

5 Things to Look for in a Traditional Martial Arts School

If you are new to the martial arts, it can seem overwhelming. The term “martial art” can refer to a wide variety of formats from traditional to sport. This information is focused on Traditional schools, although much of it will apply to any type of martial art school. Even among traditional schools, there are diverse styles from around the world.

We are often asked, “**What should I look for in a Traditional Martial Art School?**”

Today, we would like to share five questions you can ask when **seeking the school that is right for you**. Keep reading to know why these questions are important and what follow-up questions to ask.

1. **Who are the instructors?**
2. **How long has the school been in the community?**
3. **Is it, in fact, Traditional?**
4. **Is the style documented?**
5. **Can you watch a class?**

1) Who are the Instructors?

A traditional martial art style is fundamentally taught through an instructor-student mentorship. Ultimately, you need another, better skilled individual who has learned from a person whose knowledge has descended from the core of instructors who learned from the Founder (Grandmaster or Headmaster).



This instructor needs to:

- Take your body structure into account
- Be aware of your mental and emotional state, such as your level of self-confidence and your ability to take correction.
- Care about you as a person, especially your well-being and health
- Be able to meet your verbal understanding without

altering the intent of the technique. They use terms and demonstration as the primary teaching tool rather than resorting to physical contact with you or your children



Questions to Ask:

- Who is the school's founder?
- Under whom did he or she train?
- How long have they trained?
- What rank did they achieve?
- Did they receive a certificate verifying this rank and position?
AND, Is it available for students and parents to see?

Why it Matters:

While there are many reputable schools; unfortunately, there is no shortage of individuals who lack credibility. They may have “promoted themselves,” or cannot verify their claims. If they can't adequately answer these questions, take note.

Questions to Ask:

- What is the process for someone to become an instructor?
- What is the minimum age to become an instructor?
- What rank are the instructors?
- Did the instructors train in the style they are teaching?

Why it Matters:

Just because someone is personally skilled, that does not make them qualified to teach you or your children. You want to know they are skilled in the four criteria we discussed at the beginning of this article. Are they teaching something entirely different from what they were originally certified? Are the instructors adults or kids? If they let anyone teach with minimal experience and no process for developing consistent, effective teaching skills, take note.



2) How Long Has the School Been in the Community?

Traditional martial art schools are focused on the consistency and longevity of their style. It may surprise you that most traditional schools are not concerned with having a large number of students, rather ensuring that their students are a “good fit” for their school. You should ask questions, but don't be surprised when they ask you a few in return. The point is, traditional schools are “in it for the long haul;” they have a history and lineage, and they seek to be around for another 50 – 100 years (at least)!

You want to know that they will be there for you. Unfortunately, some schools “pop-up” and disappear overnight. Look for a school that has a history in your community, and one that will be around for years to come.

Questions to Ask:

- How many years has the school been active in the community and at this location?
- Who will take over the school for the next generation?
- What would happen if the Headmaster passed away (unexpectedly)?

Why it Matters:

Unfortunately, some schools are run more as a business than a style. This means that the owner may decide to simply retire, move, or sell the school to another with little or no notice. You could spend years of training, only to find that you have no school the next day. A traditional school has a leader, the Grandmaster. They may have multiple locations overseen or “owned” by their top students.

For longevity, have they:

- 1) designated a successor in the event of their passing, and
- 2) established a plan for the location(s) to be passed on to another top student to ensure seamless continuity. If they cannot answer these questions, take note. They may be here today, gone tomorrow.

3) Is it Traditional?

A traditional school has made a contribution to the history of the martial arts, has a strong educational system and methods, has a hierarchical structure, has an underpinning philosophy, and often seeks to develop the mind as much as the body, with the benefits applied to all areas of life. It can develop the idea of respect, a sense of consequence, a sense of personal responsibility, and a sense of connection to the self through an instructor-student mentorship.

