

*Beginning Foil
Fencing —
In Practice and Combat*

*A One-Semester Introductory Course
Including
Basic Safety, History and Drills*

by **Anthony L. Glise**

PREFACE

Fencing is a tremendous sport with equally tremendous mental and physical challenges. It radically develops concentration, both upper and lower body strength and coordination, footwork agility and hand/eye/body coordination.

In designing this booklet I've tried to give a rational order to subjects and drills that build from one to the next leading to a solid basic fencing technique.

PLEASE do not alter this order and do not jump ahead or skip a lesson! Otherwise you will have "holes" in your technique which in combat, will lead to "holes" in your body...

It would not be irrational to spend 2-3 weeks (or more) on each of the lessons as is typical in Europe, but most US students are anxious to begin combat so I have given here the most concise series of lessons leading to a basic competence. However, I would *strongly* encourage instructors to spend more than one week on a lesson if it seems that students need the extra work on a movement or technique.

To quote fencing and dancing master Cesare Negri from the Renaissance court in Ferrara, Italy, "*...an undeveloped technique will result in death, or worse-yet, shame.*"

While we don't have this same level of honor or severity today, an undeveloped technique WILL lead to losing a competition bout.

Fencing is an abstract sport and even with a lifetime of study and work, it's impossible to know everything – which is one of the true joys of the sport – you can fence your entire life and constantly find new "tricks," but to quote Maître Yves Auriol,

"La réponse c'est sur la piste!"
(*"The answer is on the piste!"*)

Nothing is more true! No matter what happens, in combat, if it doesn't:

1) protect you, *or*;

2) get you a point,

it's useless (or, more likely than being "useless," it's a technique that you need to practice more!).

Thanks for joining the club, be careful and enjoy!

Sincerely,

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WEEK ONE — BASICS

1) Safety Rules

- NEVER raise weapon without BOTH you and your opponent wearing masks!
- NEVER bout without ALL safety gear correctly worn and in perfect condition!
- “HALT !” means to **IMMEDIATELY** stop all action and lower weapons!

ANY breach of these three basic rules constitutes a “black card” and, in competition, you will immediately expelled. THIS IS NOT A JOKE. These are severe rules with serious consequences designed to keep people from getting hurt.

Also PLEASE inspect your equipment both before and after each class and if you see any tears, nicks, dents TELL THE INSTRUCTOR IMMEDIATELY! Fencing is very safe if it’s done safely. If not, people can get hurt VERY badly!

2) The three weapons

- Foil (*training weapon*)
Thrusting only.
Target area: waist up to neck (front & back but not arms) including groin area (front only).
Scoring: 500 grams pressure (in valid target area) for at least 1/20th of a second.
- Épée (*duelling weapon*)
Thrusting only.
Target area: entire body.
Scoring: 500 grams pressure (in valid target area) for at least 1/20th of a second.
- Saber (*cavalry weapon*)
Both thrust *and* cut including cuts from the back 1/3 foible of the blade.
Target area: whole body (including head) from waist up (excluding non-weapon hand).
Scoring: 500 grams pressure (in valid target area) for at least 1/20th of a second.

3) Parts of the weapons: pommel, grips, bell guard (electrical plug) blade (forté, foible, point).

N.B. Both foil and saber use “Right of Way” in an assault (a friendly exchange without points) and bouts (an exchange when points are kept). “Right of Way” means that if player 1 initiates an attack, he has the right to continue the attack until that attack is parried by player 2. Then player 2 has the right to attack, but if he doesn’t within 1/10 second, that right to attack reverts back to player 1.

Épée has no right of way.

Remember foil fencing initiated in the 18th-Century as a training weapon for épée (which was actually used for duels). If you maintain a little of the attitude that this is actual combat it will heighten you sense of excitement and you won’t take unnecessary risks in a bout.

4) Equipment (and parts of each)

weapon, glove, mask, plastron, jacket, knickers, socks, shoes (check for pebbles in tread so you don’t destroy the floor!)

