



## the five most common stroke flaws – and a drill to help fix each

a swim coaching article by [swim smooth](#)

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As you might already know, swimming is a sport limited by stroke technique not strength or brute force. Great swimmers have fantastic stroke technique which minimises their drag and maximises their propulsion, moving them quickly and efficiently through the water.

If you are a beginner or intermediate level freestyle swimmer you will have some flaws in your stroke technique that are holding you back, making you slower and less efficient than you could be. At Swim Smooth we have individually coached thousands of swimmers and in this time we see five stroke problems come up time and time again, at least one is in place in nearly every swimmer.

We're going to take a look at each of these "Five Most Common Flaws" in turn and dip into Swim Smooth's methodology to give you a drill or visualisation to help improve each. You might already have a good idea which of these problems exists in your stroke but if not then ask a friend, coach or lifeguard to watch you swim and feed back to you.

### classic flaw 1: holding your breath underwater

If you stood at the side of your pool and watched everyone swim, breath holding is probably the most common flaw you will see. Holding onto your breath underwater increases the buoyancy in your chest and acts to sink your legs. If you suffer from sinky legs in the water then this is the first thing to get right in your stroke to improve your body position. Holding your breath also makes things feel much more tense as the CO<sub>2</sub> builds up in your system.

**How to fix it:** During freestyle you should be exhaling whenever your face is in the water. At first it can feel very unnatural to do this and it can take some getting used to. Go to the deep end of your pool and tread water, take a breath in and then exhale which allows you to sink underwater. If you have trouble sinking, this is a sign you're used to holding onto your breath! Keep practising exhaling more smoothly until you are able to sink down to the bottom. It can be surprising how much air is in there and how you might have only been breathing with the top of your lungs before:



When you start to swim again afterwards, focus on exhaling smoothly into the water between breaths. You should feel more relaxed straight away and also feel it helps keep your legs higher in the water.

### classic flaw 2: crossing over in front of the head

When you swim freestyle, your hands should never cross the centre line. Crossing over like this might happen only on one side or only when you go to breathe. A crossover causes you to snake down the pool adding drag and it harms your [catch on the water](#), reducing your propulsion:



**How to fix it:** The temptation here is to simply think about going wider with your arm stroke, the problem with this approach is that you end up being very flat in the water with little body rotation. Instead of taking your arm wider, think about drawing your shoulder blades together and back – this will straighten out your arm stroke. The perfect way to practise this is kicking on the side with some fins (flippers) on:



As you do this be aware of the position of your lead hand, you will probably find it wants to cross over in this position too! To straighten it, draw your shoulder blades together and back "shoulders back chest forwards". You'll become aware that it's a slumping of the shoulders forward that is causing the crossover and the fix is to draw your shoulders back as you swim.

As you start swimming the full stroke again simply think about the middle finger on each hand and pointing that gun-barrel straight down the pool as you swim. This is a very simple visualisation which helps transfer better alignment into your full stroke.

### classic flaw 3: scissor kick

A scissor kick is a horizontal parting of the legs in the water which causes a large amount of drag. This normally happens during or immediately after breathing and can be very quick – watch carefully or you might miss it:



In nearly all cases, the cause of a scissor kick relates to a crossover in the stroke (see flaw 1). The cross-over causes a loss of balance which results in a scissor kick shortly after to stabilise yourself. It's normally an unconscious reaction – you probably don't even know you're doing it!

**How to fix it:** The first thing to do is remove the crossover (see flaw 1), very often this is enough to remove the scissor all by itself. To help re-enforce a better kicking action, as you swim gently brush your big toes together as they pass: tap tap tap. When you go to breathe, instead of thinking about the breath keep your attention on your toes and keeping the tapping constant – a big gap between taps is probably a big parting of the legs!

### classic flaw 4: kicking from the knee

If you have a running or cycling background you're at high risk from this one! A good freestyle leg kick is performed with a nearly straight leg, with only a slight relaxed flex at the knee in time with the kick. The kicking action should predominantly be from the hip not the knee:



As soon as you bend your knee you present your thigh as a blunt object to the water and you push against the flow creating huge amounts of drag.

**How to fix it:** To reprogram your leg kick, practise some torpedo push-offs from the wall with a very strong kick. Do this for about 10-15 meters using a strong kick and then swim easy pace to the end of the pool, lightly tapping your toes as mentioned in flaw 3. Do several of these in succession:

- First time focusing simply on keeping your legs straight and kicking from the hip.
- Second time imagine you have a coin between your butt cheeks and you've got to keep it there as you kick by lightly clenching your glutes.
- Third time stretch through your core as tall and straight as you can in the water.

Kicking hard like this with good technique helps your nervous system learn a better kicking action.

#### classic flaw 5: over-reaching and putting on the brakes

If you have been working on your stroke length, trying to make your stroke more efficient you might have fallen foul of this. Many swimmers trying to lengthen out as much as possible end up dropping their wrists and showing the palm of their hand forwards. This just applies the brakes to your stroke:



**How to fix it:** Practice kicking on the side with fins again and become aware of the position of your lead hand. Is the wrist dropped and pointing forwards? Work on

correcting this, actually tipping your wrist slightly the other way so your fingers are angled a few degrees downwards. This slight tipping of the wrist immediately sets you up for a much better catch and pull through.

As you introduce this change into your full stroke you may find your stroke rate (cadence) lifts slightly, that's a good thing, it shows you're not artificially slowing your stroke!

### improve your swimming with swim smooth!

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