

OPEX

PROGRAM DESIGN TIPS
VOLUME &
INTENSITY

INTRODUCTION

With the number of fitness coaches in the industry growing every year, honing your programming skills is now more essential than ever. Effective program design is how you get your clients great results, retain them, and grow your coaching business. To help you do just that we have created this quick reference guide of our go-to program design tools and techniques for adjusting volume and intensity. These tools will give you a starting point for creating progressive and individualized programs for your clients.

WHERE TO START

Before programming, you must first conduct an initial assessment and consultation with your clients. This will inform your program design by highlighting factors such as training history, lifestyle, how often the client wants to train, their goals, movement capabilities, and work capacity.

With the assessment and consultation complete, you are prepared to define the intention (goal) of the training program. This will vary greatly from client to client, but common examples are to get stronger, lose weight, improve energy, and build muscle (hypertrophy).

With a clear intention established, you can begin to prioritize, plan and periodize their training plan. When you periodize, you are simply organizing shifts in volume and intensity over time to deliver the appropriate dose-response (stimulus required to achieve the training goal) from the training program. ([Sign up for this free coaching course to see how OPEX Coaches do this.](#))

There are many programming techniques to adjust volume and intensity in your program design. In this quick reference guide you'll learn a few of our favorite tools to do this.

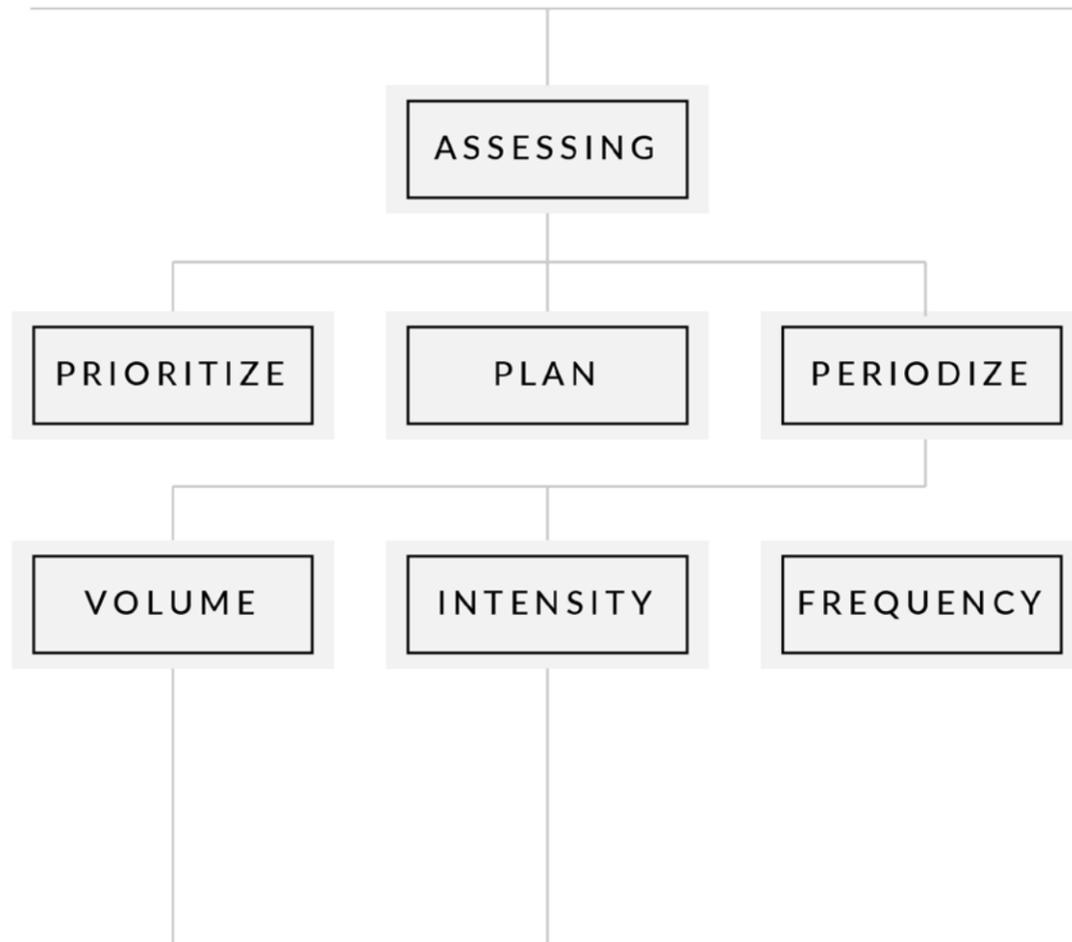
PROGRAMMING VS. PERIODIZATION

Programming is the process of designing training plans that your client will follow. It is the act of implementing periodization through program design techniques and exercise selection. We write and deliver programming through [CoachRx](#).

