Wilderness Skills

How to Use Trekking Poles: The Gas-Brake-Coast Method

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Poking poles around for added stability is fairly intuitive, but the full promise of two more legs - greater endurance, building upper body strength, and reducing injury from stress or falls - requires some technique. Try Skip's straightforward and effective approach!



October 11, 2011

Introduction: How to Use Trekking Poles

While there is plenty of information available about <u>why</u> you should use trekking poles, very little information is available about *how* to use trekking poles. In this article, I describe a systematic and methodical approach describing how to use trekking poles in a way that allows you to use them to your advantage by making your hiking easier and more efficient.

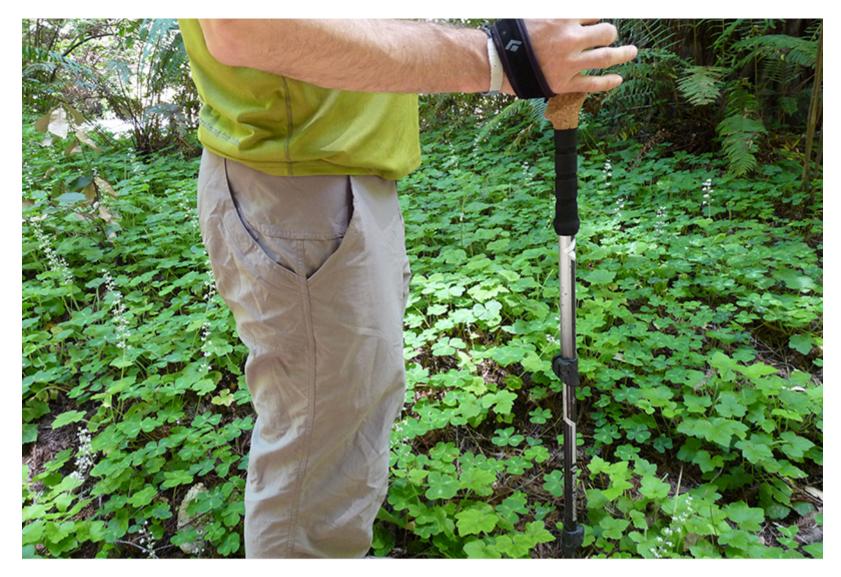
Adjusting Pole Length

You can't learn how to use trekking poles properly if they are either too short, or too long.

So first off, your new legs need to be a suitable length:

- For general use, set pole height so that when the tip is at your foot, your elbow makes a roughly 90° bend. Setting the height a little shorter allows you to clear plants or rocks with less lifting.
- On a typical three-tier pole, set the top adjuster so the upper section is telescoped halfway. Then fix the lower section to achieve the desired height. Make any adjustments en route using the top adjuster.

Why? It is hard to load (bear down on) your poles with your arm grossly extended or bent. (See how much less force you can generate at 180° or 0° than at 90°, for example.) Setting pole segments as suggested lets you change pole length using just one adjuster, the closest and least likely to be muddy and contaminated with poison oak/ivy oil.



Your elbow should make a roughly 90° bend

Attaching your Poles

Next up, you have to attach your new legs to your original equipment.

- For each pole, put your hand up through the bottom of the strap loop and then pull the strap down by holding the grip.
- Adjust the length of the straps such that your fingers land where they fit on the grips.
- *Hold the grip loosely.* You don't even need to close your bottom three fingers around the grip (a good way to ensure that you aren't over-gripping). Change how your fingers (loosely) hold the grip as needed to prevent hand or wrist soreness.
- Keep your elbows close to your sides.

Why? You are making a joint by using the strap as a strong, tireless ligament. If you grip tightly, your hands and wrists will needlessly work and stress. Keeping your arms close to your sides conserves energy and keeps your poles traveling where the path is most likely to be clear: down the center.



Put your hand up through the bottom of the strap loop.



Pull the strap snug by loosely holding the grip.

The Multiple Uses of Trekking Poles

Trekking poles are used primarily for endurance, building upper body strength, and reducing injury, but they serve many other functions:

• Checking for critters in high brush

- Making a stand for a dromedary bag or gravity filter
- Poling a tarp or tarp tent
- Making noise to avoid bear, lion, and other unwelcome encounters
- Bluffing off an animal attack (swing poles over your head)
- Defending yourself in an actual attack
- Temporarily marking a trail
- Resting and stretching while standing
- Probing depth of water and mud
- Probing trail obstacles in the dark
- Stabilizing a camera
- Poking companions, as needed



Moving Trekking Poles Forward

Limbs attached, check. Now we have to move them forward, from "plant" to plant, as we hike.

• Jog the forearm up slightly to cause the pole to swing forward and then back down to plant the tip (for now don't worry about where to plant). Or, move the pole with a slight flick of the wrist.

Why? These minor motions get the job done with a minimum of movement and energy.

Movement Patterns

• **Alternate legs:** Each pole goes forward when the opposite leg does. This pattern maximizes balance and lets your arms swing the way they do naturally when hiking.

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• **Double (or simultaneous) pole:** Both poles move forward at the same time. This pattern is useful for stepping up or down, or as a change up.

Load, Load, Load

The pedal-pushing analogy reminds us that *it is essential that you load your poles!* Without loading, you are basically just hauling stabilizers to engage in case of slipping. A lot of pole users are not loading enough. If your upper body doesn't feel "worked" after an arduous trek, you are likely not loading enough.