In physical terms, it will often involve stances, punches, kicks, basic forms, kata (forms), self-defense, sparring, and a variety of other areas. While these can differ from school-to-school, traditional schools differ from sport schools, which often center on one-on-one competition and involve defeating a competitor by points, submission, or knockout. MMA is a professional sport and its athletes are paid to compete. If these areas interest you, you may want to seek them out from a reputable school with qualified coaches who are fully insured. NOTE: traditional schools may allow for some competition for their students, but it is far from their main focus.

In a traditional school it is common to see the following:

- Ranks are earned and each rank strives for constant improvement (training is not for entertainment). Except for level of intensity, children are taught essentially the same as adults.
- Instructors continue to train and progress in the Art under an instructor.
- Everyone starts as a White Belt. Some schools will recognize a level of rank from another school, but it is not common for the traditionalist. In fact, most traditionalists WANT to be a white belt and to progress from “the bottom,” therefore developing a strong foundation.
- Standards must be met. Rank grading varies widely among schools, but traditional schools establish rigorous standards and enforce them consistently.
- There are many other features, but the above are quite common

Questions to Ask:

- How often do you compete?
- Do you allow head contact in sparring?
- Do instructors spar students?
- Is competition part of the testing process for rank?
- How long does it take for the average individual to earn a black belt?
- Do you incorporate a lot of gymnastics?

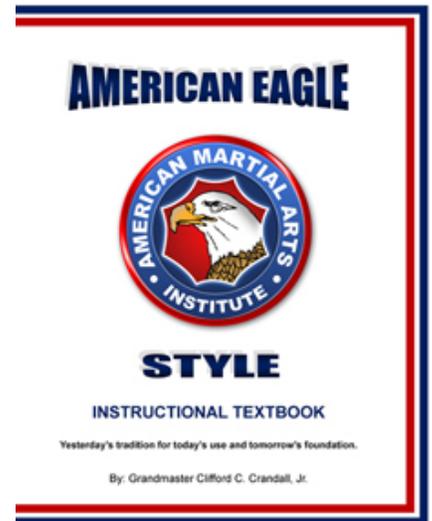
Why it Matters:

If you are looking for traditional school, then being overly focused on competition, offering quick acceleration through ranks, or being acrobatic-focused are probably red flags. If you are looking for a sport school or competition, they might be a good fit for you.



4) Is Your Style Documented?

A key test for a traditional school is the test of time. Will it endure, unaltered for future generations to enjoy the same benefits as those who came before? A large part of this is consistency. When a school documents their style through a textbook, videos, and other formats, they are taking a stand for consistency. They are saying, “We have no secrets,” “we are not arbitrary,” and “standards matter.” Not all traditional schools have taken the time to document their styles. This does not mean they are not traditional, but when a school can point to documentation, it speaks volumes for their credibility, longevity, and commitment to the Art.



Question to Ask:

- Does your style have a textbook or informational videos?
- Have any of your instructors or the founders published articles, books, or DVDs?

Why It Matters:

While not essential, a school that is willing to articulate in clear terms what they believe will be able to answer your questions regarding their style.

5) Can I Watch A Class?

Perhaps the best thing you can do is watch a class. Most schools will allow this. Not all schools will let you try a class; in fact, many traditional schools do not. Why? Remember earlier when we said it is important for you to be a “good fit” for a school? Many traditional schools can tell if you are good potential student from your eagerness from watching a class. To do a class is fun and exciting, but when you are willing to make a decision based on trust, you probably also possess the personal desire and patience necessary to be a traditional martial artist.

Watching a class will allow you to see how the instructors interact with the students, how beginners are treated, what advanced students do, and will bring to mind other questions that an instructor should be able to answer for you.

Questions to Ask:

- How are beginners taught?
- Who would my instructor be?
- Are you insured?

Why it Matters:

You are ready to take a big step (one many people only talk about doing)! You want your school to be credible, have qualified instructors, and be a good fit.



The life-long benefits of traditional martial arts training are undeniable, and an entire body of research in recent years has begun to verify what many have known for years. Unlike combat sports, where participants often “age out” or risk serious injury, traditional martial arts can be practiced from childhood through very advanced age. Traditional schools are also focused on developing the mind and safety awareness skills. **We hope you find the school that is right for you.**