GA Climbing and Abseiling Syllabus Level 1

Notes for Leaders

These notes are intended for use as a guide to good practise in conjunction with the Guide Association Climbing and Abseiling Syllabus. They are not exhaustive; please refer to any of the texts listed as references and be familiar with as many techniques as possible.

These notes are in discussion form to help you organise and run activities; they are not intended as a definitive or prescriptive document. If you have any queries please contact the GA.

Syllabus areas

1. Knowledge and Currency

a) Keep up to date with current practices. Those who hope to lead and instruct others climbing or abseiling should have an interest in the sport themselves and generally be aware of current developments. Developments may happen quickly, and leaders operating in isolation will be helped by keeping abreast of current news by reading climbing magazines etc.
Example: An example of change in practise is the situation with Figure of Eight descenders in 1998. A technical report was published and highlighted in national climbing magazines which told of some incidents where Fig 8 descenders, often used as belay devices, had been twisted so as to lie across the gate of a karabiner and when loaded actually break the karabiner. One abseiler in the UK died as a result of this on an instructed session when there was no independent safety rope. DMM subsequently developed a karabiner (the Belaymaster) which negates this problem, and it is now current practise never to belay with Fig 8 descenders except with this or a similar karabiner being used.

b) The best way to keep up with current practise is to go climbing, and to talk to other climbers. A level of personal skill is a great asset to leaders, and a personal interest in the activity is always apparent to the participants under instruction.
A qualification is useful only if it is used and the leader is fluent in their instruction, ropework and group management.

2. Personal Climbing

a) and b) It is not a requirement of the Level 1 Syllabus that leaders climb at a certain standard. However, leaders should be aware that they are expected to be able to do (at some level) what they are asking others to do. It may also be necessary to climb and abseil in order to facilitate a rescue or other situation and candidates should expect to demonstrate this. Leaders would not be expected to climb up to a climber unroped and rescue them; normally this is dangerous and unnecessary. Climbing more than a few feet off of the ground unroped at most sessions should not be part of normal practise for leaders.
Leaders are therefore required to show that they can abseil themselves, and that they are capable of simple demonstrations of climbing technique at ground level.

3. First Aid

On assessment candidates should present their current First Aid certificate. If this is not available, out of date etc. candidates may be deferred (i.e. a full pass will be issued when the certificate is presented). There is no First Aid test or component involved in the assessment as this should be covered by a First Aid Certificate.

4. Preparation

The requirements for leaders prior to organising a session of climbing or abseiling can be daunting; however once the checks have been done on the first occasion it should not be too difficult. Leaders must be aware of several factors; these are also discussed on the training course in some detail.

Legal factors

a) GA climbing and abseiling leaders must act in a voluntary capacity only. Anyone offering instruction for payment must hold an AALA (Adventurous Activities Licensing Authority) Licence*. This is not within the scope of this scheme.

   *(Please note: these notes are intended for Guide climbing leaders and it is not appropriate to list here all of the conditions for licence requirements. You should check with each centre whether they have, or need, a licence as the situation is complex. Some centres for example offer only activities which do not need a licence; some are voluntary organisations (e.g. Scouts) and only offer activities to other voluntary organisations, and therefore don't need a licence; etc. etc. Please check!)

b) Guide centres which use GA instructors and make a charge, such as Blackland Farm, hold their own AALA licences. Guide Association leaders working at such centres will be covered by those centres' licences.
c) Insurance - please check with Guide Association HQ
d) Parental consent – procedure for this is covered below; leaders must be aware of the need for informed and written consent.

