

# the next level

Here's one of the few universal truths of yoga:

You can't hide in the restroom every time your teacher asks you to do a deep backbend or an arm balance that takes you beyond your comfort zone. So, rather than trying to figure out how to avoid a lifetime of challenging postures, why not learn to approach them in a safe and effective way?

Understanding what parts of your body need opening and what parts need strengthening

in any given pose will make the posture more accessible to you. To that end, we've created this guide to help you troubleshoot challenging poses in five different categories. As you develop the strength, flexibility,

and awareness to practice these poses with integrity, other postures in the same category may become more accessible, too.

Of course, every body is different—and it's best to learn

from a teacher if you can. But working in the ways recommended here will provide you with a path to deepening your practice—and let you save your bathroom pass for when you *really* need to go.

*Does the fear of "advanced" poses keep you hiding out in the back row—or avoiding class altogether? Take heart. With an understanding of how to open and strengthen your body, you'll soon be practicing with the best of them. **By Jason Crandell***

	What has to be opened?	What has to be strengthened?
<b>Standing Pose</b> Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose) 	<p><b>INNER THIGH</b> The pose requires that the inner thighs be flexible so that the top hip can roll open. Practice Virabhadrasana II (Warrior Pose II), Parsvakonasana (Side Angle Pose), and Trikonasana (Triangle Pose).</p> <p><b>HAMSTRINGS</b> While all forward bends help unravel tension in the hamstrings, poses that separate the legs—such as Prasarita Padottanasana (Wide-Legged Standing Forward Bend) and Parsvottanasana (Intense Side Stretch)—are particularly beneficial.</p> <p><b>CHEST</b> To reach through your arms more completely, open your chest with backbending postures such as Dhanurasana (Bow Pose) and Salabhasana (Locust Pose) with the arms clasped behind the back.</p>	<p><b>OUTER HIPS</b> Strengthening the outer hips and legs will help you lift your top leg toward the ceiling. All standing poses help; Warrior I and II and Side Angle Pose are the most efficient.</p> <p><b>THIGHS</b> Postures like Dandasana (Staff Pose), Tadasana (Mountain Pose), and Vrksasana (Tree Pose) will help teach you how to engage your thighs with straight knees. Utkatasana (Chair Pose) will build raw strength in your thighs.</p>
<b>Backbend</b> Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow Pose) 	<p><b>THIGHS</b> You'll need to open the front of your thighs (hip flexors) so that your pelvis can tilt appropriately; if you don't, your lower back will become compressed. Practice Anjaneyasana (Low Lunge) and Warrior I.</p> <p><b>SHOULDERS</b> If your shoulders and mid-to-upper back don't arc into the pose, you'll have an uncomfortable, uneven posture. Practice Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose), Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose), and Dolphin Pose.</p> <p><b>MIDBACK</b> Practice passive backbending lying over a bolster, rolled-up blanket, or block placed just underneath the bottom tips of your shoulder blades.</p>	<p><b>ARMS</b> Build the strength to press into the pose by holding Downward-Facing Dog for 5 or 10 minutes at a time.</p> <p><b>BACK</b> The long muscles that run up the sides of the spine also need to be strengthened to support the body in this backbend. Prone backbends such as Locust Pose are perfect for this job.</p> <p><b>ABDOMINALS</b> Poses that strengthen the abdominals, such as Paripurna Navasana (Full Boat Pose) and Ardha Navasana (Half Boat Pose), can help you distribute the curve of the posture more evenly, and are particularly important if you are flexible in your lower back.</p>

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	What has to be opened?	What has to be strengthened?
<b>Forward Bend</b> Ardha Baddha Padmottanasana (Bound Half-Lotus Forward Bend) 	<p><b>HIP ROTATORS, OUTER HIPS, INNER THIGHS</b> To fold your leg safely into Half Lotus and prevent knee strain, your thigh and shinbones need to rotate in unison. Practice Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (One-Legged King Pigeon Pose) for opening your hip rotators, Cow Face Pose for building flexibility in your outer hips, and Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose) for your inner legs.</p> <p><b>HAMSTRINGS</b> The hamstrings need to be lengthened in order to rock your pelvis forward in this pose. Practice Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend), Paschimottasana (Seated Forward Bend), and Janu Sirsasana (Head-of-the-Knee Pose).</p>	<p><b>ABDOMINALS</b> All forward bends are facilitated by gently drawing the lowest part of your abdomen toward your back body to help rock your pelvis forward. Practice Full and Half Boat.</p>
<b>Twist</b> Marichyasana III 	<p><b>OUTER HIPS</b> Tension in the outer hips will inhibit rotation; you can promote suppleness and mobility with Parivrtta Trikonasana (Revolved Triangle Pose), Parivrtta Parsvakonasana (Revolved Side Angle Pose), and Cow Face Pose.</p> <p><b>SPINE</b> Prepare for a demanding twist like Marichyasana III with more accessible and moderate twists such as Bharadvajasana (Bharadvaja's Twist) and Ardha Matsyendrasana (Half Lord of the Fishes Pose).</p> <p><b>SHOULDERS AND CHEST</b> In order for the arm to wrap around the front leg, the chest and shoulders need to be opened. Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose) will teach you how to lift and expand your chest; Reverse Namaste will help coax your shoulders into place.</p>	<p><b>ABDOMINALS</b> The abdominals need to be strong enough to keep the spine vertical. Practice Plank Pose and Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose) with an emphasis on abdominal engagement.</p> <p><b>SPINE</b> The long muscles of the spine need to work in tandem with the abdominals to support the torso in its upright position. Prone backbends such as Locust strengthen these spinal erectors.</p> <p><b>THIGHS</b> Practice thigh-strengthening poses such as Warrior I and II to root downward through the straight leg and help lengthen the spine in the twist.</p>
<b>Inversion</b> Salamba Sirasana (Supported Headstand) 	<p><b>THIGHS/HIP FLEXORS</b> If the thighs or hip flexors are too tight, the legs can draw too far forward, creating an imbalance. Practicing lunges and King Arthur's Pose (see page 89) can help you avoid this problem by opening the thighs and keeping the thighbones centered in their sockets.</p> <p><b>SHOULDERS</b> The shoulders must significantly flex in order to properly align the arms, neck, and head in Headstand. Practice postures that require you to move the arms up and overhead, such as Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog) and extended Balasana (Child's Pose).</p>	<p><b>SHOULDERS AND ARMS</b> Downward-Facing Dog, Plank, and Dolphin poses will strengthen your arms while teaching you the fundamental actions of the upper arms and shoulder blades.</p> <p><b>ABDOMINALS</b> The abdominals help you maintain balance in Headstand (this is particularly true for practitioners with great lumbar flexibility). Both Plank and Dolphin develop stable strength.</p> <p><b>LEGS</b> Practicing a strong Mountain Pose will help strengthen and train the legs to evenly support the body, which, when you're inverted, will help you take weight off your arms.</p>

TOP (2): CHRIS ANDRE; BOTTOM: RORY EARNISH/W/SANDBOX STUDIOS