

Referee has collected some of the best baseball umpiring tips & techniques they could find and have created a Baseball Officiating A-Z email series to share with officials. Officials who are interested can visit <https://www.referee.com/free-guides/> for more officiating resources. Tips will be added weekly once new ones are released.



## A

### **ATTEND AN UMPIRE SCHOOL OR CAMP**

There are many excellent college and professional umpire schools and weeklong and weekend camps available in all parts of the country. Attend one of them every now and then. You'll be surprised at what you'll learn; chances are you'll be learning the latest techniques being taught at both the amateur or professional level.

A word of caution, though. Remember that some schools teach umpire mechanics, interpretations and philosophies that generally apply to professional baseball. That is OK. Just be sure you have a good idea of what you can and cannot apply to whatever level you are working. Also, professional schools are five weeks for a reason. Candidates there are given hundreds of repetitions on how to take a pivot at first base, etc. They are also allowed countless hours of time calling pitches in the batting cage. When you attend a weeklong or weekend camp, you aren't going to get that kind of training. What you will get is the correct way to do various things. It's up to you to get the extra repetitions on your own.

# B

## BE POSITIVE WITH COACHES AND PLAYERS

Be alert for any opportunity to thank a player or coach for helping you administer the game. Whether someone is getting a bat out of the way or bringing out baseballs to you, say “please” and “thank you.” As simple as that is, you’d be surprised how much game participants appreciate that little kindness. The same goes for a coach who is taking care of a problem for you. Remember, you’re not trying to be their buddy, you’re just showing some simple courtesy. That technique is also useful to keep a player calm. Say, for example, a batter is hit by a pitch and trots right to first base without glaring at the pitcher or practicing other theatrical items batters sometimes do. Gently praise him for keeping his poise. A well-placed comment can do wonders to keep a situation from getting out of control.

# C

## CARRY YOURSELF PROFESSIONALLY

Some umpires do things on the field that immediately peg them as inexperienced. Let’s run through some of them.

There is no reason to vocalize obvious plays. There is no reason to loudly proclaim “Foul ball!” when a ball is fouled directly to the backstop. The time to do something is when there is doubt as to whether the ball is fair or foul. There also isn’t much reason to give a pronounced “out” signal on a routine fly or pop up.

Don’t let catchers or on-deck batters toss the ball to you. Ask the catcher to always hand you the ball. Tell the catcher that if an on-deck batter has the ball, he will toss it to the catcher who will then hand it to you. Don’t hold your indicator up to your face and look at it like you’ve never seen one before. Get a file and notch the wheels (preferably at “0”) and you’ll never have to look at your indicator again to start a count on a hitter. Rather than having to mentally beg for a batted ball, try advancing your indicator while the ball is in the air back to the pitcher. This is whether you throw it, the catcher throws it or a fielder throws it. If it’s in the air, that’s your cue to advance your indicator. Do that and you will cut down on lost counts immeasurably.

Use proper mechanics to signal the plays. Good, sharp mechanics give the impression you are right on top of things. Lazy or sloppy mechanics give the impression you really don’t care too much about what you are doing, or worse, give the impression you aren’t too sure of your call.

Put the ball in play after a dead ball, especially with runners on base. Don't leave your partner wondering if he should make an out call on a pickoff because he or she doesn't know if the ball is in play or not.



### **DISCUSS HOW EJECTIONS WILL BE HANDLED**

Cover ejections in your pregame. Fortunately, ejections occur rarely. However, when they do occur, they can get ugly fast unless the umpires have an idea of how they will be handled. First, whenever a coach comes out to discuss a play and the conversation starts to drag or get heated, the other umpire should walk to within hearing range. Listen to what's being said and don't participate unless asked by the umpire involved in the discussion or if the conversation obviously is dragging on.

Secondly, it must be understood by all umpires on the crew that the discussion is over once the umpire walks away or the coach is ejected. When that happens, the other umpires should try to get the coach away, either to the bench or out of the ballpark in the event of an ejection. Be careful not to put your hands on a coach or player. Sometimes by walking toward the dugout, you can get the coach to follow you while pleading a case.

