INTRODUCTION
Learning how to swim effectively in the open water when you are entirely new to triathlon or open water swimming begins with developing your confidence in this strange new environment. Even if you have been swimming for a while and are working on improving your performances in open water, you will find these first pointers on overcoming anxiety very useful.

Experienced open water swimmers will find more advanced tips later in this guide but we would still encourage you to look through this first section, you might just find one or two tips that make all the difference for you.

1. OVERCOMING ANXIETY
You may have spent some time familiarising yourself with the basics of a sound freestyle stroke in the pool, only to find yourself feeling very awkward or even panic-stricken during your first forays into your local lake, river or the sea.
Don’t worry, this is normal and even very strong pool swimmers can find this happens to them when they first swim in the great outdoors. The key is to first recognise that open water anxiety is an issue for you to tackle and then learn some coping strategies to deal with it.

After becoming more relaxed in open water you will be free to set about developing your stroke to suit a range of water conditions and improving your ability to swimming straight and draft off other swimmers. At this point open water swimming becomes a lot more fun and gives a much greater sense of freedom than swimming within the confines of a pool!

**Breathing**

Here at Swim Smooth, the most common stroke flaw we see is for swimmers to be holding their breath underwater. To a large extent this is a natural instinct born from a feeling that by exhaling into the water you will run out of air. However, nothing could be further from the truth, by exhaling smoothly and constantly into the water the lungs are cleared of CO2 and the feeling of shortness of breath is greatly reduced.

A build-up of CO2 in your system causes a sense of anxiety and panic which becomes doubly worse in the alien environment of open water. For this reason, learning to exhale efficiently underneath the water whilst in the pool environment is your first step towards swimming confidently in open water.
Your exhalation should feel like a long steady sigh into the water and can be from the mouth or nose or even a combination of the two. The key thing is to ensure a continuous flowing stream of bubbles as soon as your face returns to the water after taking a breath in.

You can practice this in the pool without even swimming a stroke by placing your face in the water and blowing a smooth stream of bubbles. Which makes you feel most relaxed, nose or mouth?

Now try the same exercise in slightly deeper water (1.5m or 5ft) and see if the process of exhaling smoothly allows you to sink down to the bottom of the pool. If you stay afloat this indicates that you may be holding onto your breath for fear of letting go.

Try these ‘sink downs’ several times and try to let your whole body feel loose and relaxed in the water. As basic as these exhalation exercises seem, tuning into and improving your exhalation technique will make a huge difference to feelings of anxiety and panic in open water.

Better exhalation is also good for your stroke technique as it reduces excess buoyancy in the chest and so helps to bring the legs up higher in the water, reducing drag. This happens as the body pivots around its centre like a see-saw, lowering your front lifts you up at the rear.

Many swimmers find coordinating good exhalation quite hard with the rest of the stroke, so try repeating our famous mantra for developing this technique:

*breathe - bubble - bubble - breathe - bubble - bubble - breathe...*

Physically say the word bubble into the water to remind you to exhale between breaths. We use this with all our swimmers in the pool but it is equally powerful in open water as the alien surroundings subconsciously cause them to hold their breath and worsen the anxiety further!

This simple mantra places all your focus on the process of breathing and if you actually mouth the word bubble as each hand enters into the water, you will find that this rhythm will initiate a bilateral breathing pattern without you having to think about it.

Breathing to both sides is always great for your swimming as it naturally improves your stroke symmetry and so will help you swim much straighter between buoys.
**Becoming a “Selfish Swimmer”**

Anxiety and feelings of panic are often caused by a particular aspect of open water swimming, the most common areas being:

- murky water
- deep water
- cold water
- claustrophobia from others swimming very closely to you
- reeds, bull-rushes and oozy mud upon entering the water
- losing your sense of direction
- fear of marine life and other submerged objects

This is not an exhaustive list but may help you identify what is triggering your individual discomfort. In the comfortable environment of the pool it’s relatively easy to focus on your own stroke movements but in open water, these distractions can shift your focus outwardly towards things which you cannot control.

Knowing which element[s] of open water swimming trigger your anxiety can help enormously as you can work on blocking them out and letting them take care of themselves. We call this “becoming a selfish swimmer” as you think solely about your own movements and swimming. This returns that feeling of control to you and leaves you feeling much more relaxed.

**Safety**

Swimming in open water does certainly come with additional safety concerns that you may normally take for granted in the pool. Always aim to swim in designated safe open water venues and under the supervision of a coach with good safety support staff at all times.