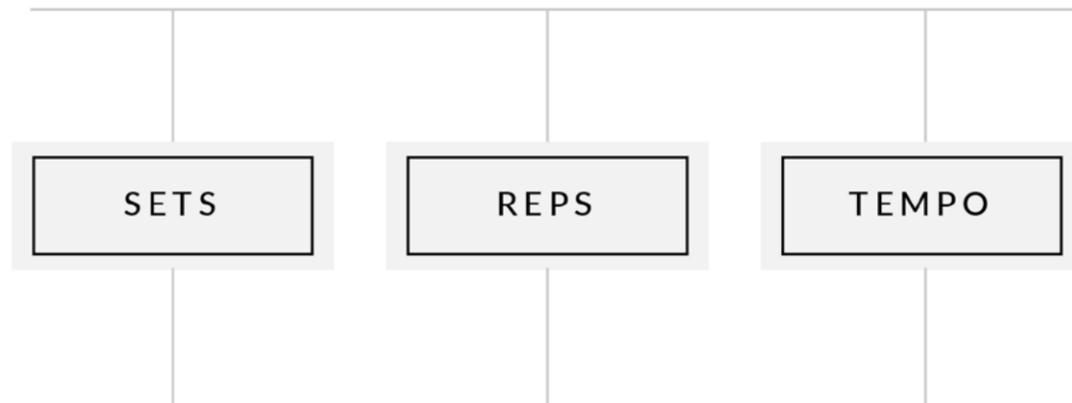
Periodization is the act of planning phases in a client's program to adjust volume and intensity over time. Phases of training include accumulation, intensification, pre-competition, competition, tapering, and deloading.

Periodization provides a roadmap for your programming, and is done in the [CoachRx](#) planning feature prior to writing workouts in the programming calendar.

THE FOUNDATION OF PROGRAM DESIGN



PROGRAM DESIGN VARIABLES



DROP SETS

Also known as strip sets, this is a training technique where a client performs reps to failure at a higher intensity, then decreases the intensity and performs a prescribed amount of reps or reps until failure for a given amount of "drops".

CLUSTER SETS

These come from the training technique "velocity stops" where an individual performs four sets at 70% of 1RM, and stops the set when the velocity has decreased by 40% from the first rep. Cluster sets are when an individual performs a certain amount of reps, rests a short amount of time, then performs a certain number of reps for a given amount of "intra-set clusters". Clusters are a method that allows a client to increase volume at a higher intensity within a set.

SUPER SETS

Pairing two exercises together and performing them back to back. Typically this is performed with antagonistic (a muscle that opposes the action of another) muscles but can be performed with the same muscle group. This works to improve the overall time efficiency of a training program and also limits interference from the antagonist muscle group.

TRI SETS

Tri sets are the act of performing three exercises in a superset fashion. We can utilize tri sets on a single, or multiple muscle groups.

GIANT SETS

Giant sets are the act of performing four or more exercises in a superset fashion. We can utilize giant sets for a single, or multiple muscle groups.