Practical considerations

a) Find out the ability/age of your group, this may affect the choice of venue/location.

b) Have knowledge of the chosen venue/location, preferably by climbing/abseiling there before taking the group. This is an invaluable aid to improving the quality of experience for the participants and the safety levels – you will be aware of the hazards of operating at the location and better able to manage the group accordingly.

c) Check if there are any access difficulties. For example, do you need to pre-book? Do the wall owners/operators stipulate minimum qualifications? Do they require that you show proof of liability insurance?

d) Check if there are specific requirements of the venue. For example, specific belay methods requested; minimum leader/participant ratios.
Example – some walls do not permit the use of Fig 8 descenders for belaying; some walls require climbers to tie in with a Fig 8 knot followed through and do not permit clipping in with a karabiner.

e) Prepare an equipment list by checking what is needed/available at the wall/tower. For example, are there ropes left up on the wall, is a ladder needed on the abseil tower?

f) Obtain parents' permission to undertake activity. This must be done in writing. Parents must also give details of any medical conditions of which you should be aware. A sample medical/consent form is given as Appendix A When seeking consent parents must be given details of the activities to be undertaken and where there is any room for misunderstanding activities must be explained. For example, many people think of 'scrambling' as involving motor bikes. Many people do not understand the meaning of technical terms such as 'abseiling' – most probably do, but do not assume that they will. It is probably reasonable to assume that climbing and abseiling will be clear, but try to avoid any more technical terms.

g) Appoint a Home Contact and ensure all details of participants are available.

h) Be aware of the nearest first aid provision and hospital Accident & Emergency Department.

i) Organise/ carry mobile phone wherever possible. Give the number to the home contact.

5. Equipment

a) Appropriate equipment. Whilst this is a large area of knowledge and will be covered in all training/ assessment courses; some general points are:
i) It is a requirement of the GA that all participants in climbing and abseiling sessions wear climbing helmets. These must be UIAA and CE approved climbing helmets.
ii) Need for chest harnesses for age 11 and under
iii) Type of karabiner – steel/alloy/shape according to intended use and amount of wear anticipated.
iv) Type of harness - these might be chosen for ease of use or range of size and adjustability. There are several good group harnesses available notably from Petzl, Camp and DMM. Note the comments about gear loops under 'misuse of equipment'.
v) Ropes – full (single rope nominal 11mm) UIAA approved kernmantel climbing ropes should be used for climbing; 'static' abseil rope for abseiling.

b) Size of equipment – this is important as children can be a wide variety of sizes and some equipment is sized, so a set of harnesses for example mustn't be assumed to be usable for every group.
    - Harnesses must be tight around the waist;
    - Helmets must fit without falling off when the head is shaken/tilted;
    - Chest harnesses should be tight
    - All equipment should be adjusted carefully and checked by the leader. This is a common area of oversight and often assumed to be unimportant. Take care and time over this at the beginning of a session and check before each climb/abseil for loosening belts, straps etc.

c) Outdated gear – some types of equipment are still occasionally seen in use. Hawser laid rope for example should not be considered for use with groups. Some old types of harness (e.g. Whillans harnesses) are extremely uncomfortable and would presumable be past their safe life by now in any event. Climbing belts (as opposed to harnesses) should not be used.

d) Equipment should be stored in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations. In general the life of equipment will be up to three years, dependant on the level of use, if used and stored correctly. However be aware that you must check and maintain gear frequently. With heavy use a rope might last as little as two weeks even without any misuse. Gear should be stored in dry conditions away from UV light and any contact with chemicals, oil etc.

e) When to dispose of equipment:
    - At the end of the period the manufacturer recommends in any event.
    - Ropes – check for fraying, sheath slippage, core showing through, feels misshapen in the core.
    - Harnesses – watch fraying especially at key points such as waist belt & attachment point. Minor frays (up to say 20% of width) may be monitored carefully but these will expand rapidly and it is best to dispose of them straight away.
    - Karabiners – these will generally last longer than nylon equipment; however they can wear if used to run ropes through -–distinct grooves can appear. Any burrs which could cut ropes mean they should be retired; and the movement of gates and so on checked. Belay devices etc. have similar wear properties and should be checked in the same way. It may be useful to use steel karabiners with this type of instruction as they wear better, and they don't need to be carried on a harness so weight is not such a consideration.
    - Slings – check for fraying regularly.
    - Helmets – check for chipping, cracks, cradle coming away from the inside, cradle adjustment wearing out/breaking

f) There are many possible types of misuse of gear and the training and assessment courses discuss this in detail. There are many points to note with group work and this list is not exhaustive but illustrates a few common examples:
    - Some climbing harnesses (and old belts) come supplied with a belay loop which seems like a good idea. However if inverted this loop will be

attached only by a tiny tape and participants have been known to continue belaying/tying in with this. It is a good idea to dispose of these loops or at least the attaching tape so that the loop would fall off if inverted.

