

How To Routeset & Grade Routes In Gyms Far From Outdoor Climbing?

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in [CWA Blog](#)



Why is it so difficult to decide on what grading system to use in a climbing gym?

Indoor climbing gyms continue to open every year and more people begin their climbing journey on plastic. As a result, the language we use to describe indoor climbing difficulty is continuously evolving. For gyms that are opening far from an established climbing area, does using the V-Grade system make sense?

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** Jesse Safford, head routesetter for Terra Firma Bouldering Company in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This is their first article with the CWA, and we're excited to have them!
- **Who Should Read:** This article is written for setters, and specifically setters who live in areas that are not close by outdoor climbing.
- **What Will You Learn:** The different ways to think about grading, and how indoor climbing gyms, specifically for those who are not near outdoor rock, can help educate climbers on the difficulty of routes and choosing the right system to work for their unique gym community.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** The CWA published an updated 2023 Routesetting Guide. [Download that here.](#)

Some routesetters would say that grades are meant to emulate real rock climbing, but most setters acknowledge the discrepancy in grading between indoor and outdoor grades. Some gyms are choosing to lean into circuits, grouping boulders by difficulty spectrum instead of a specific grade. For climbers looking to track their progression, grading systems can give them the tools to map their journey. So how can setters establish systems that work in their gyms?

As a routesetter living in western Michigan, I'm pretty far from rocks. The closest crag is a small top-rope-only area near Lansing, an hour away. Getting to the next closest area requires leaving the state entirely. While a portion of Michigan climbers venture out for long weekends or week-long climbing ventures—maybe south to the Red River Gorge or north to Canada—the majority are climbing at indoor gyms on plastic holds.

Without having close access to a well-established climbing area, how do we evaluate climbing movement in our gyms?

[Terra Firma \(my indoor climbing gym\)](#) has been open for six years, and in that time we've used five-color tagged circuits. Two years ago, we overlapped our circuits, allowing us to put harder climbs in each circuit.

In our pink (V0-V2) circuit, we focus on building the climber's confidence by having lower complexity and accessible movement. In the blue (V2-V4) circuit, we start surprising them with more complexity and risk. The majority of our members climb in the green (V4-V6) circuit. At that level, our intention with routes switches from teaching climbing skills to testing them.

We incorporate a variety of dynamic movements, all types of holds, and sustained intensity to challenge climbers pushing through that intermediate ability zone. In our orange (V6-V8) and black (V8-V10) circuits, the routes become exponentially harder, becoming closer to the Kilter Board grades as they test finger strength, complex sequences, and coordination moves with higher risk.

READ ALSO: [Setting With Your Members in Mind](#)

Our circuits reflect members' abilities more than the standard "grade spread" of an outdoor area. My routesetting team has let go of rigid grades and instead embraced the variety of climbs and difficulties within the circuits.

How do other teams build that intentionality into their grading systems?

Michael Shirley is the headsetter at the newly built [Apex Climbing Gym in Mishawaka, Indiana](#). Like me, Michael is far removed from outdoor climbing– it's a six-hour drive to the Red River Gorge or Devil's Lake for him. Apex has been open for six months, and in that time they've introduced many new people to climbing. His gym currently uses a five-color tagged circuit system. Their circuits include red (V0-V2), yellow (V2-V4), green (V4-V6), blue (V6-V8) and black (V8+).

Right now, the majority of their members are climbing in the first two circuits, and their route distribution reflects that.

"We use a tapered distribution. With the most red circuit climbs," said Michael. He sees his red circuit as the, "...intro to movement. Which is maybe for the person who has been climbing for two weeks to several months".

The walls at Apex are 60 percent vert and slab terrain, which they use to set routes that teach climbers how to smear and trust their feet, **skills that are important for their first outdoor trip** or day trip to another climbing gym.

Michael hopes each circuit can be climbed as a collection of boulders around the same difficulty that would provide a well-rounded experience for climbers. Apex has fewer boulders in the V6-V8+ range than an average gym. For members who are serious about training, there are training boards such as the Tension Board 2 and Kilter Board. Michael encourages his routesetters to watch climbers of all ability levels and see who is projecting what, then use those observations to help keep circuits balanced.

In the future, Apex will be looking to add a circuit below V0-V2. Michael sees the need for "beginner-beginner" boulders, but wants his gym's red circuit to reflect the skills required by outdoor climbs, and V0 can be unapproachable for true beginners. As their membership grows, the needs of his gym could continue to change, and their setting team and circuits will keep evolving.

So can a Midwest gym find a good use for the V-Grade system?

If you drive 30 miles west of my home gym, you'll reach [Scrapyard Climbing Collective in Holland, Michigan](#).

I spoke to the owner, Josh Bochniak, about their use of the V-Grade system and how it has changed in the last 4 years under his ownership. Josh said his own journey as a climber has influenced what grading system he wants to use. He progressed from discovering movement indoors to planning trips and climbing outside.

Scrapyard provides climbing classes that reflect those values of exploration outside, with everything from top rope and lead classes to an “anchor building and cleaning” class. Josh wants his members **to be able to boulder outside with confidence and without the “rude awakening” most indoor climbers experience on their first trip to the crag.**

To help foster this standard of indoor to outdoor grading consistency, he took his routesetters to Red Rocks, Nevada, to climb and collect the “body beta” to crystalize the feeling of different V-Grades. Josh’s setting team also uses the Tension Board as a baseline for boulder grades. Josh finds it frustrating to have so few benchmark climbs outside in the Midwest, and hopes his team can create some within their community. Similar to Michael and his routesetters at Apex, Josh noticed a need to create a separate circuit to accommodate newer climbers, and has added VB and VB+ below their V0 boulders. He notes that as his setters get stronger, they should continue to take their progress into account so that their members don’t feel like they are “chasing grades” constantly out of reach.

Josh says that his setting team is “shooting to correlate to outdoor grades, so they need to be climbing outside.” His value for outdoor climbing plays a large role in deciding on how the grading system is used in his gym.

At the end of each setting day, setters place tags on the routes, and those tags may determine who will try the boulder.

My personal decisions during setting, forerunning, and tagging routes are influenced by thinking about some key questions that other setters may ask themselves or their team to help guide these choices:

- Who is this route for?
- What skills are we testing the climbers on?
- Who will this route push?
- What percentage of our members do we want to top this, or be able to start this boulder?
- What do our grades mean to new climbers vs longtime members?

Creating space for these conversations opens the door for accurate language to talk about boulders, grades, and difficulties beyond “soft” or “hard”. Talking about risk, intensity, and complexity within your setting team only helps if the team has clear intentions for climber progression and members’ needs.

Whether you’re using circuits, V-Grades, or another grading system, continue to observe and

gather feedback. As your gym changes and members grow, your setting system might have to evolve with it. Taking time to ask how grading systems influence setting can create an environment that leads to member longevity, progression, and passion, regardless of how far from rocks you are.

Download the CWA's Routesetting Guide

About the Author



Jesse Safford (they/them) is the head setter at Terra Firma Bouldering Co. in Grand Rapids, MI. They started climbing while studying art at Montana State. Their interest in building community and connecting with other setters has taken them to Tennessee, Texas, Florida and Illinois to set competitions. They also coach the youth climbing clubs and teach adult technique classes at their home gym. They hope to build a welcoming community for LGBTQ+ setters and climbers.

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WHY KIDS MATTER AT INDOOR CLIMBING GYMS ☐

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