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Troubleshooting Jiu-Jitsu Techniques

A Systematic Diagnostic Framework for Instructors and Advanced Practitioners

One of the defining characteristics of an exceptional instructor is the ability to diagnose why a technique is not working. Demonstrating a technique correctly is only the beginning of teaching. The greater challenge is identifying the specific factor preventing a student from performing it successfully.

Likewise, advanced practitioners should develop the ability to analyse their own techniques critically. Rather than assuming that repetition alone will produce improvement, they should learn to identify the underlying causes of failure and make deliberate adjustments. This understanding is also helpful in the study of transitions and counters for the advanced practitioner.

The purpose of this article is to provide a structured framework for troubleshooting any Jiu-Jitsu technique. Rather than relying on trial and error, instructors and advanced students should approach technical problems systematically, much like a scientist or engineer solving a complex problem.

The Hierarchy of Troubleshooting

When a technique fails, there are often many possible explanations. An inexperienced instructor may jump to conclusions or offer multiple corrections at once, leaving the student overwhelmed and uncertain. An experienced instructor works methodically, eliminating the most likely causes first before considering less obvious factors.

The following hierarchy provides a logical order for diagnosing technical problems.

Level 1 – Biomechanics (Always Begin Here)

The first question should always be:

"Are the mechanics of the technique correct?"

Jiu-Jitsu is founded on principles of leverage, balance, timing, and efficient body movement. If these mechanical principles are incorrect, no amount of strength, speed, determination, or repetition will consistently make the technique successful.

Examine:

- Base and stability
- Posture
- Centre of gravity
- Balance
- Foot placement
- Hip position
- Alignment
- Grip placement
- Direction of force
- Weight transfer
- Rotation
- Timing
- Distance
- Kuzushi (breaking balance)
- Relaxation versus unnecessary muscular tension

Most technical failures originate at this level.

Correcting one small biomechanical error often resolves several other apparent problems.

Level 2 – Physiology

If the mechanics appear sound, consider whether the student's body is capable of performing the movement efficiently.

Evaluate:

- Flexibility
- Joint mobility
- Strength
- Endurance
- Fatigue
- Hydration
- Existing injuries
- Pain
- Recovery from previous training

A tired or injured student may perform excellent mechanics poorly simply because their body cannot execute the movement effectively.

Level 3 – Psychology

The next consideration is the student's mental state.

Technical ability is often limited not by physical capability but by emotional or cognitive barriers.

Consider:

- Fear of falling
- Fear of failure
- Fear of hurting a partner
- Anxiety
- Confidence
- Hesitation
- Commitment to the technique
- Emotional frustration

Fear frequently produces hesitation, excessive muscular tension, poor timing, and incomplete movement.

Confidence should be built progressively through safe and successful practice.

Level 4 – Learning and Instruction

Sometimes the problem lies not with the student but with the instruction itself.

Ask:

- Was the explanation clear?
- Was the demonstration visible?
- Was too much information presented?
- Were key teaching points emphasised?
- Did the student misunderstand one important detail?
- Was the technique broken into manageable stages?

A student cannot perform a movement they have not yet understood.

Good instruction simplifies complexity.

Level 5 – Environment

External factors also influence technical performance.

Consider:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| • Quality of the training partner | • Lighting |
| • Appropriate resistance | • Distractions |
| • Mat space | • Equipment |
| • Temperature | • Class size |
| • Noise | |

Sometimes changing partners immediately improves technical performance because the previous partner was providing unrealistic resistance or inconsistent movement.

Level 6 – Tactical Decision-Making

Only after all previous levels have been considered should tactical decisions be analysed.

Questions include:

- Was this the appropriate technique?
- Was the timing tactically correct?
- Did the opponent react unexpectedly?
- Was another technique a better option?
- Should the practitioner have transitioned earlier?

Advanced practitioners often fail not because the technique was poor, but because they selected the wrong technique for the situation and used the wrong timing.

Root Cause Analysis

Whenever a technique fails, resist the temptation to say,

"Try harder."

Instead ask,

"What is the first point where the technique began to fail?"

Symptoms are often mistaken for causes.

Examples include:

- "The throw won't work."
- "The lock keeps slipping."
- "The choke has no pressure."
- "I keep losing my balance."

These are symptoms.

The instructor's role is to identify the underlying cause.

Correct one variable at a time.

Observe the result.

If the problem remains, continue working down the troubleshooting hierarchy until the root cause is identified.

This systematic process prevents instructors from overwhelming students with multiple corrections and encourages evidence-based coaching rather than guesswork.

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