



Running Basics: Form

by [Julia Malacoff](#)

January 6, 2020

FORM

Focusing on form is like free power for runners, especially for newer runners. It's absolutely critical, experts say. "There's an old running adage, 'form comes first, then distance, then speed,'" explains Thomas Watson, an UESCA-certified running coach and founder of [The Marathon Handbook](#). "The point being that good running form is your foundation that you'll build the rest of your running abilities on top of."

Good form can also help you continue running longer without injuries. "You can significantly reduce the wear and tear of running through the development of good form and mechanics," notes Steve Stonehouse, a certified coach and personal trainer and director of education for [STRIDE](#).

Unfortunately, learning good running form isn't a "one-and-done" kind of process, which is why an [app like MapMyRun](#), with its form-coaching feature, is helpful. "It's something that all runners should be checking in on regularly," Watson says. This is because your form is impacted by a host of factors that are likely to change over time. "Your form can be influenced by your mental state — if you're stressed or anxious, for example — and even by the weather," Watson says. Tight muscles, muscle soreness and injuries can also impact how you run.

Ahead, run coaches share their best form tips for runners of all levels.

FORM ESSENTIALS

Good running form helps you avoid injury and encourages energy efficiency. That can lead to more time spent out logging miles and eventually, faster times.

When thinking about [running posture](#), it can be helpful to break down each area of the body individually. While all parts of the body need to work together, runners often have issues in one particular area that causes a chain reaction in the others. Here's what to look out for from head to toe.



La Salle
COLLEGE PREPARATORY

Track and Field

Coach C. Ring '01

3880 E Sierra Madre Blvd
Pasadena, CA 91107
626.351.8951

POSTURE



HEAD AND NECK

HEAD LEVEL, EARS
IN LINE WITH
SHOULDERS

CHEST AND SHOULDERS

OPEN CHEST
AND PACKED
SHOULDERS

ARMS AND HANDS

PUMP ARMS BACK
AND FORTH

HIPS

HIPS STAY
NEUTRAL

FOOT STRIKE

LAND ON THE BALLS OF FOOT,
AVOIDING EXTREMES

HEAD AND NECK

"The biggest tip here is to just relax," Stonehouse says. "People have a tendency to get tight in their neck and jaw." If you find yourself clenching your jaw as you run, try to release it by consciously softening your jaw.



Your head angle and position can also have a big impact on the rest of your form, Watson says. “Make sure your head is level, meaning your chin is parallel to the ground. Keeping your gaze directly in front of you makes this easy.”

You also want to keep your ears in line with your shoulders. “It’s common for people to lean their head forward in front of their body, but good posture comes from your head being neatly above the shoulders,” Watson notes.

CHEST AND SHOULDERS

Since many of us spend so much time in front of a computer, it’s common to allow the shoulders to roll forward and the chest to cave in. This should be avoided as much as possible while running. “Your chest should be open and facing forward, like a proud lion,” Watson says. “It’s your center of gravity and where much of your running power comes from, so focus on a tall spine, open chest and engaged core for good form.”

ARMS AND HANDS

Some people find they just don’t know [what to do with their arms while running](#). But they actually play an integral role in your form: “Your arms help power you forward through the momentum of their swings, so feel free to use them,” Watson says.

Ideally, you want to keep your elbows close to your body and bent at 90-degrees. “Try to pump your arms back-and-forth rather than side-to-side for a more effective use of your energy,” Watson advises.

As for your hands, there are no strict rules about positioning, other than that they should remain relaxed.” Tensed fists use energy and affect your posture; they can channel that tension through your arms and shoulders,” Watson notes.

Interestingly, what you do with your arms while you’re running may give you clues about other issues with your form. “Typically, runners with weak hips on one or both sides tend to drop their arm on the side of the weak hip in an effort to pull the body back over to that side,” says [Meghan Kennihan](#), a RRCA and USATF-certified run coach. This can actually slow you down, as it’s not an efficient use of energy. While you probably won’t notice this on your own, working with a running coach or videoing yourself running may help you notice asymmetries.