REST PAUSE

Rest pause training is a programming technique that requires multiple sets, each to failure, with less than 30 seconds rest between sets until the prescribed reps are achieved. This method is similar to cluster sets, but the main difference is the amount of reps achieved per bout is based on the individual going to failure.

PROGRAM DESIGN TOOLS

THE FOUNDATIONS OF PROGRAM DESIGN

ASSESSING

This is the act of gathering information about your client prior to programming. The OPEX Assessment includes an initial coach/client consultation, body composition analysis, movement screen, and work capacity assessment.

PRIORITIZING

Priorities are what your program needs to focus on, based on capabilities identified in the assessment and the client's goal.

PLANNING

This is the act of figuring out exactly how you will achieve a client's goal by considering resources, schedule and assessment results.

PERIODIZATION

Planning blocks of time to focus on different training phases. These blocks may include phases of accumulation, intensification, pre-competition, competition, tapering and deload.

VOLUME

The total number of repetitions or total work.

INTENSITY

The rate of effort at which a movement is performed, measured by the load lifted relative to the 1RM.

PROGRAM DESIGN VARIABLES

SETS

The number of times you perform the repetitions in an exercise.

REPS

Short for repetitions, the number of times a movement is performed within a set.

TEMPO

The speed at which a repetition is performed. Prescribed as four numbers, which correspond to the eccentric, isometric, concentric and isometric contractions of a movement. For example, @3110 on a back squat means 3 seconds eccentric (down), 1 second pause (bottom), 1 second concentric (up), 0 seconds pause (top).

PROGRAM DESIGN TOOLS

Drop Sets

Also known as strip sets, this is a training technique where a client performs reps to failure at a higher intensity, then decreases the intensity and performs a prescribed amount of reps or reps until failure for a given amount of drops.

How to Perform Drop Sets

After completing the final rep of a movement reduce the weight anywhere from 20-75% and perform another set immediately until failure.

Example: E.g., Bench Press @2010, 8/8/8 x 3 sets, dropping 10-15% of load after every 8 reps without rest; rest 3 minutes
x 3 sets

[WATCH VIDEO DEMONSTRATION](#)

Cluster Sets

These come from the training technique, velocity stops, where an individual performs four sets at 70% of 1RM, and stops the set when the velocity has decreased by 40% from the first rep. Cluster sets are when an individual performs a certain amount of reps, rests a short amount of time, then performs a certain number of reps for a given amount of intraset clusters. Clusters are a method that allows a client to increase volume at a higher intensity within a set.

How to Perform Cluster Sets

Use a heavy weight and perform 2-3 reps fewer than you would normally, take a short break and then continue this process until you hit the prescribed cluster.

Example: Weighted Strict Pull-Up @20X0, 2.2.2.2 x 3 sets; 10 sec rest between clusters and 3 min rest between sets

[WATCH VIDEO DEMONSTRATION](#)

Supersets

Pairing two exercises together and performing them back to back. Typically this is performed with antagonistic muscles (muscles that oppose the action of the other) but can be performed with the same muscle group. Supersets improve the overall time efficiency of a training program and also limit interference when pairing antagonist muscle groups.

How to Perform Supersets

Choose two exercises in the same or varied muscle groups (for this example we will use antagonistic muscle groups) and perform one after the other in an alternating fashion with an appropriate rest period between sets.

Example:

A1) Incline Dumbbell Hammer Curl @2111, 8-10 reps x 3 sets; rest 90 seconds

A2) Incline Dumbbell Tricep Extension @2121; 8-10 reps x 3 sets; rest 90 seconds

[WATCH VIDEO DEMONSTRATION](#)

Tri Sets

Tri sets are the act of performing three exercises in a superset fashion. We can utilize tri sets on a single or multiple muscle groups. Tri-sets are beneficial to create greater efficiency in a training program (for multiple muscle groups or patterns) or possibly to increase muscle damage that can lead to greater levels of hypertrophy (for single muscle groups or patterns).

