

# Dividing Your Skills By Distance

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When you started learning taekwondo, two of the first skills you learned were probably a middle punch and a front kick. Those are often the first two tools a new student adds to his or her taekwondo toolbox. Each time you learned a new skill, you probably dropped it right in your mental toolbox of skills. The path from being a young white belt to earning a black belt added 65-75 new punches, kicks, and strikes to your toolbox, making it very crowded, indeed.

The problem with keeping all your skills in the same toolbox is similar to a mechanic keeping all his tools in the same toolbox, just lumped together without organization. When the mechanic needs one specific tool, he has to dig through dozens or hundreds of other tools to find the one tool he's looking for. That is a time-consuming process. To make life simpler, and to make locating the needed tool an easier process, good mechanics have their tools organized into separate toolboxes, or at least separate compartments in one large toolbox. If he needs a 10mm socket, he opens the metric socket drawer and there is the needed socket, right where he expected it to be. His electrical tools will be in a different toolbox. If he has plumbing tools, they will also be in a separate toolbox.

We should organize our taekwondo skills in much the same way. While there are a lot of different ways to organize these skills, I'm going to suggest we divide our skills into three or four toolboxes. These would be labeled according to target distance. It doesn't really matter what we call our three toolboxes. Most adults can name them the One Foot, two Foot, and Three Foot toolboxes, and that will be pretty accurate descriptions for them. Youth and shorter folks may want to name them Zone One, Zone Two, and Zone Three, to indicate distance groups. For the sake of this paper, I'll refer to them as One Foot, Two Foot, and Three Foot. Just keep in mind these are descriptive names, not exact measurements.

So, let's look at a very small group of three skills. Let's use backfist, front kick, and spinning side kick.

If you are in a walking stance with your front foot about one foot away from your target, you should be able to execute a backfist easily. A target distance of one foot is the ideal distance for using a backfist. While standing at that distance, attempt a front kick or a spinning sidekick. Of course you're way too close for those two kicks. As a matter of fact, almost any kick other than a spinning hook is useless at that close of a distance.

Based on this demonstration, let's call the backfist a one foot tool for you, and we'll drop it in your One Foot tool box. As you look at all the skills you've learned since white belt, you'll find that most of the skills you have that work at the one foot distance are hand and elbow actions. Go through your list of skills, pick out the ones that work at one foot, and put them all in your One Foot tool box. Any time you are one foot (give or take a bit) from the target, you can reach into your One Foot tool box and know that the skill you pull out will work at that distance. In a conflict situation or in sparring, this eliminates the need to mentally sort through all your skills looking for the skills that work when you are up close

and personal. That saves you a few fractions of a second in the decision making process, allowing you to respond quicker.

Now, let's look at the front kick. Again, in a walking stance, stand two feet from your opponent. Try your front kick, and see how well it works. You may need to adjust the actual distance based on your height, leg length, and skill level. But, the distance where your front kick is effective will probably be about twice as far from the opponent as the backfist distance. Now that you have found your effective distance for your front kick, drop that skill into a new tool box and we'll call that your Two Foot tool box. Again, what you call it may differ based on your effective working distance, but we're using the Two Foot name for our second tool box in this example.

Now you have a much shorter list of skills to sort through. Sort through your remaining skills, and make a list of the ones that work effectively at the same distance as your front kick. If you have to back up, move forward, or lean to make the skill work, it's not a good Two Foot skill. Take all the skills that work well at the same distance as your front kick, and drop them into your Two Foot tool box.

Follow the same process as before, this time using the spinning side kick from about a three foot distance from your target. The list of remaining skills will almost all fit in the Three Foot tool box. The exceptions will be skills such as flying sidekick, double jump front kick, and similar kicks. Those few remaining skills can be dropped into a fourth tool box you can call Three Plus, or Other, or Long Distance, etc. In this discussion, we'll refer to that last, rather small tool box as Three Plus.

At this point, you've got four very specific groups of skills listed. The One Foot tool box contains your up-close skills, the Two Foot tool box contains your average distance skills, and the Three Foot toolbox contains your "out of arm's reach" skills. Your last, small tool box, the Three Plus box, contains the "closing distance" skills.

In order to make these different tool boxes useful, you'll need to modify your training just a bit. When practicing skills, practice with skills from only one tool box at a time. Get used to what is available at one foot's distance. Practice those skills together as a set, and eventually you will reflexively go to those skills (and only those skills) when you sense your distance is right for that tool box.

This sense of distance, coupled with a fixed set of skills, can greatly reduce your reaction time when responding to a threat or a sparring partner.

Practicing with a partner, in pads, can greatly help you make your tool boxes instantaneous selections. Keeping your Two Foot tool box in mind, stand at your two foot distance and practice all your skills in the Two Foot tool box. Have your partner cooperate by raising his or her arms, and making themselves an easy target. You can adjust the contents of your tool box as needed, moving skills in and out until you know which skills truly work at which distances.

Once you are comfortable with your three primary tool boxes, you can start to adjust your distance to the target based on what you see as an opening. For example, your opponent has left his right side open, and you want to use a roundhouse (for you, a Two Foot skill) to attack his right side. You now

instinctively know you are too close (or too far) for the roundhouse to work, so you adjust the distance by stepping forward (or backward) so your attack will be effective. Making the decision making process as brief as possible on your end goes a long way toward eliminating your opponent's response prep time.

If you are fighting an opponent about the same height as you, knowing what is in each of your tool boxes goes a long way toward helping you know what attacks your opponent has available to use *against* you. If you're at the three foot distance, chances are she has exactly the same list of skills available to her that you have available to you, so "seeing" what they are about to do is a much quicker and efficient process than trying to defend against all the skills your opponent has learned.

One last thing I am compelled to mention; all of these ideas work quite well in an academic discussion, but they are totally useless if the martial artist does not organize their tool boxes and then practice those tool boxes one at a time. Turning learned skills into instinctive responses is the result of hundreds or thousands of hours of practice. If you are going to put in the practice time, make it count as much as possible. When the time comes to defend yourself, the less time you spend thinking about how to respond the better the outcome will be.

**Supporting Documents:**

Excel spreadsheet of 65 skills: <http://npstkcd.org/documents/SkillsPage.xlsx>

Sample adult skills list: <http://npstkcd.org/documents/sampleskills.pdf>

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