

# Downward Dog, Elevated Dialogue: Why Yoga Instructors Need a Foundation in Writing



Whenever yoga teachers in training ask me for advice, I always say, “the key to being a fantastic yoga teacher is to be a better writer.” Think about it. You command a room for sixty minutes straight and have to explain a unique sequence with a minimum of three anatomical cues per pose/exercise; no one wants someone with plain phrases. As a result, I have learned more original verbs and unique compliments than I have exercises over my past year as an instructor. And my students come back because of it. Sure my popstar-esque aura and fantastic playlists also bring my students joy. But your words matter. Although a student comes to your class to move, they should leave having learned something new about their body in the process—whether that be how to properly activate their core or the proper alignment within a double lunge.

## 1. Exercise Cues Need a Fun Verb

I’ll let you in on a secret. Every instructor must follow a specific script when describing a cue to the body. The formula goes “verb–body part.” Most managers also encourage

variety with cues, which means you need a strong foundation of anatomy and verb choices. I always tell new staff to take a verb they tend to use and look up its synonyms online. And Voila! You are original! The action seems simplistic, yet the end product makes you creative. Here are some of my favorite, versatile cues:

- **Elongate/Lengthen** your spine
- **Squeeze/Glue together** your (inner/outer) glutes
- **Reach** through your fingertips
- Instead of “**Stand** tall,” say “**Ground** down through your heels”
- Instead of saying “**Engage** your core,” I say “**Envision** your belly button seeping into your spine”

## 2. “Teacher Talk” 101

However, yoga instructors need far more than an *Oxford English Dictionary* to master “teacher talk.” You have to avoid saying filler words such as “find,” “like” or “here,” and you can never say sorry: all yogis say “*rather*.” When you write well, you know which parts of your written piece are too wordy or do not translate well. Same goes for instructors. If you continuously say “activate your core here,” you have found your filler. Thus, take the leap of faith and remove your safety phrase from your cue treasure chest. Writers love concision—and so does studio management.

## 3. Intention Breeds Intellect

Finally, having a strong literary tool box helps you foster a sense of community within your class and a sense of intentionality as an instructor. Students can tell when you have taken the time to properly learn an exercise or to write your intention for class. And the best instructors use what students view as “classy language” when setting their intention—news flash, they are typically transitional phrases. For instance, one of my class themes centered solely around the word “expansion,” which I explained as such:

“Today, I offer you the intention of **expansion**. Although we often underestimate the key to overcoming challenges, expanding your capacities and welcoming in a positive mindset are the keys to personal growth. For the next sixty minutes, the exercises presented will challenge you not only to physically lengthen your body, as you reach for your best pose, but also to mentally expand your mind, reminding yourself of your capability to achieve. Inhale to seal your intention, exhale to share it with the room.”

Guess what? I made that intention running on four hours of sleep and sheer delusion. But because I know how to speak like a writer, the words came easily. Using correlative conjunctions like “not only...but also” and gerunds like “expanding,” “welcoming,” and “reminding,” made students trust that they were in a safe space with a thoughtful teacher. Plus, my sequence included poses and exercises that physically expand the body—standing splits, rainbow toe taps, and v-up crunches—which perfectly coincided with my verbal intention.

#### **4. Cool Instructors Love Compliments and Community**

Furthermore, the best instructors vary their compliments and words of encouragement. Recognizing the beauty of language in crafting kind words gives you the upperhand as an instructor because the words makes your students feel special. For instance, alliteration rolls off the tongue well and excites students: **“Fantastic form, Emma!” or “Beautiful balance, Bridget!”**

Also being conscientious of how students are feeling throughout class helps you know when to give the most and the best compliments. When students feel their lowest, uplift them to their highest. Here are some of my encouraging phrases:

- **“Your fatigue fosters growth.”**
- **“Remind yourself of your personal strength to overcome any mental blocks you face.”**
- **“Your practice is personal, but our class is a community. Lean on your community’s perseverance to push through the last standing exercise.”**

#### **5. The Big Conclusion, Sculpt Instructors Need More Than Just a Yoga Class**

For any college student looking to instruct workout classes, my biggest tip would be get into any grammar or writing class. Although you would expect science oriented students to be the strongest instructors, the humanities students can instantly command a room with confidence. So please stop telling English majors that we are only smart because our courseload is easy. And to my humanities students, keep pushing through opposition and consider a side hustle in yoga or pilates.