How to Perform Tri Sets

Choose three exercises in the same or varied muscle group (for this example we will use the quadriceps as our muscle group). It is best practice to order these exercises from most compound to auxiliary in nature.

Example:

A1) Cyclist Back Squat @20X1, 8-10 reps x 3 sets; rest 60 seconds

A2) Dumbbell Cyclist Front Squat @20X1, 12-15 reps x 3 sets; rest
60 seconds

A3) Cyclist Air Squat @20X0, 15-20 reps x 3 sets; rest 2-3 minutes

[WATCH VIDEO DEMONSTRATION](#)

Giant Sets

Giant sets are the act of performing four or more exercises in a superset fashion. We can utilize giant sets for a single, or multiple muscle groups. Similar to tri-sets, giant sets are beneficial to create efficiency in a training program (for multiple muscle groups or patterns) or possibly to increase muscle damage that can lead to greater levels of hypertrophy (for single muscle groups or patterns).

How to Perform Giant Sets

Choose four or more exercises in the same or varied muscle group (for this example we will use the chest as our muscle group). It is best practice to order these exercises from most compound to auxiliary in nature.

Example:

- A1) Close Grip Bench Press @2011, 8-10 reps x 3 sets; rest 60 seconds
- A2) Dumbbell Incline Bench Press @2011, 8-10 reps x 3 sets; rest 60 seconds
- A3) Dumbbell Incline Fly @2111, 8-10 reps x 3 sets; rest 60 seconds
- A4) Push-Up @20X1, AMRAP (-1) x 3 sets; rest 2-3 minutes

[WATCH VIDEO DEMONSTRATION](#)

Rest-Pause Method

Rest pause training is a programming technique that requires multiple sets, each to failure, with less than 30 seconds rest between sets until the prescribed reps are achieved. This method is similar to cluster sets, but the main difference is the amount of reps achieved per bout is based on the individual going to failure.

How to Perform Rest-Pause Method

Choose the amount of volume that you would like to achieve in a particular exercise. For example, instead of performing 4 sets of 10 reps (40 reps) at 185 pounds in the bench press, you would warm-up to 185 pounds, get under the bar and accumulate 40 reps in as few sets as possible (going to failure each set) and resting less than 30 seconds between sets.

Example: Bench Press @2010, Accumulate 40 reps @ 185 pounds; rest <30 seconds between sets

[WATCH VIDEO DEMONSTRATION](#)

Developing Confidence in Program Design

This download highlighted six specific program design techniques and the elements that form the foundation of smarter program design.

So how do you put it all together when you onboard a new client?

It takes experience and education (and more than we can share in this short guide!).

The [OPEX Coaching Certificate Program \(CCP\)](#) provides just that. Throughout the curriculum and mentorship, you'll practice conducting assessments, implementing periodization, and designing training programs for a variety of client avatars.

Taught by industry leaders, [CCP](#) is the most comprehensive online coaching education and mentorship program. This course teaches you how to design long-term training programs for any client so you can grow your in-person or remote coaching business.

On top of learning a scalable system of coaching, you'll get access to the premium coaching software, [CoachRx](#), which will help you make long-term planning and designing a breeze.

With a CCP education, you'll stop guessing whether your programs are working and become a confident and successful fitness coach.



TAKE THE NEXT STEP IN YOUR PROFESSIONAL COACHING
DEVELOPMENT AND START CCP TODAY.

[START NOW](#)

READY TO BECOME A CCP COACH?

COACHING CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

An OPEX CCP Coach is a trusted fitness advisor and a partner in delivering results to clients. They are leaders on the front lines, making a real difference in the lives of people in their community. Ultimately, what makes OPEX CCP Coaches stand out is their ability to meet their clients where they are at – regardless of age, training history, lifestyle, or goals – and design a comprehensive personalized fitness program.

ARE YOU READY TO BECOME A
LEADING FITNESS PROFESSIONAL?

LEARN MORE