5) Practical:

- holding the weapon
- en garde position (thumb at *ca.* 12 o'clock)
- stance
- simple direct thrust (from en garde to sixth position)

DRILLS

- From en garde to sixth position and back
- Wall exercise (from 6th position)

CLOSE

- Pass out disclaimer (MUST return before next week! ! !)
- Warning: next week we begin with calisthenics! Start on your own this week!

TERMS

- pommel
- grip (French, Italian [ricasso] Pistol)
- blade (forté, foible, point)
- en garde
- simple direct thrust
- USFA (*United States Fencing Association*)
- FIE (*Fédération Internationale d'Éscrime*)
- target area
- right of way

N.B. Next week be SURE to bring signed disclaimer. Clothing: low-top tennis shoes and wear either fencing knickers or sweat pants and remember: *next week we begin with calisthenics!* Start on your own this week!

WEEK TWO — DIRECT IN-LINE ATTACKS

POSITIONS 6 AND 4

- 1) Warm ups (in this order!)
 jumping jacks / floor touch / windmill (with toe touch, then reverse) / knee bends (only half way) / high kicks / ankles.
- 2) Review last week.
- 3) Position 6 — protects upper outside (outside is “out” toward opponent)
 - supination— (palm up-thumb at 1 o’clock).
- 4) Position 4 — protects upper inside (inside is “in” where it’s further from opponent)
 - pronation — (palm down-thumb at 11 o’clock).

DRILLS

Salute

down, up, out, up (to Referee [Judge, President], then to opponent).

Thrusts

- With opponent, practice simple direct thrust from 6 to opponent’s 4.
- With opponent, practice simple direct thrust from 4 to opponent’s 6.

These are simple direct attacks in high line.

Parries

- Table exercise (roll the bell in parries from en garde to 6, to en garde to 4.
 Remember the point should stay on target (show how little movement of the bell is necessary).
- Practice with instructor calling out a position to parry (on table).
- Practice with an opponents with instructor calling out a position to parry

(with stance).

Stationary Assault

Practice un-coached in-line direct attacks with an opponent taking turns attacking (right of way) and the other parrying

Do NOT use any footwork. Make the weapon do the work.

Assault

Just for fun, try some assaults with your partner. Try and incorporate the moves from this and previous lessons. Don’t worry about footwork - we’ll get to that in 2 weeks!

N.B. If you are touched during this assault exercise, raise your left hand. This is (for dry fencing, *i.e.* non-electric) the honorable acknowledgement of a touch by your opponent.

TERMS

- en garde
- assault
- bout
- salute
- 6th position
- 4th position
- supination
- pronation
- thrust
- simple direct attack (straight thrust)
- parry
- inside
- outside
- high line (tip above bell guard)
- dry (a dry weapon, dry fencing, *etc.*)

WEEK THREE — INDIRECT IN-LINE ATTACKS

1) Warm ups (in this order!)

jumping jacks / floor touch / windmill (with toe touch, then reverse) / knee bends (only half way) / high kicks / ankles.

2) Review last week.

DRILLS

Thrusts

- With opponent, practice simple indirect thrust from 6 to opponent's 6 (without parry).
- With opponent, practice simple indirect thrust from 4 to opponent's 4 (without parry).

These are simple indirect attacks in high line. BOTH simple direct (from last week) and simple indirect attacks are "in line," meaning you stay in the same parallel line (in this case "in line" means the upper line; attacks ABOVE the bell guard from an en garde position).

Execute the following drills alternating each action between fencers (this alternation will help you get used to right of way).

- With opponent, practice simple indirect thrust from 6 to opponent's 6.
(WITH parry).
- With opponent, practice simple indirect thrust from 4 to opponent's 4.
(WITH parry).

Parries

Review parries in 4 and 6.

Practice from en garde, with instructor calling out a position to parry (on table), then return immediately to en garde. Keep tempo smooth!

Practice from en garde with instructor calling out a position to parry (with stance), then return immediately to en garde. Keep tempo smooth!

