



Snowshoeing 101: Techniques With a Short Learning Curve

By Jim Joque

“Okay, everyone line up,” I say to start the class. “We are going to play follow the leader with a twist. The first one in line chooses an animal. Then you all walk like that animal.” Fifteen grade-school kids walk like moose, with their fanned-out hands above their heads mimicking antlers taking large plopping steps on their snowshoes as if walking like the great northwoods mammals themselves.



The children are having a blast as they laugh and trod through snow. What they don't realize is that my primary goal is to give them an opportunity to experience walking on snowshoes and putting to use some basic stride techniques.

I have several other ice-breakers I use to introduce novices to snowshoeing so they learn the basics of the sport. For example, *Hide & Seek* on and around hills puts ascending and descending skills to use. Likewise, a game of *Simon Says* gives an opportunity for all kinds of gyrations on snowshoes, while doing the *Hokee-Pokee* can help build confidence levels in children as they attempt to dance around in the snow.

When it comes to learning to snowshoe, the basics are all you need to get started. According to snowshoe author Phil Savignano, “One of the greatest aspects of snowshoeing is that the learning curve is so short.” Although I teach eight week-long college courses in snowshoeing, you really do not need that detailed of a course in order to enjoy the refreshing sport of snowshoeing. Here are some very basic techniques that can be developed within an hour so the beginner can get out on snowshoes and take in the fresh, crisp winter air.

Note that authors and instructors may vary slightly on some of the definitions and terminology given to snowshoeing techniques. I recommend exploring techniques by reading various snowshoeing books (see references at end of article). Below I use terminology and explanations that I adopted from the various authors and have developed over time through practical application and teaching.

Getting up and turning around:

First and foremost is learning to get up from falling in the snow. A simple approach to getting up is to roll over onto your front, put one knee up and push yourself up to a half-kneeling position. Then raise yourself back to a standing position by using your knees to brace your hands/arms. Or if you have a hiking staff, use the staff to support yourself as you stand. To practice this, I have students line up a couple arm distances apart. I then surprise them by having them fall back into the snow and make snow angels while wearing their snowshoes. I then say, “Now that you are down, let’s get up,” and proceed to demonstrate how to do so.

Turning around on snowshoes is also a first among the basic skills. Walking in a circle is the easiest means of turning around. But time and space do not always permit that. A good alternative to turning around is to use what is called the “step turn.” This movement involves lifting one snowshoe and placing it at a 90-degree angle in front of the other shoe (forming a “T” with your snowshoes). Then shifting your body and bringing the other snowshoe back alongside, making a half-turn. Do it again to make the full turn. Another approach is the “kick turn,” making a full 180-degree turn by placing one snowshoe in the opposite direction to the other and having your body make a full-turnaround. This step works well in tight spaces when a quick movement is needed to make a full turnaround, but requires good lower body flexibility for making the exaggerated twist.

Stride and breaking trail:

Stride is walking forward on snowshoes at a gait that is compatible with the snowshoer’s step. Walk as you would without snowshoes. But allow for some straddling depending on the width of your snowshoe. The idea is to prevent hitting your shins or developing pain in your thighs due to too wide a straddle.

Breaking trail is simply making tracks through untouched snow. The depth of the snow will determine how difficult your effort will be to break trail. You may need to take slower and higher lifting steps in deep snow. When with a group, rotate your trail breaker every few minutes since the first person will always exert the greatest effort and energy. Rotating will give everyone a turn to break trail and to rest throughout the hike.

Stamping and edging:

Stand in place, step lightly with your heel first and then toe. Pause for a brief moment and then transfer your weight onto the full snowshoe. This is a technique called *stamping*, helping to solidify snow using the physics of time and pressure.

The same goes for another technique called *edging*, whereby you plant the side of your snowshoe edgewise into the snow, pause, and push your weight onto the outside edge of the shoe, thereby solidifying the snow and building a step. Both techniques come in

handy for application with other skills such as using stamping for breaking trail or edging when trying to climb a hill by ascending sideways.



Ascending:

Going up and across hills involves procedures that require more skill and practice than most other techniques. Valuable accessories used for ascending as well as traversing and descending hills are hiking poles. I use one pole while snowshoeing and find it invaluable for hilling, helping with balance and relieving the stress on my knees.

Techniques I teach for going up hill include five well-accepted approaches. The first is used for climbing a moderate incline. The technique is called “stepping-up” by many authors. While facing directly uphill, step into the snow with your weight on your toes while planting your front claws or crampons into the hill. Use stamping as needed while you literally step-up the incline.

“Herringbone stepping” can also be used for moderate hill climbing. Face uphill with your snowshoes turned out at about a 45% angle, similar to the herringbone skill used in cross-country skiing. By placing your weight to the outside of each snowshoe as you ascend, you will be able to dig into the snow and gain greater traction as you climb.

“Scrambling” is another approach. Scrambling involves an aggressive and fast stepping-up pace while climbing a moderate incline with weight to the toes.