It's very important that the ejecting umpire stay out of that process; participating at that point will only intensify the problem. Finally, it must be understood by all crew members that when a coach is ejected, the coach must leave the playing field before the game is resumed. Be sure to follow whatever procedures are in place for whatever level of ball you are working.



### **EXPECT THAT PARTICIPANTS WILL TRY TO GAIN AN EDGE**

Coaches and players have a stake in the outcome. They do care who wins. A player may fudge a bit on a trap to make you think he caught the ball. If a coach can get you to start calling low strikes because that's where his pitcher throws the ball, he may do it. The point here is, when a coach starts to get on you for something, or tries to rattle the opposing pitcher, or a player starts whining about your strike zone, consider the motive. When a participant is trying to get the edge, the reason to get upset is not because he's doing it; the reason to get upset is if you're not buying it and he continues.



## **FORFEITS ARE VERY SERIOUS**

The most important aspect to remember about forfeits is that they are very serious. In most other situations, you need to do a couple of things. First, whenever possible, be sure your partners are aware of what is happening. Secondly, be absolutely sure a coach knows that his continued conduct or the continuing conduct of his team is grounds for a forfeit. If you do forfeit the game, the coach is going to have to defend his actions to someone. And when he does explain his actions, you are going to be the scapegoat. The most popular excuse a coach may use is, "I didn't realize the game may be forfeited," or, "Nobody told me." Make sure your partners are in on that conversation. If possible, you and your partners should explain the circumstances to the other coach. Also, be sure to record all pertinent information that should be included in your report.



## **GET A REALISTIC STRIKE ZONE**

We all know coaches and players just want umpires to be consistent when calling balls and strikes, but umpires must be realistic in applying that principle. The lower the level of baseball, the bigger the strike zone. In high school baseball, umpires should be more generous on the knee pitch and on the corners than on pitches which are considered up in the zone. Regardless of the level, don't go to extremes. That applies to all levels of baseball. Don't be a voice in the wilderness. Your strike zone should be consistent with the other umpires calling the same level of baseball.



## HAVE A GOOD PREGAME

There are two good reasons to have a pregame, including one you may not have considered. The obvious reason is to be sure you and your partners know how you are going to work the game. Don't think that because you have umpired many games with the same partner that it's not necessary to have a pregame. Both of you have worked with others and you still need a reminder of how you are going to officiate the game. The other reason is to get your mind on baseball. There's no telling what goes through an umpire's mind on the way to a game. The one sure way to get focused on baseball is to have a good pregame meeting.



## INFIELD GROUNDERS

With no runners on base, for ground balls hit in the infield where fair/foul is not a factor, you should immediately advance up the first base line, striving to get as close to the start of the three-foot lane as possible and taking a standing set before the play occurs.

There are three reasons for doing that. You must watch for interference by the batter-runner while out of the three-foot lane. You must be ready for overthrows, being prepared to bounce into foul territory and rule on a dead ball and any subsequent award. Finally, from that position you can assist on a pulled foot and/or swipe tag, if asked.

If you're required to make a fair/foul call, advance after making that call (fair balls only). You must clear the catcher to his left or allow the catcher to clear before advancing. A good catcher will break toward the first base dugout to back up an overthrow.

With runners on base, you're responsible for the lead runner if he may attempt to score and thus cannot advance up the first base line. You may also be responsible (depending on the pregame) for the lead runner if he is not put out on the first play. That includes a runner on second who may attempt to advance to third and don't forget a runner on first who once in a while tries to go all the way to third, usually on a bunt.



## JUST WATCH WHAT YOU SAY

One area that gets umpires into trouble is their use of profanity on the field. Regardless of how it's used, profanity can cause you problems about as fast as anything you do. The biggest reason is that profanity, and the context in which it is used, is often misconstrued. You might say something that may be humorous to you, but if it's misunderstood you will have a difficult time convincing coaches, players or fans. Watch your language.