Riposte

A riposte is an immediate attack following a successful parry of an opponent's attack. Remember right of way, so the tempo needs to be soon enough that it shows you have taken right of way, otherwise the referee can decide your opponent has the right to attack again.

Stationary Assault

- Practice un-coached in-line direct OR indirect attacks (6/6 or 6/4 taking turns attacking (right of way) and the other parrying (no touches - just practice attacking and parrying back and forth).
- Practice un-coached in-line direct OR indirect attacks (6/6 or 6/4 taking turns attacking (right of way) and the other parrying with the following sequence:

1) attack, 2) parry and riposte (1 allow touch).

Do NOT use any footwork. Make the weapon do the work.

N.B. Remember to raise your hand if you are touched.

Assault

Just for fun, try some assaults with your partner. Try and incorporate the moves from this and previous lessons. Don't worry about footwork - we'll get to that next week.

TERMS

- simple indirect attack
- in line
- tempo
- riposte

BASIC FENCING GLOSSARY

by **Anthony Glise** *(with following alternate glossary...)*

A

absence of blade

When the blades are not touching; opposite of engagement.

advance

A movement forward by step, cross, or balestra.

aids

The last three fingers of the sword hand.

assault

A combat where points are NOT counted.

attack

The initial offensive action made by extending the sword arm and continuously threatening the valid target of the opponent.

attack au fer

An attack that is prepared by deflecting the opponent's blade, eg. beat, froissement, pressure.

B

balestra

A forward hop or jump, typically followed by an attack such as a lunge or fleche.

beat

An attempt to knock the opponent's blade aside or out of line by using one's foible or middle against the opponent's foible.

bind

An action in which the opponent's blade is forced into the diagonally opposite line.

black card

Used to indicate the most serious offences in a fencing competition. The offending fencer is usually expelled from the event or tournament.

bout

A combat where points ARE counted.

broken time

A sudden change in the tempo of one fencer's actions, used to fool the opponent into responding at the wrong time.

button

The safety tip on the end of practice swords.

C

change of engagement

Engagement of the opponent's blade in the opposite line.

compound

Also composed; an attack or riposte incorporating one or more feints to the opposite line that the action finishes in.

conversation (of blades)

The back-and-forth play of the blades in a fencing match, composed of phrases (phrases d'armes) punctuated by gaps of no blade action.

counter-attack

An attack made against the right-of-way, or in response to the opponent's attack.

counter-disengage

A disengage in the opposite direction, to deceive the counter-parry.

counter-parry

A parry made in the opposite line to the attack; ie. the defender first comes around to the opposite side of the opponent's blade.

counter-riposte

An attack that follows a parry of the opponent's riposte.

counter-time

An attack that responds to the opponent's counter-attack, typically a riposte following the parry of the counter-attack.

corps-a-corps

"Body-to-body"; physical contact between the two fencers during a bout, illegal in foil and sabre.

coulé

Also graze, glisé, or glissade; an attack or feint that slides along the opponent's blade.

coup lancé

A launched hit; an attack that starts before a stop in play but lands after. Valid for normal halts, but not valid at end of time.

coupé

Also cut-over; an attack or deception that passes around the opponent's tip.

croisé

Also semi-bind; an action in which the opponent's blade is forced into the high or low line on the same side.

cross

An advance or retreat by crossing one leg over the other; also passé avant (forward cross), passé arriere (backwards cross).

cut

An attack made with a chopping motion of the blade, landing with the edge or point.

D

deception

Avoidance of an attempt to engage the blades; see disengage, coupé

derobement

Deception of the attack au fer or prise de fer.

direct

An attack or riposte that finishes in the same line in which it was formed, with no feints out of that line.

disengage

A circular movement of the blade that deceives the opponent's parry, removes the blades from engagement, or changes the line of engagement.

displacement

Moving the target to avoid an attack; dodging.

double

In épée, two attacks that arrive within 40-50 ms of each other.

doublé

An attack or riposte that describes a complete circle around the opponent's blade, and finishes in the opposite line.

