

Climbing Beyond the Bolt: A 7-Session Cycle on Mental Engagement

Lesson Overview & Objectives

This 7-session cycle is designed for climbers aged 13-16 who are already comfortable leading 5C routes. The core theme is **Engagement**—the mental ability to commit to movement, manage the fear of falling, and maintain focus when the "pump" sets in or the next bolt feels far away.

Learning Objectives:

- Master efficient clipping techniques to minimize energy loss.
- Identify "Safe Zones" vs. "No-Fall Zones" on a route.
- Develop a personal "Pre-Flight" routine for mental focus.
- Execute controlled falls to build trust in the belay system and the belayer.
- Commit to dynamic moves (deadpoints/dynos) above the last piece of protection.
- Perform at personal physical limits by managing the "fear of failure."

Materials Needed

- Climbing harness, rock shoes, and chalk bag.
- Lead rope (minimum 30m) and dynamic belay device (Grigri or similar).
- Quickdraws (if not pre-placed).
- "Engagement Log" (a small notebook or digital doc).
- Stopwatch (for timing clips).
- A climbing gym or crag with routes ranging from 5C to 6B+.

Session 1: The Foundation of Trust (Clipping & Belaying)

Hook: "Did you know a bad clip can cost you 20% of your energy? Today, we make clipping second nature so your brain can focus on the climbing, not the rope."

- **I Do:** Demonstrate "The Perfect Clip" (two fingers in the biner, thumb steadying, rope through in one motion). Show "Z-clipping" and how to avoid it.
- **We Do:** Partners practice clipping a quickdraw at shoulder height while standing on the ground, then while hanging from a "jug" on a 5C route.
- **You Do:** Lead a 5C route with a focus on "Clips of Steel." **Goal:** Every clip must be completed in under 3 seconds.

Session 2: Breathing into the Burn (Stress Management)

Hook: "When we get scared or tired, we hold our breath. That's a signal to our brain to panic. We're going to hack our nervous system today."

- **I Do:** Demonstrate "Box Breathing" (4s inhale, 4s hold, 4s exhale, 4s hold) and the "Resting

Shake-out."

- **We Do:** On a vertical 5C+, find a rest. Use the box breathing for 1 minute before moving to the crux.
- **You Do:** Climb a route near your limit. At every second bolt, you must stop, find a way to let go with one hand, and take three deep "power breaths" before continuing.

Session 3: Reading the Map (Visualization)

Hook: "Engagement starts on the ground. If you don't have a plan, you're just reacting. Pro climbers 'climb' the route three times in their head before they ever touch the wall."

- **I Do:** Model a "Route Preview." Point out the crux, the rest spots, and the "clipping stances."
- **We Do:** Students pair up to "Read" a 6A route. They must agree on the beta for the hardest section.
- **You Do:** The "Blindfold" Challenge (Partial). Close your eyes on the ground and "mime" the moves. Then, lead the route. If you hesitate for more than 5 seconds, you have to commit to the move you planned, even if it feels wrong.

Session 4: The Art of the Flight (Fall School)

Hook: "Engagement is impossible if you are terrified of the rope. Today, we turn falling from a 'failure' into a 'skill'."

- **I Do:** Explain the physics of a lead fall. Demonstrate a "Soft Catch" as a belayer.
- **We Do:** The "Take-to-Fall" Progression.
 1. Fall with the bolt at chest height (seated).
 2. Fall with the bolt at waist height.
 3. Fall with the bolt at feet height.
- **You Do:** "The Mystery Fall." On a safe, overhanging 5C+, the climber chooses a "drop zone." The belayer gives a "Go!" command at a random moment, and the climber must let go immediately.

Session 5: Dynamic Commitment (The Deadpoint)

Hook: "Static climbing is safe, but dynamic climbing is where the magic happens. Engagement means launching for a hold you aren't 100% sure you'll catch."

- **I Do:** Demonstrate a "Deadpoint"—using momentum to reach a hold at the apex of a movement.
- **We Do:** On a 6A with big holds, practice "throwing" for a hold that is just out of reach, trusting the feet to drive the upward motion.
- **You Do:** The "Commitment Move." Find a route with a slightly reachy move above a bolt. You are not allowed to "test" the hold. You must look at it, breathe, and go for it 100%.

Session 6: The Flow State (Non-Stop Climbing)

Hook: "Over-thinking is the enemy of engagement. Today, we climb without the 'Pause' button."

- **I Do:** Explain the concept of 'Flow'—where movement becomes automatic. Show the difference between "hesitation" and "calculation."

- **We Do:** "Silent Feet" drill. Climb a 5C focusing purely on the sound (or lack thereof) of your shoes. This focuses the mind on the present.
- **You Do:** "The Shark is Coming." Lead a 6A/6A+. Once you start, you cannot stop moving for more than 3 seconds unless you are at a designated rest. No chalking unless you are in a "Safe Zone." Keep the momentum!

Session 7: The Redpoint Challenge (The "Send")

Hook: "Everything we've learned—clipping, breathing, falling, and moving—comes together today. This is your personal 'project' day."

- **Review:** Recap the engagement strategies: The Pre-Flight ritual, the Breath, and the Commitment.
- **The Activity:** Students choose a route that is "at their limit" (6A+ or 6B).
 - **Attempt 1:** Bolt-to-bolt. Work the moves, find the clips, identify the "Engagement Zone" (where it gets scary or hard).
 - **Attempt 2:** The Full Send. The student must commit to climbing the route without "taking" on the rope.
- **Closure:** Discussion on "How it felt to give 100%," regardless of whether they reached the top.

Success Criteria

- **Technical:** Can the student clip correctly and belay a lead fall safely?
- **Mental:** Does the student attempt moves above the bolt without asking for a "Take"?
- **Reflective:** Can the student identify why they hesitated and what strategy (breathing, visualization) they used to overcome it?

Differentiation & Adaptability

- **For the Hesitant Climber:** Stay on overhanging routes where falls are "into space" and feel safer. Use a "top-rope-lead" (climbing lead with a top-rope backup) for Session 4.
- **For the Advanced Climber:** Increase the grade (6B+). Introduce "one-hand-only" clipping or "no-chalk" challenges to increase the mental demand.
- **Homeschool/Small Group:** Focus heavily on the "Engagement Log." Have the student write down their heart rate or "Fear Level" (1-10) after each climb.