On the occasions that you may like to venture a little off the beaten track, always swim with at least two other swimmers and stay close to each other at all times.
You will find that having this reassurance of support will make you feel significantly more comfortable in the open water and with it your confidence and ability to develop your skills will grow. Even then, remember swimming in the great outdoors is at the whim of mother nature and you should never enter any body of water without addressing appropriate safety provisions as outlined below:

2. SIGHTING EFFECTIVELY AND SWIMMING STRAIGHT
When there is no black line to follow, it is very easy to wander off course in the open water and this can add significant distance to your swim distances, costing you valuable time. Over the past three years, we have been plotting GPS traces of swimmers who thought they swam a bit off course during an open water race, only to find that they had added up to 20% of the distance through a zig-zagging path! This inability to hold a straight line boils down to two key factors: 1) stroke imbalances and 2) inefficient sighting strategies.

Stroke Imbalances
Bilateral breathing is a key way to develop symmetry in the freestyle stroke and most unilateral breathers will develop a strong asymmetry to their movements over time.

When viewed from above, the unilateral breather will typically swing the lead arm across the midline in front of the head as they breathe, throwing the body off balance and causing the legs to scissor kick apart. Usually the other arm will then subconsciously correct this by also swinging across the midline, leaving the swimmer snaking through the water.
Whilst some of the world’s best swimmers and triathletes only breathe to one side, their strokes are already well developed. For the developing swimmer, breathing to one side is a recipe for a lop-sided stroke.

In addition to developing your bilateral breathing, you can also work directly on your alignment by focusing on the middle finger of each hand extending forwards in front of the same shoulder as you enter the water. Visualise cutting straight down the pool and maintain this focus just as strongly on a breathing stroke. To help with this you can modify the mantra we used before to:

**bubble - bubble - straight, bubble - bubble - straight**

### Sighting Strategies

When it comes to improving your sighting and navigation, the most important thing is to do your homework before an event. Many swimmers and triathletes start a swim event without having done any detailed reconnaissance of the course beforehand. Using the map provided by the race organiser, aim to walk around as much of the course as possible and work out key landmark features that might help you better target each turn buoy when you are down at water level.

*KEEP YOUR HEAD AS LOW AS POSSIBLE WHEN SIGHTING IN THE OPEN WATER TO PREVENT EXCESSIVE DRAG FROM THE LEGS*
Take a vertical line upwards from the turning buoy and see what key features on the horizon make sighting easier, e.g. a tall tree, hill top, odd-shaped building. Aim for these as you swim rather than becoming too focused on the buoy itself, especially if the water is a little rough. This will take some of the stress out of sighting small turn buoys in the melee of a race start. Doing this well will also help remove some of the disorientation that many people experience in open water.

The most common mistake to make when sighting forwards is to lift the whole face out of the water and try to sight and breathe at the same time. In order to lift your head out sufficiently to breathe, the legs sink dramatically creating additional drag, even when wearing a wetsuit.

**SIGHTING TECHNIQUE SEQUENCE:** LIFT YOUR HEAD JUST ENOUGH TO SIGHT FORWARDS AND THEN BREATHE TO THE SIDE.
A good sighting technique involves lifting just your eyes out of the water and then rolling your head to the side to breathe, this should happen in one smooth fluid movement. If you were about to breathe to your right, you would press down slightly with the right arm as you pull through to raise just your eyes above the water line before continuing to roll the head with your body’s natural rotation to the right and take a breath as normal.

Avoid trying to hold your head up high for several strokes until you can see exactly where you are going with a waterpolo style of stroke. That is extremely fatiguing. If you cannot see where you are going on your first sighting stroke then don’t panic and retry a couple of strokes later. You will not always get a clear view every time you sight forwards but by sighting two or three times in a row you will gradually change what is initially a fuzzy picture into a clearer view of where you are going. Once you have that image in your head, lock onto it and focus entirely on cutting as straight a line as possible to that point.
3. ADAPTING YOUR STROKE FOR THE CONDITIONS

OPEN WATER SWIMMING CAN BE VERY DIFFERENT TO THE POOL, ESPECIALLY WHEN CONDITIONS ARE ROUGH AND CHOPPY
Whether you swim in the sea, ocean, river or in a flat lake, the experience of swimming in the open water can be very different to that of a pool. Even a calm lake can be transformed into a foaming mass of arms and legs at the start of an event and knowing how to adapt your stroke to cope with this is a big advantage irrespective of your level of ability.

**Stroke Rate**

The biggest single difference between the world’s best pool swimmers and those who dominate the sport in the open water and during a triathlon is their stroke rate, i.e. how many times your arms turn-over per minute. The typical stroke rate of the world’s best male pool swimmers over 1500m are in the range of 68-76 Strokes Per Minute (SPM), compared with the world’s best open water swimmers and triathletes who are in the region of 75-90 SPM (or even higher!). Female swimmers generally have slightly shorter arms than men and so use higher stroke rates still in both environments.

