentioning the class’s overall purpose will help participants get the most from their experience. For example: “Remember that the overall purpose of this boot camp is both strength and cardio, so not only will your muscles be working, but your heart will be pumping as well!”

For mnemonic recall, the preceding sections form the acronym “W.I.N.G.S. T.T.I.P.”

Closings and Transitions

“Closing” refers to the final section of class, which includes both movement and script. Maureen Hagan, 2006 IDEA Fitness Instructor of the Year and 1998 IDEA Program Director of the Year, is vice president of operations for Good-

Life® Fitness, Canada. She suggests we rename “cool-downs” as “transitions.”

“It makes more sense that we call this portion of class a ‘transition’ because participants are moving on to use their muscles differently. How can we predict that everyone needs to “cool down” in this day of back-to-back classes and active exercisers who rush back to work? Including flexibility at the end of every single class isn’t always practical for everyone.”

Consider including the following in the closing transition:

Gratitude. Thank participants for attending and for making it through to the very end. Sometimes we take for granted the great physical effort members make to complete a class.

You. Make “you” statements about observed behaviors to help members feel successful. Use concrete, objective observations about the energy and abilities of participants to keep the “group” in “group exercise.” For example, tell them, “The back row really brought the energy today with excellent form on those burpees.”

Make their day. Use the final moments of class to bring value-added service to the experience. Give away coupons to special events, recognize a most valuable player (MVP) and make positive comments on participants’ Facebook walls where appropriate.

Transcendence. Emphasize the functional aspects of your class by choosing at least one exercise from that day’s repertoire and explaining how it transcends the walls of the group exercise studio and is relevant to people’s everyday lives. Mindy Mylrea, 1999 IDEA Fitness Instructor of the Year and creator of Tabata Bootcamp™, likes to share the meaning behind the movement.

“In Tabata, for example, I try to make people understand the principles of intensity training by relating it to times in their lives when they have to work that hard and then recover,” says Mylrea. “When you make movement feel like a logical part of their daily lives, it makes more sense to them, and they ‘get it.’”

Teaser. The opening teaser gives par-

ticipants a reason to stay for class. The transition teaser serves as a carrot, luring them to return. Examples range from the simple (“Now that you’ve learned today’s movements with great technique, next week we’ll add an additional set to each muscle group!”) to the innovative (“Next week we’re going to do all the moves we learned today, but in the dark, with glowsticks!”) to the call to action (“Next week *you* are all going to choose our music by posting on my Facebook wall the song *you* want to hear for our ride!”).

Intensity. Where appropriate, a reminder about intensity can help participants stay on track from week to week. “If I tell them at the start of class that I’m going to ask them if they chose the appropriate intensity, then I certainly do ask them at the end,” Kahn says. “This helps teach accountability.”

Purpose. This bears repeating. Positively restate the purpose at the end of class—this helps everyone, regardless of skill level, to achieve success. On hearing that “our overall purpose was to improve our leg strength today, and we achieved that together,” the participant whose legs are shaking will feel rewarded when reminded of this within the positive context of teamwork.

For mnemonic recall, the preceding sections form the acronym “G.Y.M. T.T.I.P.”

Scripting and memorizing your openings and closings help ensure success because you begin by preparing everyone for the experience and end by tying it all together. The more time and preparation you put into your starts and finishes, the closer you will get to guaranteeing a highly polished and professional experience for all. ■

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