

Competitive Strokes and Terms

There are five competitive disciplines or strokes in swimming. They include freestyle, backstroke, breaststroke, butterfly, and the individual medley.

Each swim meet will offer a variety of events and distances, depending on the age group and swimmer classification.

In freestyle events, the swimmer may swim any stroke. The stroke most commonly used is the crawl, which is characterized by the alternate overhand motion of the arms and an alternating (up-and-down) flutter kick. On turns, some part of the swimmer must touch the wall. Most swimmers do a flip turn and touch the wall with their feet.

Backstroke consists of an alternating motion of the arms with a flutter kick while on the back. On turns, swimmers may rotate to the stomach and perform a flip turn with some part of the swimmer touching the wall. Swimmer must push off the wall on their back.

The breaststroke, which is the oldest stroke dating back hundreds of years, requires simultaneous movements of the arms on the same horizontal plane. The hands are pressed out from in front of the breast in a heart shaped pattern and recovered under or on the surface of the water. The kick is a simultaneous somewhat circular motion similar to the action of a frog. On turns and at the finish, the swimmer must touch the wall with both hands simultaneously at, above or below the water surface.

Some consider the butterfly the most beautiful of strokes. It features a simultaneous over water recovery of the arms combined with an undulating dolphin kick. In the kick, the swimmer must keep both legs together and may not flutter, scissors, or use the breaststroke kick. (The butterfly is the newest stroke and was developed in the early 1950s as a variation of the breastwork. It became an Olympic stroke in 1956 in Melbourne, Australia.)

The individual medley, commonly referred to as the I.M., features all four strokes. In the I.M., the swimmer begins with the butterfly, then changes after one-fourth of the race to backstroke, then breaststroke, and finally freestyle. Some people feel that being the best in the IM means you are the best swimmer.

In the medley relay, all four strokes are swum. The first swimmer swims backstroke, the second breaststroke, the third butterfly and the final swimmer anchors the relay with freestyle.

The freestyle relay events consist of four freestylers, each swimming one-quarter of the total distance of the event

Starts, turns and finishes: Many races are won or lost by the swimmer's performance in the start, turn or finish. At the start, the starter who visually checks that all swimmers are motionless calls the swimmer to the starting position. When all swimmers are set, the gun or starting horn is sounded to start the race. If the starter feels that one of the swimmers has moved, left early or gotten an unfair advantage, that swimmer may be disqualified after the race for a false start.

The above is from the Parents Handbook - USA Swimming