In swimming it is common folklore that the longer a stroke (taking fewer strokes per lap) the more efficient it is. Many swimmers have taken this notion way too far and have introduced a distinct pause-and-glide into their stroke timing. At Swim Smooth we call this Overgliding and it is bad for your swimming because it kills the rate and rhythm of your stroke.

In the open water, the ability to hold smooth, rhythmical strokes with plenty of momentum is a real advantage when battling swell, chop and the turbulence created by other swimmers close to you. Whilst a very long stroke might look smooth, it’s not always the most effective in the open water, which is a major reason for the disparity in stroke rates between the world’s best open water swimmers over their pool counterparts.

It’s worth highlighting that despite their stroke rate being higher and their stroke length slightly shorter, these great open water swimmers are not fighting the water. They have high body positions, do not have scissor kicks or cross the centre line in front of the head. At all times they are working with the water, not against it.

Interestingly enough, when these great open water swimmers are seen in the pool they appear less smooth than pure pool swimmers. However, their skill levels are very high and if desired they can easily lengthen out their strokes to emulate that classic pool swimming style. This is not an issue of coordination or discipline, they have simply developed and chosen a stroke style which suits their racing environment: horses for courses!
Just like elite open water swimmers have done, if you can learn to adapt your stroke to the conditions then you will perform much better as a result.

The elastic nature of a wetsuit assists with developing a slightly higher stroke rate. Even in the most flexible wetsuits, range of movement in the shoulder is slightly restricted and correspondingly the stroke length decreases a touch naturally. By elevating the stroke rate about 5-8 SPM by initiating the catch phase a little sooner, the swimmer is able to maintain, or even increase, their overall speed.

The swimmer is also assisted in doing this by the elastic nature of the wetsuit helping them spring-back at the front of the stroke after full extension. If the swimmer does not fight this sensation by trying to pause and glide then they will find that this process will assist in their speed and also reduce fatigue in the shoulders from not fighting against the elastic properties of the neoprene.

**Arm Recovery**

Another obvious difference between good pool and good open water swimmers is their recovery action over the top of the water. Those who have come from a pool swimming background are commonly taught to swim with the classic high elbow recovery, where the elbow stays high with the fingertips just skimming over the surface of the water as the hand travels forwards.

The high elbow recovery certainly appears very smooth and looks aesthetically very pleasing to a bystander or coach on the pool deck however it is not often adopted by great open water swimmers. Instead, they prefer a straighter arm recovery with more hand clearance over the water. This is very advantageous in the open water for three key reasons:

- A higher arm ensures the hand does not clash with waves or chop in rough conditions
- It allows the swimmer to get closer to other swimmers and so benefit from drafting them to the side
- It reduces stress on the shoulder joint when wearing a wetsuit

Whilst this stroke action may seem a little unorthodox at first, it can prove to be very beneficial especially for those with limited flexibility in the upper back and shoulders.
4. OPEN WATER ENTRY / EXITS

Practising fast entries and exits between land and open water is a priority for more advanced level swimmers. However, if you are new to open water swimming don’t let this put you off, entry and exit skills are great fun to learn and performing them well will help you build a sense of confidence and pride in your open water swimming.

ENTRY

Before practising your entry skills – or performing them in a race – it is vitally important to check the shallows of the beach or bank area where you will enter the water. Submerged rocks, logs or other obstacles are significant hazards to bare feet and also at the point where you dive and porpoise forwards.

Knowing how the bottom shelves away is also important so that you have a plan for how far you will be able to run and then how many porpoises you will perform before entering your full stroke.

A good entry has three main phases:

- Being aware of who your competitors are before the start is important so that you can enter the water alongside them and immediately start drafting them. Lining up alongside a swimmer who is slightly quicker than you can lead to a significantly faster swim split for this reason.

- The run in is conducted with a bounding running style, flicking the legs out to the side to clear the water’s surface as it becomes deeper. Tall athletes have an advantage here and can generally run a few strides further before diving forwards into the water. As soon as the water becomes too deep to run through, dive and carry as much momentum as possible into it so that you travel maximum distance.

- With a gradually shelving beach it is normally possible to porpoise one to four times after your initial dive. Dive to the bottom and with your hands grab the sand at the bottom to pull yourself forwards, tucking your legs under your body. Then explosively leap forwards, pushing hard off the bottom, clearing the water and diving forwards again, grabbing the bottom and repeating.
Porpoising in this manner is quicker than swimming and can help you break away from a competitor who starts swimming sooner.

- As soon as the water becomes too deep, break into your freestyle stroke from the last dive forwards and immediately pick up the draft of your chosen competitor(s).