Keep in mind that whatever you say on the field will probably get back to the dugout. If it's a negative comment you can count on it. If you engage a player in a conversation on the field, it will be picked up from the dugout and someone will ask the player involved about it. That is why plate umpires should be very careful about how they handle situations involving a batter. Why? Who is a couple of feet away, well within hearing range? The other team's catcher, who is more than happy to report any interesting tidbits to his coach or teammates



## KNOW THE RULES

Rules mastery is critical to success on the field, but that can't be attained overnight. Here are a few study tips:

- **Definitions.** The starting point for any study session should be the definitions. Reading the rulebook without knowing the definitions is like starting to read a murder mystery from the middle. If you don't know the suspects — or in the case of the rules, the definitions — the terms used in the rest of the rulebook aren't going to make sense. A thorough understanding of the definitions allows you to figure out who's who and what's what.
- **Understand spirit and intent.** You can memorize a passage and recite it verbatim to anyone who asks. But that doesn't do you any good unless you understand why the rule exists. In general, the spirit and intent behind a rule is to either promote safety of participants or prevent one team or athlete from gaining an advantage over an opponent. Some rules do both. Understanding why the rule exists gives you a leg up on enforcing it.

- Correlate the rule to situations. Again, the rules are just words on paper. Translating those words into knowledge requires the additional step of thinking when and how a rule might come into play. You can think back to games you've worked or consult a casebook or approved rulings to find applicable situations and discern the proper ruling.
- Bite-size is better. Rules study isn't like cramming for a college midterm. You might get through the entire rulebook in one sitting, but it's doubtful you'll retain much of anything.
- Don't go it alone. Many activities are easier or at least less ponderous in groups. So it is with rules study. Get together with your partner during the offseason or form a study group with other local umpires. You can help other umpires with rules they don't understand and vice versa.



## LET THEM PLAY THE GAME

One of the best things an umpire can do is let the players play the game. Umpires shouldn't be looking for technical violations and other minor circumstances to show people how much they know the rules. It seems that every time a new rule is introduced, umpires want to try it out, usually without much regard as to the spirit and intent of the rule. Use common sense when applying the rules. One of the worst raps an umpire can get is that of being a "rulebook umpire." Unfortunately, it's a reputation that will stay with an umpire for a long time, if not for the rest of the umpire's career. Certainly, you should know the rules, but just as importantly, you should know how to apply them and under what circumstances.



## MONITOR AND HANDLE DARKNESS, RAIN AND LIGHTNING

This part of the game probably gets umpires into more trouble than any other area. Why? It's because umpires are in a "can't win" situation. However, there are some things umpires can do to lessen the pain. First, when dealing with darkness, know what time sunset is. You can get that information from your daily paper. That, obviously, is no problem when the sky is clear. But on cloudy days, you have a lot more credibility with a coach when you say you are calling the game because sunset occurred 10 minutes ago. Don't fib, because the first thing a coach will do after getting home is to check it.

Secondly, get your partners together with both coaches before you start a new inning and tell them play will continue as long as you think it's safe. A good guideline is to watch for any player hesitating in seeing the ball. Don't make the mistake of telling everyone you'll play one more inning. There have been times when the light conditions are brighter at the end of an inning than at the beginning.

Lastly, remember that few games have ever been decided by playing an extra inning. The reason should be fairly obvious. Neither team will allow it to happen. Each team will gladly take a tie rather than a loss. So what happens? Say on the first pitch of the extra inning, the batter hits a home run. The visitors know that if the home team can't finish the inning, the score will revert. So the visitors start to swing wildly at pitches to speed up the game. This puts you right in the middle of possible acts that may cause a forfeit. In the same scenario, the home team now comes to bat. Guess what will happen? Down by a run, they are going to make sure they can't complete the inning so the score will revert. So, the home team slows down the game as much as possible and you are stuck with another possible forfeit situation.

In another scenario, the visitors are out on about five pitches. Do you think for one moment the visiting team is going to deliver a hittable pitch to the home team? Not at all. The visitors will throw about four wide ones, the catcher will go out to talk to the pitcher, then the pitching coach will come out, then make a pitching change, etc. A change in the outcome of the game is so remote it's just not worth the aggravation for the umpire. You might also seriously consider the legal consequences of trying to be a nice guy. Who do you think a player's parents and attorneys are going to go after if someone is hit in the face with a line drive or an errant pitch?