E

engagement

When the blades are in contact with each other, eg. during a parry, attack au fer, prise de fer, or coulé.

en garde

Also On Guard; the fencing position; the stance that fencers assume when preparing to fence.

enveloppement

An engagement that sweeps the opponent's blade through a full circle.

épée

A fencing weapon with triangular cross-section blade and a large bell guard; also a light dueling sword of similar design, popular in the mid-19th century.

F

false

An action that is intended to fail, but draw a predicted reaction from the opponent; also, the back edge of a sabre blade.

feint

Attacking into one line with the intention of switching to another line before the attack is completed.

fencing Time

Also temps d'escrime; the time required to complete a single, simple fencing action.

FIE

Federation Internationale d'Escrime, the world governing body of fencing.

finta in tempo

"Feint in time"; a feint of counter-attack that draws a counter-time parry, which is deceived.

flèche

"Arrow"; an attack in which the aggressor leaps off his leading foot, attempts to make the hit, and then passes the opponent at a run.

flick

A cut that lands with the point, often involving some whip of the foible of the blade to "throw" the point around a block or other obstruction.

flying parry or riposte

A parry with a backwards glide and riposte by cut-over.

foible

The upper, weak part of the blade.

foil

A fencing weapon.

forté

The lower, strong part of the blade.

french grip

A traditional hilt with a slightly curved grip and a large pommel.

froissement

An attack that displaces the opponent's blade by a strong grazing action.

G

guard

The metal cup or bow that protects the hand from being hit. Also, the defensive position assumed when not attacking.

H

hilt

The handle of a sword, consisting of guard, grip, and pommel.

I

in quartata

An attack made with a quarter turn to the inside, concealing the front but exposing the back.

in time

When a stop-hit arrives at least one fencing time before the original attack.

indirect

An attack or riposte that finishes in the opposite line to which it was formed, by means of a disengage or coupé.

insistence

Forcing an attack through the parry.

invitation

A line that is intentionally left open to encourage the opponent to attack.

Italian grip

A traditional hilt with finger rings ricossa and crossbar.

L

lamé

A metallic vest/jacket used to detect valid touches in foil and sabre.

line

The main direction of an attack (eg., high/low, inside/outside), often equated to the parry that must be made to deflect the attack; also point in line.

lunge

An attack made by extending the rear leg and landing on the bent front leg.

M

mal-parry

Also mal-paré; a parry that fails to prevent the attack from landing.

manipulators

The thumb and index finger of the sword hand.

maraging

A special steel used for making blades; said to be stronger and break more cleanly than conventional steels.

martingale

A strap that binds the grip (usually only for Italian grip) to the wrist/forearm.

match

The aggregate of bouts between two fencing teams.

middle

The middle third of the blade, between foible and forte.

N

neuvieme

Parry #9; blade behind the back, pointing down; alternatively, similar to elevated sixte.

O

octave

Parry #8; blade down and to the outside, wrist supinated.

opposition

Holding the opponent's blade in a non-threatening line; a time-hit; any attack or counter-attack with opposition.

P

parry

A block of the attack, made with the forte of one's own blade.

pass

An attack made with a cross; eg. fleche, "Russian lunge". Also, the act of moving past the opponent.

passata-sotto

A lunge made by dropping one hand to the floor.

passé

An attack that passes the target without hitting; also a cross-step (see cross).

phrase

A set of related actions and reactions in a fencing conversation.

piste

The linear strip on which a fencing bout is fought; approx. 2m wide and 14m long.

pistol grip

A modern, orthopaedic grip, shaped vaguely like a small pistol; varieties are known by names such as Belgian, German, Russian, and Visconti.

plastron

A partial jacket worn for extra protection; typically a half-jacket worn under the main jacket on the weapon-arm side of the body.

point

A valid touch; the tip of the sword; an attack made with the point (ie. a thrust)

point in line

Also line; an extended arm and blade that threatens the opponent.

pommel

A fastener that attaches the grip to the blade.

preparation

The initial phase of an attack, before right-of-way is established.

presentation

Offering one's blade for engagement by the opponent.

press

An attempt to push the opponent's blade aside or out of line; depending on the opponent's response, the press is followed by a direct or indirect attack.

prime

Parry #1; blade down and to the inside, wrist pronated.

principle of defence

The use of forté against foible when parrying.

priority

In sabre, the now-superseded rules that decide which fencer will be awarded the touch in the event that they both attack simultaneously; also used synonymously with right-of-way.

prise de fer

Also taking the blade; an engagement of the blades that forces the opponent's weapon into a new line. See bind, croisé, envelopment, opposition.

