

What CWA Certification Is Right For You?

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in [CWA Blog](#)



For most climbing enthusiasts, indoor climbing gyms are our happy place, our connection to the sport we love. For those of us for whom real rock is the goal, climbing gyms provide a training ground.

They can be a social venue, or a space where we can test our limits. They provide accessibility in parts of the country where outdoor climbing is less available. Many climbers will never go outside; for those individuals, their local climbing gym defines their climbing world.

Cultivating the right environment doesn't happen by accident.

From the holds purchased to the waiver to the belay orientation, every decision impacts the experience of people who enter our gyms. Perhaps the most important factor is the interaction we have with staff, whether direct or indirect. How did our belay check go? Did we see someone fixing a hold or switching an air filter in a way that made us nervous? Were the routesetters jumping off ladders and tossing holds?

Staff training has a huge impact on the experience of visitors, and CWA Certifications are a resource for ensuring a standard of professionalism and competence. But how do you know which certification to get, and for whom?

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Climbing Wall Instructor Certifications

From orientations and belay checks to lead climbing classes and beyond, climbing instruction is happening all around us when we go to our local climbing gym, and the way that instruction is delivered matters.

Certification doesn't just help the people receiving instruction, either. Providing your staff with the tools to manage challenging situations helps them feel empowered and supported.

So who is providing instruction in your gym?

- Front desk staff: Are your front desk employees performing orientations and belay checks? The friendly faces working behind your front desk are the first people visitors interact with when they step into your gym, and their professionalism and expertise sets the tone for the entire facility.
- Floor staff: Do you have staff monitoring the gym, managing risk, and helping climbers feel at home? How do they react when they see someone belaying incorrectly? Proper training provides staff with the confidence and skills needed for a well-received intervention.
- Instructors and coaches: From youth programs and adult teams to lead climbing classes, coaches and instructors elevate our communities. How are they learning what and how to teach? Is the information taught consistent among your coaching and climbing instruction staff?
- Managers: Who is providing your staff training? As employees come and go, it's important to make sure the quality of instruction provided to your community remains consistent.

The **CWA Climbing Wall Instructor (CWI) Certification Program** is split into three levels by discipline.

CWI Level 1:

CWI Level 1 teaches candidates how to provide bouldering orientations and monitor the floor to manage risks, ideal for staff in bouldering-only facilities.

CWI Level 2:

CWI Level 2 is designed for staff working in full-service facilities, training candidates how to teach climbers to belay on top-rope, as well as how to provide orientations and manage risk in a gym that has rope and auto belay terrain.

CWI Level 3

CWI Level 3 expands to include lead climbing and belaying instruction. It's important to have enough CWI Level 3 Instructors on staff to ensure climbers don't have a long wait before their lead climbing check.

CWI Provider Certification (CWI-P)

The CWI-P teaches candidates how to certify CWI Level 1, 2, and 3 Instructors on behalf of the CWA Levels 1-3. The course focuses not just on delivering technical climbing instruction but also teaching methodologies for different learning styles. Having a CWI Provider (or two!) at your climbing gym ensures that all your staff is certified to provide quality instruction for your community,

Work at Height (WAH) Certifications

Whether you work in a bouldering-only facility or a full-service climbing gym with rope walls and lead terrain, the staff servicing the walls are performing work at height. The staff most obviously working at height are the routesetters, who constantly move up and down ladders and rope systems to make the routes we love. However, other staff in your facility may have responsibilities that require them to perform tasks at height.

Let's look at some tasks that involve Work-at-Height:

- Routesetting: This one's obvious. Unless your walls are less than ten feet tall, your routesetters are working at height.
- Cleaning/Facility Maintenance: Do you have staff who clean or perform maintenance on ladders or ropes? They should be following WAH best practices.
- Events: Are employees ever climbing up ladders or rope systems to hang decorations or lights for events? Even though the task might not be a part of the regular routine, that doesn't make the standard safety expectations don't apply.
- Hold Removal: While this task might be done by staff outside the routesetting team, it is still functionally the same task as routesetting, requiring staff to move and handle materials at height.

While a WAH Certification isn't mandated for employees working at height, it does provide them with training and skills that reduce risk to both them and community members. The courses are

centered around industry best practices and risk management and are split into three levels designed for different levels of responsibility.

WAH Level 1

WAH Level 1 is intended for non-management employees, and provides basic technical skills and risk mitigation practices, teaching candidates how to work efficiently at height while remaining compliant with the WAH Standard.

WAH Level 2

Anyone supervising a team working at height should have their WAH Level 2, which teaches candidates how to recognize improper equipment use and deviations from best practices. WAH Level 2 also provides candidates with information about how to approach performing work behind the wall.

WAH Level 3

Policy makers such as operations managers and routesetting directors should consider their WAH Level 3, which focuses on program design that meets the needs of your specific facility while remaining compliant with applicable regulatory bodies.

WAH Provider

The WAH Provider Certification is ideal for anyone who is regularly training new staff, as it qualifies them to provide CWA WAH Level 1 Certification courses, allowing you to keep your non-management training in-house.

Professional Routesetting (PRS) Certifications

While routesetters are often top of the list of staff to get WAH certifications, we ask them to do a lot more than simply operate compliantly at height: they provide the literal product that climbing gyms are selling.

As the industry has grown, routesetting has been steadily professionalizing, moving away from the cowboy antics of yesteryear and toward recognizable skilled trade, emphasizing risk management and customer service. Climbing gyms across the U.S. and Canada are looking for creative routesetters who put their audience first, providing a space for climbers to explore and improve...while also executing sound judgement collaborating seamlessly with a team.

The CWA PRS Certification Program very deliberately doesn't define "good routesetting," since every climbing gym community has different views on what constitutes a "good" bloc.

However, the CWA PRS Program does train candidates to be good routesetters, focusing on technical proficiency, secure attachment, efficient workflow, good communication and attention to community needs and feedback.

PRS Level 1

PRS Level 1 is a foundational course and is designed to provide an entry point into the routesetting trade. It's perfect for staff who are interested in applying for a routesetting apprenticeship, as it teaches the basics of safe attachment and equipment use, and introduces candidates to the forerunning assessment and editing process.

PRS Level 2

PRS Level 2 is designed for routesetters with some experience who are looking to broaden their expertise and demonstrate their competence. The course emphasizes higher level technical skills such as hauling and attaching large volumes, ladder stabilization techniques, and more nuanced forerunning assessment.

Level 2 is split into 2 parts, Boulders and Ropes, since not every climbing gym has rope walls. By hiring or certifying routesetters with their PRS Level 2, climbing gym hiring managers can expect that their team has been trained not only to securely attach holds to the wall using sound risk management and industry best practices, but also to think critically and empathetically about the product they are offering to their community.

PRS Provider

The PRS Provider Certification is ideal for directors of routesetting, as it qualifies them to provide PRS Level 1 and 2 Certifications in-house, equipping them with a pre-built training program. Since the CWA PRS Program focuses on technical best practices and good communication rather than defining "good" routesetting styles, it provides a neutral training that can be integrated into any brand ethos.

To sum up...

A healthy gym ecosystem is comprised of many things; fun routes, a caring community, exciting events....and a well-trained staff.

Stay Connected and Get Certified

Connecting staff with the certifications that best support them can help cultivate a positive experience for everyone. Check out the [CWA Certification Dashboard](#) for more information.



LATERAL VS UPWARD MOBILITY IN THE CLIMBING GYM

October 20, 2025

STANDARDIZING ENTRY TO YOUR CLIMBING GYM COULD PREVENT HASSLE (OR WORSE)



October 3, 2025