Three Basic Techniques: Gas, Brake, and Coast

OK, let's get in gear. Conventional advice tells us where to plant (and how long the poles should be) based on the type of terrain: flat, uphill, and downhill. Instead, the Gas, Brake, Coast Method focuses on what we want our poles to do for us:

- Adding thrust (or gassing), which you might do on flats, uphill, and even downhill.
- **Slowing assistance (braking),** on downhill stretches.
- **Nothing (coasting),** which you might choose on any terrain.

Technique 1: Gas

When you want forward thrust:

• Plant the tip of your pole at the rear of or behind your foot. On long assents, you can help maintain the roughly 90° bends at your elbows by *lengthening* your poles (as opposed to the common counsel to shorten them).

Why? Planting and loading a pole to the rear gives forward thrust. In contrast, planting and loading at the foot gives *lift* (see below) and then forward thrust (if you keep loading as the pole moves behind you). Loading in front of you causes braking. Exactly how far you should plant to the rear depends on pole length, arm length, degree of body lean, the pitch of the trail, and other factors. Just plant it back where you most feel forward thrust. If needed on ascents, lengthening is the adjustment to make because the trail is dropping away from your pole tips.



Gas: Plant the tip of your pole at the rear of or behind your foot.



Technique 2: Brake

When you fancy help in slowing down:

- Plant in front of your foot. For extended descents, you can again maintain your 90° lever by lengthening your poles.
- You can use an alternate hold when braking, in which you rest your palms atop the grips.

Why? Planting and loading forward creates resistance. Again, you should plant in the forward location where you most feel the intended effect. On a long stretch, lengthening poles helps since the trail is dropping away from your pole tips.



Brake: Plant in front of your foot.



You can use an alternate hold when braking.

Technique 3: Coast

When you don't need gas or brakes, or when you need an upper body break:

- Plant, but do not load your poles; or
- Swing them one per hand, holding at their center of gravity.

- Tuck your poles under one arm; or
- Attach them to your pack.

Why? No load planting will give you a break. (It is, however, like leaving your car idling: It still uses some energy.)
Swinging your poles brings them into the rhythm of your stride. Tucking can be cumbersome, but it does free your hands.
Packing poles away gets them completely out of the way.

Other Techniques

After committing the basic techniques to muscle memory, you might learn these other useful maneuvers.

Technique 4: Step Over

When you need to tread over a large obstacle, say a downed tree:

• Plant and load at or close to your foot.

Why? Planting at the foot creates lift.



Plant and load at or close to your foot to create lift.

Technique 5: Step Up

To go up a big step:

- Plant and load on the upper surface and step up. You might double pole here.
- As needed, un-strap and choke up on the poles to make them effectively shorter (or actually shorten your sticks).



Plant and load on the upper surface and step up.

Technique 6: Step Down

To move down a large step:

- Plant and load on the lower surface and step down. Again you might double pole here.
- Extend your arms. Or, for longer step-like descents, lengthen your poles.

Why? This will give you a strong braking assist as you step down, especially if you double pole.



Plant and load on the lower surface and step down.

Technique 7: Traverse

When you hike across a significant slope (off-trail hillsides, narrow switchback and ridge trails, beaches, etc.), your uphill pole and arm will ride unusually high, and your downhill pole and arm low. For a long traverse:

- Resize one or both poles accordingly (uphill side shorter, downhill side longer).
- On switchbacks, rather than readjusting length, simply switch poles when you change direction.

Why? Resizing maintains an efficient angle at the elbow. A longer downhill pole will also help keep you from leaning down the slope and falling should your pole slip.



Resize poles so that uphill side is shorter; downhill side, longer.

Technique 8: Going Strapless

When the terrain is rough and varied:

- Unstrap.
- Switch between techniques as needed.

Why? This will allow you to go rapidly from standard grip techniques to choking up for steps and traverses to coasting for scrambling up or down chutes, over large talus, and other hands-required territory. *Always unstrap if scree or talus can catch and hold your pole tip.* If a pole locks when moving at a good clip, and you are tethered to it, **bad things** can happen!



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By Skip Spitzer

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Oct 11, 2011 at 1:04 pm

<u>#1280457</u>

Addie Bedford BPL MEMBER

Companion forum thread to:

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Mar 25, 2017 at 8:56 am

<u>#345931</u>4

Ken Thompson BPL MEMBER

Makes me wonder how many have given up using poles. I had to, and don't really miss them now that I don't need the help stumbling around under a heavy pack.

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Mar 25, 2017 at 10:49 am

<u>#3459337</u>

Lester Moore BPL MEMBER

Haven't given up on poles yet, but feel like I really want them infrequently on the trail nowadays, after adopting UL backpacking. Other than steep downhill sections with big steps, poles never really feel necessary any more, especially on short, light trips or day trips. On long flat trail sections, the poles usually get strapped to the pack. Not ready to leave them home yet on overnighters as they hold up the tarp, are really efficient early season if there's snow, and most overnight trips still tend to have big downhill sections in the Pacific NW.

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Oct 9, 2022 at 2:15 am

<u>#3761509</u>

solitone BPL MEMBER

Pictures in section *Attaching your Poles* don't show whether thumb should be placed up (as you do with ski poles) or down the strap. In a following image, thumb seems down. However, personally I keep it up, and many other people do the same.

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Oct 9, 2022 at 3:18 am

#3761512

solitone BPL MEMBER

In this video Ryan seem to put his thumb above the strap:



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