HIPS

“It’s very common for runners to puff their chests out without controlling their hips, meaning their hips roll backward, their lower back is curved and their bottom is sticking way out,” Watson says. “This posture means you’re not enlisting your glutes, hips or pelvic muscles effectively and can lead to injury.”

Instead, Watson recommends keeping your hips as neutral as possible as you run, not tilted too far forward or back. “Make sure you’re activating those glutes with each stride, too,” Watson adds. “It’s a sure sign that your form is on point.”

FOOT STRIKE



La Salle
COLLEGE PREPARATORY

Track and Field

Coach C. Ring '01

3880 E Sierra Madre Blvd
Pasadena, CA 91107
626.351.8951

“Everyone’s feet and gait are different, so there is no one-size-fits-all approach to how your feet should strike the ground,” Watson says. In general, there are three main types of [foot strike](#):

FOOT STRIKE



FOREFOOT STRIKE

Landing on the ball and/or toes of your feet first, then the midfoot, then the heel.

MIDFOOT STRIKE

Landing in the middle of your foot first, then the heel.

HEEL STRIKE

Landing on your heel first, then your midfoot and toes.

“It generally helps to focus on landing on the balls of your feet,” Watson says. “This avoids the extremes of running on your heels or toes, both of which tend to cause problems.”

That said, if you’re a toe- or heel-strike runner and don’t seem to be having any [nagging injuries or issues](#) related to your foot strike (such as shin splints, calf tightness or knee pain) [research suggests](#) you’re probably better off sticking with what’s working for you.

Running shoes also have a huge effect on your form and how your feet land, Watson points out. “Ensure you have a pair that are both comfortable and [suited to your style of running](#). Get help from a reputable shoe store if in doubt.”

CADENCE AND STRIDE LENGTH



La Salle
COLLEGE PREPARATORY

Track and Field

Coach C. Ring '01

3880 E Sierra Madre Blvd
Pasadena, CA 91107
626.351.8951

Your [running cadence](#) is the number of steps you take per minute. You can measure it by counting your steps for a minute, or by using a run tracking app like MapMyRun.

Your stride length is the length of each of your steps.

A lower cadence typically indicates a longer stride, while a higher cadence indicates a shorter stride. Every runner is a bit different, but for most people, smaller strides are beneficial for alignment.

“You want to ensure that your feet are landing beneath your hips, as opposed to out in front of your body,” Watson says. “Smaller strides can help to achieve this.”

It’s important to [increase cadence](#) (and decrease stride length) gradually, adds Kennihan. “Otherwise, you will risk injury.”

Lastly, some runners bounce up and down as they run. “This leads to slower than necessary run times, as time moving vertically is *not* spent moving horizontally,” Kennihan explains. “An additional 1–2 inches of vertical bounce beyond normal can relate to as much as 300–600 feet of vertical climbing in a flat 40-minute 10K, running at 90 steps per minute.” This essentially creates hills on flat terrain, making your run feel harder. Bouncing can also overload the hip joints, potentially causing injury over time.

HOW TO CHECK YOUR FORM

You may be able to feel some form issues intuitively after learning what you’re looking for. But the simplest way to get a form check is to seek expert help. “They can watch you run for a few minutes and give you some pointers to quickly correct any errors you’re making,” Watson says.

“Have an experienced run coach watch you run both inside on a treadmill and outside, because you run differently on a treadmill than outside,” Kennihan adds. “If you don’t have a run coach near you that does run analysis, there are coaches you can send videos to online.”

Alternatively, you can film yourself and do your own evaluation, or check your form in the mirror on a treadmill, Watson says. But he still suggests getting someone else involved: “It’s often best to seek out a third party, especially one who is experienced in training runners.”