

## Basic Music Principles for Group Exercise

Understanding and learning to work with the principles of professionally-mixed group exercise music will help your participants follow your choreography and cues more successfully.

Most group exercise music is composed in 32-count blocks with 16-count and 8-count phrasing. The most fundamental principle in designing safe and flowing choreography is identifying the beat of the music and the downbeat at the beginning of each music phrase (i.e., “music identity”). The downbeat is always the *first* count (1) of the 8-count phrase.

The following examples illustrate the basic concept of counting base steps according to the musical phrase:

March:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  
R L R L R L R L

(Step “something”) Step, Knee lift:

1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8  
Step R – Knee Lift L    Step L – Knee Lift R    Step R – Knee Lift L    Step L – Knee Lift R

(“Something” step) Knee lift, Step:

1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8  
Knee Lift R – Step R    Knee Lift L – Step L    Knee Lift R – Step R    Knee Lift L – Step L

Neutral:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  
Feet together, hands on thighs -- pulse squats to each beat

Some movements will flow together very well while others simply don’t fit together. In the illustration below, the circles that connect contain steps that work well together while the circles that do not connect tend to “clash”.

For example, circles 1-2-4 and 1-3-4 will flow together; circles 2-3 never flow together smoothly because of where the “step” is in relation to the beat of music. To connect the steps in circles 2 and 3, you need to use steps or movements from circles 1 and/or 4.



A march flows into a “step something” or a “something step”.

A “step something” and a “something step” *never* flow together smoothly. In the “base steps” examples above, “step something” always places the “step” on beats 1-3-5-7 and the action (or “something”) is always on beats 2-4-6-8. “Something step” places the action (or “something”) on beats 1-3-5-7 and the “step” on beats 2-4-6-8.

To link “step something” and “something step”, you need a neutral movement where both feet are in contact with the ground or marching.

When choreographing cardio movement or routines, consider the following four base moves and the numerous variations provided. Feel free to experiment to create blocks of choreography for your Circuit or Cardio classes.

## Base Steps with Variations

- I. **MARCH** - step RL or step LR (a cue of March R or March L identifies the lead leg)
  1. Style – how a step looks (arms may also change how a movement looks)
    - a. March in place – low-high
    - b. March out, out, in, in or V step (fwd out, out, in place, in, in-)
    - c. Rock step (R - step fwd R, step in place L, step back R, step in place L)
  2. Number – number of repetitions performed
    - a. 2,4,6,8, etc.
  3. Asymmetry – uneven repetitions are performed side to side
    - a. 3 + 1: (hustle) march r, l, r, tap l or march l, r, l, tap r
  4. Rhythm – speed or syncopation
    - a. ½ time, at tempo, double-time (fast or stampede)
    - b. Combination of speeds:  
ex: Cha, Cha; 1,2 - 1,2,3 (2 tempo - 3 dbl time) r, l - r, l, r or l, r,- l, r, l
  5. Travel and direction
    - a. Forward, back, right, left, circle, angle R or L
  
- II. **“SOMETHING” STEP** – “something” R on beat one, step R on beat two  
(do “something” -- touch, knee, kick, hamstring curl, etc. -- on one, and “step” on two)
  1. Style – how a step looks (arms may also change how a step looks)
    - a. Heel touch: heel touch on beat one, step on beat two
    - b. Knee lift: knee lift on beat one, step down on beat two
    - c. Kick front or side: kick on beat one, step down on beat two
    - d. Hamstring curl: curl on beat one, step down on beat two
  2. Number – number of repetitions
    - a. Singles, doubles, four, etc.

