Learning a new lift

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Learn a new exercise light, with one or two simple cues that focus on what you're doing to the floor, bar or weight. A few imperfect reps are normal. Judge each set after you finish it, film yourself, and add weight only when the movement looks the same every rep.

Why it matters: Most people learn lifts from videos or by copying others. A coach would teach you in steps, give you short cues and watch you move. This guide gives you a way to coach yourself.

Before you start

- **Watch a good demonstration** a few times, from the front and side.
- **Check the movement pattern:** squat, hinge (pushing your hips straight back, as if closing a drawer behind you, rather than bending at the waist), lunge, push, pull or carry. Each has its own key points (see the exercise library).
- **Start with an empty bar, light dumbbells or body weight.**

Use outside cues, not inside cues

Cues about the world around you tend to be easier to follow than cues about body parts.

Instead of this	Try this
"Squeeze your glutes"	"Push the floor away"
"Retract your shoulder blades"	"Bend the bar" (bench press)
"Extend your hips"	"Drive your hips toward the wall in front"
"Brace your core"	"Get tall and tight, like before a punch"

Pick one cue per set. Too many cues at once makes movement worse.

The learning sequence

1. **Practice the shape** with no weight or a dowel: 2 sets of 5 slow reps.
2. **Add a light load** you could lift 15 or more times. Do 2 to 3 sets of 5 to 8 reps.
3. **After each set, ask:** did it feel smooth? Did anything hurt? Where did I feel it?
4. **Film one set** from the side (see "Film your form") and compare it with the demonstration.
5. **Fix one thing at a time** next set.
6. **Repeat the lift for at least 2 to 3 sessions** before adding much weight.

Adding weight

- **Add load before speed.** Get it right at a steady pace, then work on moving with intent.
- **Add small jumps:** 5 lb for upper body, 5 to 10 lb for lower body on barbell lifts.
- **Keep reps in reserve:** stop each set with 2 to 3 reps left while learning.
- **Back off** if form changes as weight goes up.

A few imperfect reps are OK

- Everyone's reps vary a little. Small differences between reps are normal.
- Your body is built to handle some variation. A slightly rounded back on a light deadlift isn't an emergency (see "Lower back pain").
- Look for patterns over the set, not one bad rep.

Pain rules

- **Mild muscle effort or burning:** normal.
- **Mild discomfort that eases as you warm up:** usually fine. Keep the load light.
- **Sharp pain, pain in a joint, or pain that gets worse during the set:** stop the exercise. Try an easier version or a different exercise.
- **Pain that lingers into the next day or keeps returning:** see a health professional.

When to get a coach

- Olympic lifts (snatch, clean and jerk)
- After an injury or surgery
- If you've filmed and practiced and something still feels wrong

A few sessions with a qualified coach or physical therapist can save months of trial and error.

Related guides

- Film your form
- How to use a weight machine
- Breathing during lifts

Related articles

- What counts as a rep
- Lower back pain
- The strength training dose