

The ABC's (and D) of digging: avalanche shoveling distilled to the basics.

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It's not sexy, but it sure saves lives. Over the past four years, shoveling has become an increasingly important aspect of recreational and professional avalanche courses. Real incidents have occurred in which shoveling strategy made the difference between life and death. Educators have adopted two prevailing techniques: "strategic shoveling" and the "v-shaped conveyor method," with various hybrid approaches in between. We surveyed 90 North American avalanche instructors to determine how these techniques are working in the field and how they can be refined. From this survey and subsequent field testing in Colorado, we distilled these prevailing techniques down to four key concepts that can be remembered with a simple mnemonic: the "ABC (and D) of Digging." We created a concise educational video illustrating these four basics: preserving the airway (A), using burial (B) depth to define the excavation area, clearing (C) snow to the sides first; and digging (D) snow only once. By simplifying the rules of thumb for excavating avalanche victims, we hope digging will become even more consistently taught in the future, potentially saving even more lives. Shoveling might not be sexy, but saving lives sure is.