3. Asymmetry – requires uneven repetitions
  - a. 2 + 1: heel, knee, kick, or curl step - r, l, r, r - l, r, l, l. (single, single, double)
  - b. 1 + 2: heel, knee, kick or curl step - r, r, l, r - l, l, r, l. (double, single, single)
4. Rhythm – speed, syncopation
  - a. ½ time, at tempo, double-time or fast
  - b. Combination of speeds (ex: quick, quick, slow)
5. Travel and direction
  - a. Forward, back, right, left, circle, angle right or left

**III. STEP “SOMETHING” - step R on beat one, “something” L on beat two**  
**(“step” on one, do “something” -- touch, knee, kick, hamstring curl, etc. -- on two)**

1. Style –how a step looks (arms may also change how a step looks)
  - a. Step touch: step R on beat one, touch L on beat two
  - b. Step heel: step R on beat one, L heel on beat two
  - c. Step knee: step R on beat one, L knee on beat two
  - d. Step kick: step R on beat one, L kick on beat two
  - e. Step hamstring curl: step R on beat one, L curl on beat two
2. Number - number of repetitions performed
  - a. Singles, doubles, four, etc.
3. Asymmetry - when uneven repetitions are performed
  - a. 2 + 1: step touch, knee, kick, or curl - r, l, r, r - l, r, l. l (sgl-sgl-dbl)
  - b. 1 + 2: step touch, knee, kick, or curl - r, r, l, r - l, l, r, l. (dbl-sgl-sgl)
4. Rhythm – speed, syncopation
  - a. ½ time, at tempo, double-time or fast
  - b. Combination of speeds (ex: quick, quick, slow)
5. Travel and direction
  - a. Forward, back, right, left, circle, angle right or left

**IV. NEUTRAL - Weight on both feet**

1. Style – how a step or movement looks (arms may change how a step looks)
  - a. Heel lifts, toe taps
  - b. Squats, plies
  - c. Hip swings or circles
  - d. Lunges – side to side or split lunge (1 foot in front of the other)
2. Rhythm
  - a. ½ time, at tempo, double-time (pulses)
  - b. Combination of speeds (ex: squats “down 3, up 1”, or “down 1, up 3”)

## Additional variations for above movements:

- Lever changes (short lever to long lever, vice versa)
  1. Step – tap – knee lift – kick

### Short Lever

Step- tap  
R L  
1 2

### Longer Lever

Step- knee lift  
R L  
1 2

### Long Lever

Step- kick  
R L  
1 2

2. Biceps Curl - Lateral Raise

### Short Lever: Biceps Curl

Wrists to shoulder -- wrists to floor  
1 2  
OR  
1-2 3-4

### Longer Lever: Lateral Raise

Wrists to side walls-- wrists to floor  
3 4  
5-6 7-8

- Plane variation (changing the plane of movement while performing same exercise)
  1. Front kick to side kick
  2. Front raise to side raise
- Directional variation (changing the direction of the movement)
  1. Perform same movement or block of choreography facing front, side wall, back of room (instructor should move to be in front of participants)
  2. Travel forward-backward-diagonally

## Choreography Techniques

### Building Basic Combinations

Start with 4 lower body movements that flow together. Make sure your movements fill a “block” of music (16-count block or 8-count block).

One style of building and breaking down combinations is called **repetition – reduction**.

Example:

- 16 count march (right lead)
  - 16 count (8x) alt tap-step (tap right – step right – tap left – step left)
  - 16 count (8x) alt knee lift – step (right knee – step right – left knee – step left)
  - 16 count (4x) alt double knee lift (right knee lift – right tap down – right knee lift – step right – left knee lift – left tap down – left knee lift –step left)
- (64 count total)

Reduction:

- 8 count march
  - 8 count (4x) alt tap-step
  - 8 count (4x) alt knee lift
  - 8 count (2x) alt double knee lift
- (32 count total)

Further reduction:

- 4 count march
  - 4 count (2x) alt tap-step
  - 4 count (2x) alt knee lift
  - 4 count (1x) double knee lift
- (16 count total)

The reduction will change your lead leg so that you *start* on your left. This can be a challenge for participants, so it may be wise to *hold the march step* for an entire 32-count block of music, then start the 16-count combination again on the new lead leg (left). When you finish the 16-count combination on the second time through (double left knee lift) you will be back on the right lead leg. With practice, you can “drop” the 32-count march “hold” step in preparation for switching the lead legs and just continue the pattern alternating lead legs.