When it comes to climbing a steep incline, you may have to go up sideways using an accepted approach called “side stepping.” Turn your body perpendicular to the hill and take sideward steps up by edging your snowshoe to make a step or shelf. If your right side is facing uphill, take a good sized step first with your right foot, edging and moving your weight onto the side of the snowshoe that edges into the hill. Then bring your left shoe up below the right shoe and into the shelf you just vacated. Continue uphill slowly in the same fashion.

Finally, an approach that works well in deep snow on steep inclines is a popular technique called “kick stepping,” often used in the mountains. Kick the toe of your snowshoe into the slope, pause, and stamp. Your goal is to build steps. Be cautious of collapsing snow shelves, should your steps not solidify properly. If hiking in the

mountains, be sure to become better trained than reading an introductory article on snowshoeing techniques. Know your level of expertise before heading out on any adventure.

Traversing and Switchbacking:

Keep in mind the best way to go up a hill on snowshoes is directly up the fall-line; the shortest line connecting the top of the hill to the bottom. But that is not always possible. Sometimes the incline is too steep or there are obstacles in the way such as trees, rock and ledges. So there may be times when you have to find alternative routes to get up a hill. Traversing and creating a switchback are ways to ascend a hill rather than taking the fall-line path.

Traversing an incline takes you uphill at an angle. A traversing technique I use involves kicking in the edge of each snowshoe to form a shelf while moving forward and upward at a designated angle to the hill. The depth of snow will determine the use of stamping as you use the edging technique for each step. It's kind of like side-stepping, except rather than just moving uphill, you are also moving forward at an uphill angle.

Throughout our public lands, uphill hiking trails do not usually follow the fall-line. They use switchbacks to ease your hike and make ascending a hill more reasonable. Switchbacks are a series of back and forth paths angled up a hill that ultimately take you to the summit. The same goes for climbing difficult hills on snowshoes. You can create your own switchbacks by first assessing the hill and deciding what series of angles provide you the path of least resistance to reaching your goal; the top of the hill. Use whatever ascending technique will offer you the best approach on your newly created switchbacks.

Descending:

Sir Isaac Newton declared that what goes up must come down. Although he was referencing the law of gravity, his statement can also apply to the snowshoer who, once on top of a hill, eventually will come down. Coming down a hill on snowshoes requires descending skills.

The first technique I teach a student group is the use of “down-hilling,” a term used by many snowshoe authors. Down-hilling involves walking down a gradual slope with snowshoes level to the horizon, keeping knees flexed, and putting weight directly on the shoe with some shift to the heel depending on the angle of the slope. Keep your body level and do not lean forward or back.

Just as you may side-step up a steep slope, you can use “side stepping” to come down the same slope. Place your weight on the hillside edge of your snowshoe as you descend. Be careful that your steps are far enough apart that they do not collapse on each other.

A technique I enjoy doing is what various authors have referred to as “step-sliding,” “running” or “glissading.” It is a descending technique for moving quickly down a hill. To accomplish this technique, assess the terrain ahead for safety such as assuring it is clear of obstructions. Then lean back with your weight to your heels, pull up slightly on your toes and move down quickly and with long strides. As snow flies, an innate surge of inner-energy will take you by surprise, often resulting in you yelling or screaming “Yahoo!!” or “Yeeeeha!!”

Take a hike:

Try out the basics in your backyard and practice them. Since I just touched the tip of the iceberg by introducing basic snowshoeing techniques, I recommend you read more about techniques from other authors. Consider taking an introductory snowshoe class from a nature center or community recreation program before heading out on your snowshoes. Once you have the basics, take a hike. I recommend not going too far if you are a beginner. Know your limits and start out with a short hike on a familiar trail, possibly a mile or two. Be prepared; dress in layers with appropriate wicking, breathable and water resistant clothing, and bring along a small pack with water, snacks, compass, matches, flashlight and first aid kit.



For the intermediate snowshoer, go ahead and push your limits some by going a little further and try climbing some challenging hills in the area. Although the learning curve is short, fun from snowshoeing can last a long time, even a lifetime.

Recommended Reading on Snowshoeing Techniques:

Edwards, Sally and McKenzie, Melissa. *Snowshoeing*. Human Kinetics Publisher, 1995.

Griffin, Steven. *Snowshoeing*. Stackpole Books, 1998.

McDougall, Len. *The Snowshoe Handbook*. Buford Books, 2000.

Olmsted, Larry. *Snowshoeing, A Trailside Guide*. WW Norton & Company, 1997.

Prater, Gene and Felkley, Dave (Editor). *Snowshoeing, From Novice to Master*. Mountaineers Books, 2002.

Savignano, Phil. *Snowshoeing*. Globe Pequot Press, 2000.

Walter, Claire. *The Snowshoe Experience*. Storey Publishing, 2004.

Zwosta, Marianne. *The Essential Snowshoer, A Step by Step Guide*. McGraw-Hill, 1996.