Q

quarte:

Parry #4; blade up and to the inside, wrist supinated

R

red card

Used to indicate repeated minor rule infractions or a major rule infraction by one of the fencers; results in a point being given to the other fencer.

redoublement

A new action that follows an attack that missed or was parried; see also Reprise.

referee

Also director, president; the mediator of the fencing bout.

remise

Immediate replacement of an attack that missed or was parried, without withdrawing the arm.

reprise

Renewal of an attack that missed or was parried, after a return to en-garde; see also redoublement.

retreat

Step back; opposite of advance.

right-of-way

Rules for awarding the point in the event of a double touch in foil or sabre.

riposte

An attack made immediately after a parry of the opponent's attack.

S

sabre

A fencing weapon with a flat blade and knuckle guard, used with cutting or thrusting actions; a military sword popular in the 18th to 20th centuries; any cutting sword used by cavalry.

salle

A fencing hall or club.

salute

With the weapon, a customary acknowledgment of one's opponent and referee at the start and end of the bout.

second intention

A false action used to draw a response from the opponent, which will open the opportunity for the intended action that follows.

seconde

Parry #2; blade down and to the outside, wrist pronated.

septime

Parry #7; blade down and to the inside, wrist supinated.

simple

An attack or riposte that involves no feints.

simultaneous

In foil and sabre, two attacks for which the right-of-way is too close to determine.

sixte

Parry #6; blade up and to the outside, wrist supinated.

stop hit

A counter-attack that hits; also a counter-attack whose touch is valid by virtue of its timing.

stop cut

A stop-hit with the edge in sabre, typically to the cuff.

T

three prong

A type of epee body wire/connector; also an old-fashioned tip that would snag clothing, to make it easier to detect hits in the pre-electric era.

thrown point

A “flick.”

thrust

An attack made by moving the sword parallel to its length and landing with the point.

tierce

Parry #3; blade up and to the outside, wrist pronated.

time hit

Also time-thrust; old name for stop hit with opposition.

trompement

Deception of the parry.

two prong

A type of body-wire/connector, used in foil and sabre.

W

whip-over

In sabre, a touch that results from the foible of the blade whipping over the opponent’s guard or blade when parried.

Y

yellow card

Also advertisement, warning; used to indicate a minor rule infraction by one of the fencers.

...and the *Alternative Glossary*...

Dry Fencing: Fencing when sober

Engagement: What your fiancée breaks, when they realize all you care about is fencing

Envelopment: What fencing does to people who just want to “try it once”

Feint: What a fencer does after they get their credit card bill from a tournament weekend

Fencing Time: Usually lost in equipment down time, tournament waiting time...

FIE: A curse given in old English.

Fleche: Is all bruised after a few bouts.

Foible: The mistake you make that lets your opponent get a hit.

Foil: What you are trying to do to your opponent

Forte: The cost of a new body wire

French Grip: The fencers secret handshake

Guard: What you have to do at tournaments so your team-mates don't “borrow” all your food.

Lamé: Fencers term for a non-fencer

Passé: All those other sports you tried before fencing

Phrase: When fencers manage to string more words together than grunting monosyllabically

Piste: How you feel when your expensive equipment starts failing

Pistol Grip: What you want to grab when you lose a 14-14 D.E. on a questionable call

Pommel: What you'd REALLY like to do to some opponents

Principle of Defence: The grass is always greener on the other side

Quarte: A measure of liquid (ie: A quarte of Beer)

Right-of-way: That driving law you may need to ignore to get to a tournament on time

Second Intention: What you need to come up with when your attack fails miserably