When executed well you can cover distance extremely quickly with this entry method and perhaps put 10-20m into a competitor, removing any possibility of them drafting from you. The key thing is to practise these skills regularly before your races so that executing them is second nature.

**Deep Water Starts**

Many races feature a deep water start, with the field lined up between two buoys before the start. There are two key elements to a good start here.

Firstly, make sure that you position yourself correctly before the start. If you are new to open water swimming the temptation is to position yourself at the back of the field or way off to one side. Very often this is not appropriate and by selecting a slightly more central or forwards position you will be with other swimmers of your own ability and can swim a much shorter path to the first buoy.

If you are racing at quite a high level you can seek out competitors you know who will swim the same speed or slightly faster than yourself. Sit yourself directly beside them so that you can immediately pick up their draft once underway.

If you are unsure where to start, ask for assistance from a coach or experienced swimmer at the event who knows your speed and ability to help you judge your position. Swimming with swimmers of your own ability level is far smoother and easier than having to fight through hundreds of slower swimmers so it is important to get this right.
The second important element with a deep water start is to make sure that you are ready for the start. Do this by lying with your legs high at the rear in the direction which you are going to travel, ready to go. Either lie on your side with your lower arm out in front ready to take a stroke, or directly on your front sculling the water with both hands. These positions leave you ready to go immediately into your stroke.

Expect to use a strong burst of kick to get yourself up to speed and then quickly settle into your stroke rhythm and pick up a fast pair of feet to draft!

Beach Exits
A beach exit is a little like a beach start but in reverse. Swim in until you are in shallow enough water to start porpoising. The classic mistake swimmers make here is to stand up too soon in deep water and start wading in very slowly.

A good guide is to swim until you can just touch the bottom with your outstretched hand and then dive down to the bottom and perform a porpoise. Continue this until you can start running, clearing the water’s surface by flicking your heels out to the side as you go.
5. DRAFTING

Studies have shown that skilled swimmers can save up to 38% of their energy expenditure by drafting another swimmer. This is a huge saving and makes drafting skills so critical to open water swimming that they should be practised on a very regular basis. For this reason at Swim Smooth we recommend you practise drafting with other swimmers all year round, doing so in the pool in the spring and winter months.

Drafting well can save you minutes on your swim split or leave you super-fresh for your bike leg after swimming at the same speed. There are two main methods of drafting, behind another swimmer or tucked in at the side on their hip. The latter is a more advanced skill but can be tactically superior and may give an even greater drafting effect.

**Drafting directly behind another swimmer**

This is the simple way of drafting and an excellent place to start. Swim as close as you can to the swimmer in front without touching their toes, this requires a lot of concentration, more than swimming alone. You will also feel the jostling motion of the disturbed water from the swimmer in front which can be slightly disconcerting at first.
Stay in a nice rhythm and enjoy the ride, sometimes it may feel too easy in this position and you may be tempted to try and overtake and go alone but be wary of doing so. Very often once you are alone the effort level rises considerably and you appreciate how much drafting benefit you were gaining!

When swimming in this position it is important to maintain responsibility for your own navigation. The swimmer in front of you can easily wander off course and take you with them, so continue to sight regularly and make judgement calls on whether to leave them if they go off course.

**Drafting beside another swimmer**

This is a more advanced skill but allows you to swim closer to other swimmers and possibly gain a greater drafting benefit as a result. The position also allows you to keep a close eye on your competitors and come round them more easily. Plus, if you do drop away you have a lifeline of trying to get on their toes and draft on their feet instead – useful during turns where it is possible to lose your position slightly.

Swim to the side with your body position next to the hip of the other swimmer, head looking in towards the side of their body. This sits you nicely in their wake which makes a v-shape from their head. Sit as close as you can and if possible match your stroke to theirs so your arms do not clash.
Breathe to one side only, towards the other swimmer. Yes you will experience some disturbed water from them which can make breathing more difficult but breathing towards them will keep you closer to them and allow you to judge the gap accurately. This is one situation where unilateral breathing is a strategic advantage in open water swimming.

6. PACING

With the adrenaline of a race and the melee of other swimmers around you it is very easy indeed to set off too fast in an open water race and then slow down progressively throughout the swim. With swimmers around you doing the same thing it can be difficult to be aware of this effect but it will be harming your overall swim split significantly!

The key to getting this right is to work on your pace judgement in the pool so that when you swim in open water you can judge your pace accurately and swim much faster overall.

An extremely useful tool to develop your pacing skills is a Finis Tempo Trainer which sits under your swim cap and beeps to you at regular intervals. Set to beep at a desired pace every lap (e.g. 20 seconds per lap) you can learn to pace out your swims, turning at the end of the pool on the beep. This is a great way to train and develop your pacing skills at the same time – very useful doubling up for the time-poor triathlete.

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