- Similarly many climbing harnesses not designed for groups have gear loops for a rack of climbing gear and participants will often use these to tie on to the rope.
  Example – one student who had attended several climbing sessions and was 17 clipped on to the end of a rope using an accessory karabiner (breaking strain 10kg) and clipped this into a gear loop! He fell from 10 feet and just reached the ground safely, but the karabiner was almost completely straightened out.
- Many participants and leaders use the abseil loops of some harnesses to belay from and tie climbers in with. They aren't designed for this. Read the instructions to your harness carefully and see what you can do with each type. For example, Petzl Club harnesses have a loop which you can use for these purposes.
- Side/cross loading karabiners. Karabiners are designed to be loaded end to end along the back bar and should only be used that way. Loads or running ropes should never go across the gate.
- Fig 8 descenders for belaying – although these have been widely used there is great potential for the descender to fall across the gate and break it with a levering action. Fig 8 descenders should only be used to belay in conjunction with a DMM Belaymaster karabiner or similar.
- Belay devices in general must be used correctly; the locking hand must be able to bring the rope in line as a continuation of itself in order to lock properly. Twisted ropes or belaying with wrong hand will not lock properly.

g) It is useful to have a logbook even if just the simplest kind to record the date of purchase of gear. It is easy to forget how old gear is when it is used frequently. If you have a lot of gear you may want to develop a more sophisticated system to log gear in & out and record its usage. In this case gear should be numbered and each use recorded with comments etc. Most stores will already have such a system in place. The important factor is that each unit/store/leader should have an appropriate level of system – a leader who only uses their own equipment will know it better and be aware that something is wearing out; whereas multiple users will need a more accurate system of recording.

h) The uses of the equipment listed forms the basis of climbing instruction and as such it is not appropriate to describe each here. Leaders will already be aware of such points if they climb regularly. However leaders should familiarise themselves with the literature available so as to gain as wide a spectrum of knowledge as possible. (See references).

6. Belaying and Ropework

- Demonstrate an ability to set up anchors – this is a central part of climbing instruction and 100% safe anchors are crucial. Candidates will be expected to be able to assess the best choice of anchor and how to set this up, with reasonable speed and efficiency. Candidates should be able to operate without lengthy delays in order that their participants are not waiting

excessively to begin an activity (see group management). A variety of methods will be demonstrated on training courses.

- Connect self and others to rope/system – normally a leader will be connected only at the top of an abseil tower for personal safety; during a climbing session they would not need to tie in. Candidates must be able to tie in participants by using the rope directly and by using a karabiner on the harness; and appreciate the reasons for using either method. It is also important to tie into each type of harness correctly (the manufacturer's instructions indicate this).
- Demonstrate a variety of belay techniques – candidates should be able to choose between the merits of different systems and devices for belaying. It is useful to have a basic knowledge of even those types of methods not recommended for groups (e.g. body belays) in order that leaders can appreciate the merits of the systems they themselves use.
  Types of belay device include:
    - Belay or 'Sticht' plate (sprung/unsprung)
    - Italian hitch
    - Fig 8 Descender
    - ATC/Bug/Tuber or similar
    - Grigri
    - Single Rope Controller and others

  Types of belay system include:
    - Instructors only belaying
    - Italian hitch belaying in teams
    - Belaying using variety of devices in teams
    - Walk back belays
    - Incorporating ground belays

9. Abseiling

This section deals with setting up 'releasable' abseils on towers. For those unfamiliar with this it is covered extensively in the training course.
The releasable abseil enables leaders to deal with problems when the abseiler is part of the way down the abseil. The weight during an abseil is mostly on the abseil rope; should the abseiler for example entangle their hair in the Fig 8 descender then it is extremely difficult to release this unless their weight can be taken off of the rope. The releasable system uses a simple knot at the top of the abseil rope on the anchor which can be released under load – usually a locked off italian hitch. The weight of the abseiler is taken on the safety rope, the abseil rope released from tension, and either the problem cleared or even the whole abseil rope/abseiler lowered to the ground.