Rain can be a little trickier. If the rain is only a drizzle, ask your partners to watch the footing of the pitcher and the infielders. In threatening conditions, you should ask the home coach if drying materials and tarps for the mound and home plate are available. If tarps are available, stop play earlier. If you wait too long, the tarps will create a greenhouse effect and cause the playing surface to hold more water.

Lightning is the worst weather condition for umpires to handle. That is probably due to the frightening fact that often, the first bolt you see is the one that can cause life-threatening injuries to people in the immediate area. Err on the side of safety and stop a game whenever you feel there's even the slightest possibility of danger to the participants or spectators.



## NEVER SAY THESE THINGS TO A COACH

1. “One more word and you’re out of here!” Don’t commit yourself to an action. It’s a no-win situation. What happens if the coach comes back with a compliment just to test you, or comes back with “word”? Are you prepared to eject the coach for that? Probably not. That’s why “one more word” is worthless at best, and adding fuel to the fire at worst. Toss any other useless threats from your coach interaction vocabulary as well.
2. “Shut up.” Whether we like it or not, coaches should be allowed to have their say. If they cross the line and say something that warrants a reaction, use your tools within the rules — such as a formal warning or ejection — to “shut up” the coach. That’s the professional approach. That should be your approach.
3. “You’re wrong!” If you don’t tell a coach he or she is wrong, that doesn’t mean you don’t think or know, in some cases, that the coach is wrong. It simply means you don’t say it, because it won’t lead to a positive result. Suggesting the coach is “right” all the time isn’t the answer either. Explaining what happened on a play or why you called what you called will let the coach know he or she is wrong (or right) without saying it. Sometimes telling the coach, “That’s not what I saw,” or, “I’ll check the play after the game” serves to mitigate the situation and allows both parties to move on.
4. “Are you serious?” Sometimes what comes out of the mouths of coaches is so far-fetched and ridiculous, you want to question their mind-set. But that is not the right approach. Coaches have a big stake in the outcome of the game, and as a result, rational thinking can be lost at times. Assume they are serious. Keep your sense of humor about you and don’t take some statements too seriously and you’ll survive and thrive on the field and field.
5. “It’s just a game.” You may argue, “It is just a game. Coaches shouldn’t act as if it is a life-or-death situation.” No one is suggesting that some coaches don’t need to learn some perspective. The key is that it’s not your job to teach it to them, and that phrase isn’t the way to teach that, anyway. You might as well be saying, “Who cares? I don’t,” because that is how it is going to be interpreted. Games are important to the coaches and participants, no matter the level, and that isn’t going to change. Just as umpiring is important to you. Respecting the game and the participants is important, whether it is reciprocated or not.



## OFFICIATE THE BLOWOUTS EVEN BETTER

Develop an “every game is a big one” attitude. That is not easy to do, especially for the competitive umpires who measure success by the number of games or the records of the teams playing. Sure, you enjoy the challenge of officiating, but, the games truly are for the participants, especially the kids playing. You are only a small — albeit important — part of the game. The quicker you realize that, the better attitude you’ll have toward all your games.

Remember this: most anyone can work the well-played games. It’s the well-handled, poorly played games that separate great officials from average ones. When the game’s score or sloppiness gets out of hand, great officials turn it up a notch and finish strong.



## PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR APPEARANCE

Have you heard that one before? You’d be surprised how coaches and players form an opinion of an umpire based on appearance. The first part of appearance is how you dress. By having your shoes shined, wearing a fitted cap and clean pants and shirt, you at least give the impression you care. One item that is a big help is having a spray bottle of water handy. It can be used to get sweat stains off your cap, dress up a dusty ballbag, etc. The second part of your appearance is how you look physically. Being considerably overweight, wearing an unkempt beard, earrings or having excessively long hair has nothing to do with your ability to umpire. But those items have a lot to do with the perception players, coaches, fans and even your partner may have toward you as an umpire. Unfortunately, most of those thoughts are going to be negative.