Add upper body movements to increase exercise and coordination intensity:

- March step – “pumping” arms
- Alt tap-step – alt arm reach front
- Alt knee lift – alt arm reach up
- Double knee lift – both arms reach up

## Freestyle

Also known as *linear progressions*, one move flows smoothly into the next, and so on. There is little repetition.

Example:

- March
- Keep marching and add alt arms reaching to the front
- Keep arms and change legs to alt heel dig front
- Keep alt heel dig and change arms to alt overhead reach
- Keep arms and change legs to alt side tap
- Keep alt side tap and change arms to alt reach across chest
- Keep arms and change legs to alt toe tap across front of body
- Keep alt toe tap and change arms to both pushing out to side walls
- Keep arms and change legs to alt knee lift
- Keep alt knee lift and change arms to both arms pushing front
- Keep arms and change legs to alt double knee lift
- Keep alt double knee lift and change arms to arms pushing down
- Keep arms and change legs to squat down and up
- Keep squat and change arms to lateral bent arm raise
- Keep arms and change legs to step touch

Continue adding steps and variations without repeating a combination.

## Layering

Layering is a technique used to add complexity to a movement combination. Each layer is repeated until the participants “get it”. Then another layer of complexity is added.

Example:

16 count (4x) -- march 3 + tap

Layer on: march 3 + knee lift

Layer on: travel forward march 3 + knee lift; travel back march 3 + knee lift

Add on:

16 count (4x) -- squat down and up

Layer on: alt side squat (step side on squat, ct. 1-2, step center on ct. 3-4)

Combine above:

16 count (4x) -- travel forward-back march 3 + knee lift

16 count (4x) -- alt side squat

Add on:

16 count (4x) -- mambo front-back

Layer on: mambo front-back-front-*cha-cha-cha* (this is a quick 1-2-3 step or march-march-march, r-l-r). The *cha-cha-cha* will change your lead leg

Add on:

16 count (8x) -- alt step touch

Combine above:

- 16 count (4x) travel forward-back march 3 + knee lift
- 16 count (4x) alt side squat
- 16 count (2x) mambo front-back-front-cha-cha-cha
- 16 count (8x) step touch

(Option) Reduce to:

- 8 count (2x) travel forward-back march 3 + knee lift
- 8 count (2x) alt side squat
- 8 count (1x) mambo front-back-front-cha-cha-cha (this will change lead leg)
- 8 count (4x) step touch

(Repeat above now starting on opposite lead leg)

## Building Blocks and Linking

The above choreography style, layering, takes the combinations you have built and simply links them together. It is important to ensure that the end of your last combination will flow smoothly into the beginning of the next.

Let's take the blocks we have already built and link them together:

Combination A:

- 8 count march
  - 8 count (4x) alt tap-step
  - 8 count (4x) alt knee lift
  - 8 count (2x) alt double knee lift
- (32 count total)

Add:

Combination B:

- 8 count (2x) travel forward-back march 3 + knee lift
  - 8 count (2x) alt side squat
  - 8 count (1x) mambo front-back-front-cha-cha-cha (this will change lead leg)
  - 8 count (4x) step touch
- (32 count total)

OR

Combination A reduced:

- 4 count march
  - 4 count (2x) alt tap-step
  - 4 count (2x) alt knee lift
  - 4 count (1x) double knee lift
- (16 count total – Repeat Combination A on other lead to make a complete 32 count combination)

Add:

Combination B:

- 8 count (2x) travel forward-back march 3 + knee lift
  - 8 count (2x) alt side squat
  - 8 count (1x) mambo front-back-front-cha-cha-cha (this will change lead leg)
  - 8 count (4x) step touch
- (32 count total)

For your SilverSneakers Circuit class, you may choose to build a block of choreography that will be taught for each of the three 3-5 minute cardio segments. If you teach SilverSneakers Cardio, you can use those same three cardio blocks and link them together for the 20 minute cardio segment of class.

Reference:

Methods of Group Exercise Instruction  
Carol Kennedy-Armbruster & Mary M. Yoke  
2009  
Human Kinetics