This system should be practised until the candidate is smooth in its execution. Should an abseiler get stuck in the Fig 8 or have any other problem they may be in some pain and it is necessary to release them from the situation quickly.

It is vital to understand that almost all of these problems can be avoided by preparation prior to the abseil.

- Clear instructions – explain clearly what the abseiler is expected to do, and that they should keep fingers/hair etc. away from the descender.

- Clear away any potential for getting loose parts caught – long hair should be tied back (or tucked into the back of a shirt); very loose clothing tucked in, long chinstraps on helmets tucked away. Abseilers can often be nervous and they will curl their upper body forward towards the descender, crowding everything around it and increasing the risk of snags. Encourage them to adopt the better posture of leaning their head/shoulders back a little.
- Fit harnesses correctly – an abseiler turning upside down (most common at the very start) could come out of a loose harness. Ensure tight fitting harness over the hips and use a chest harness if you feel that the abseiler is either very thin/young and has no hip shape, or is very large where the waist is bigger. It is a good idea to be able to tie a simple chest adaption with a sling (Parisian Baudrier) in case the situation arises and you don't have a chest harness.

In practise it is normally best to use an italian hitch to belay when abseiling. Be aware that most belay devices must be operated from behind if the rope is to be locked off; if the abseil rope is above your head as on most towers then you will not be able to get behind the device. An italian hitch is locked from the front, so it is the ideal method of belaying.

10. Safety and Group Management

The number of participants that each leader may supervise is twelve. In practise this will translate to three ropes when climbing, or when abseiling 1:1.

a) The leader must ensure their own safety at all times. You will be of no use to participants if you are injured and unable to do anything.
    - On abseil towers always tie yourself on.
    - On climbing walls do not make a habit of soloing around or up & down to climbers. This is bad practise as it degrades the perceived achievements of the participants under instruction; takes your attention away from the group; and could result in a fall for you which leaves the group unsupervised.

b) Select venue and climbs – at Level 1 leaders will be selecting climbing walls and there should, in a good wall, be appropriate climbs for all abilities.
c) Wear a rope and helmet – this will apply when demonstrating the system if necessary. A helmet must be worn by leaders if you are asking participants to wear one.
d) Awareness of the group is vital. It is important not to get too involved with any one climber and ignore the rest. Frequently a climber having problems making a move will demand attention; if you walk to the bottom or climb a few feet and encourage that person then you cannot see the other ropes or climbers. Therefore it is better at most times to stand behind the group where you can see everyone and just go forward to deal with things as they arise.
e) Leaders must comply with wall/tower rules even where these exceed GA guidelines. For example, the Foundry climbing wall in Sheffield only allow

instruction of anyone by SPA holders with a maximum of 8 participants. Check out wall rules before a visit.

f) Be aware that the group if unoccupied may well wander off into other areas. This can be as important a safety issue as any other and frequently young people can be seen happily clambering about whilst the leader is preoccupied with the 'real' climbing or abseiling session.
   - Define strict areas before the session where participants may/ may not go.
   - Use assistants/ any adults helping to supervise participants not actively involved or between activities.
   - Occupy everyone. They won't wander off if they have something interesting to do.

g) -

i) -

References

Further Modern Rope Techniques by Nigel Shepherd; Constable 1998;
ISBN 0 09 478540 6

This excellent book is an addition to 'A Manual of Modern Rope Techniques' by the same author and is aimed specifically at instructors. Although some material is not needed at this level, many sections are and these are well explained with clear illustrations.