

What is cross country (nordic) skiing?

What is Nordic skiing? What is cross country skiing?

The terms Nordic skiing and cross country skiing are often used interchangeably—which is why we have both in our course title on the website. But nordic skiing is actually **any type of skiing where the heel is not attached to the ski = “free heel”**. And cross country skiing is a type of Nordic skiing. There are many different types of free heel = Nordic skiing. Each has a different type of equipment. What distinguishes them? Terrain, technique and equipment.

What type of nordic skiing is covered in this course?

This course covers classic cross country skiing and we will teach you to ski on groomed trails.

Classic cross country skiing:

- Done at ski resorts such as White Pass, Snoqualmie East or Stevens Pass; or at nordic trail systems such as groomed trails near sno-parks or in areas near Leavenworth or the Methow Valley.
- Also done on ungroomed trails (no regularly-groomed, machine-set tracks) such as forest service roads or snowmobile trails.
- A great starting point for all of the other types of skiing. It is the most popular and easiest to learn.
- The technique involves sliding one foot directly forward followed by the other foot, and using poles alternately. Arms are moved diagonally to the legs, and this is known as the “diagonal stride”. This forms a very normal rhythm, just as you would when you walk.
- You can do it vigorously for a great cardio workout or you can amble along for a less intense session.
- Within this category, you see people with long skinny skis dressed in spandex with only a small fanny pack and at the other end you see shorter skis and folks with warmer clothing and daypacks. It is all good and it depends on what is fun for you!
- Types of skis and where to use them
 - Racing or performance—narrow and fast, expensive, harder to ski on. Only used in groomed areas with tracks.
 - Touring—good for beginners and those not interested in speed. Best type for tracks. Less than 70mm wide to fit in tracks. Can be used in ungroomed areas if following other skiers’ tracks, snowmobile tracks and you have good skills.
 - Metal edge touring—can be partial or full metal edge. Come in different widths – some narrow enough to fit in tracks. Good for ungroomed trails, icy trails, or if you want more control and stability. Can be slow in tracks. Popular among downhill skiers who also cross country ski.

2025 Olympia Mountaineers Basic Cross Country Skiing course

Other types of nordic skiing (not covered in this course)

Ski mountaineering or alpine touring (or randonee in the alps); telemark too.

- Often called backcountry skiing
- Usually at high elevations, involves route finding and may or may not follow a trail
- In potential avalanche terrain and harsh weather conditions
- Done in places like the Muir snowfield above paradise at Mt Rainier
- Involves heavy plastic boots and wide skis with “skins” for climbing
- Skiers climb up, walking on skis with a free heel, then lock the heel down and remove skins for the downhill run, using a regular downhill skiing technique.
- Telemark skiing fits into this category– it is a downhill turning technique with a free heel and more difficult to learn than alpine touring. Popular in the 70s and 80s and some hardcore people still do it.
- The Everett branch and Meany lodge offer classes for experienced backcountry skiers. There is no beginner course offered by the Mountaineers.

Skate skiing

- Movement similar to ice skating.
- Skate skiing must be done on wide groomed trails, not possible to skate on ungroomed snow.
- Very vigorous and athletic, need lessons to perfect the technique
- Skate cross country skis are shorter, don't have the grip pattern on the underside
- Everett branch offers a skating course each year.