

# Alaska Mountaineering Instructor Course

## Course Description

### Features

- **Duration:** 24 days, including a 3-day in-town training focused on inclusion, teaching, and debriefing.
- **Logistics:** Options for fly-in and walk-out or walk-in and fly-out.
- **Route Length:** 60-100 miles.
- **Group Size:** Average of 12 students and 3 instructors.
- **Age Range:** Average age of 31, with a minimum age of 21.
- **Pack Weight:** Average 55-70 pounds.
- **Course Areas:** Wrangell St. Elias, Chugach Range, or Alaska Range.
- **Curriculum Emphasis:** Managing groups in alpine and wilderness settings while teaching NOLS's core curriculum, including leadership, risk management, environmental studies, wilderness education, outdoor living skills, and mountaineering.
- **Travel Terrain:** Includes glacier travel and off-trail routes with exposure to 3rd and 4th-class terrain. Activities may involve roped travel on snow, navigating crevassed icefalls, managing firn zones, and potential ice climbing, rappelling, and peak climbing. Prior experience in avalanche terrain is highly recommended.
- **Off-Glacier Travel:** Includes grizzly bear habitat, snowfields, rocky terrain, gravel river bars, and tundra. Crossing large glacial rivers is likely.
- **Certificate of Completion:** Leave No Trace Level 3 Instructor Course (Master Educator).

### Purpose and Expectations

The Alaska Mountaineering Instructor Course (IC) is an invitation to elevate your outdoor career and join a community of world-class educators. Our goal is to equip you with the skills and insights needed to create transformative experiences for NOLS students. This course mainly assesses instructors to work on the backpacking program, but for those with a strong foundation in mountaineering, this course can open doors for you to teach specialized NOLS Mountaineering courses.

## NOLS

---

This course is designed for outdoor educators, instructors, or guides who are passionate about the wilderness and eager to deepen their impact as outdoor leaders. Throughout the IC, you'll refine your abilities in leadership, wilderness living, risk management, teaching, and environmental stewardship—essential skills that will prepare you for a professional role at NOLS.

As a NOLS instructor, you will take on diverse leadership roles, teaching and inspiring others in some of the world's most challenging and beautiful environments. You'll be expected to:

- **Facilitate Growth:** Empower your students to push their boundaries and discover their potential.
- **Live and Lead in Wilderness:** Thrive outdoors for extended periods (at least 15 to 45 days), regardless of weather conditions.
- **Be a Dynamic Team Member:** Adapt, cooperate, and contribute to the success of your expedition group.
- **Embrace Learning:** Cultivate self-awareness, maintain a growth mindset, and focus on the development of others.
- **Manage Risk with Confidence:** Evaluate hazards and implement NOLS risk management strategies effectively.

We value instructors who are compassionate and committed to fostering an inclusive, equitable group culture. Your role is to build meaningful relationships, support growth, and create an environment where every participant feels valued.

The IC is physically, mentally, and emotionally demanding, offering a mix of long days, challenging terrain, and intensive skill development. You'll be tested not just in your physical endurance but also in your emotional resilience as you navigate the complexities of group dynamics and the challenges of wilderness leadership. You'll be part of a team that thrives on feedback, learning, and mutual support. Expect to give and receive feedback regularly, as this is a cornerstone of NOLS culture.

This course is a unique opportunity to learn, share ideas, and experiment with different teaching and leadership styles. Balancing the roles of learner, leader, and instructor can be challenging, but it's also incredibly rewarding. Continuous communication and collaboration will ensure that the IC is a successful and enriching experience for everyone involved.

## Course Overview

The Alaska Instructor Course (IC) immerses you in one of Earth's most awe-inspiring and demanding environments—the mountains of the Wrangell-St. Elias, Chugach, or Alaska Range. These regions, known for their towering peaks, immense glaciers, and ever-changing weather, provide the perfect classroom to master advanced mountain travel techniques and refine your outdoor living skills.

### Campus Phase:

Your course begins at the NOLS Alaska campus in Palmer, where you'll spend the first four days engaged in intensive in-town training. During this time, you'll be introduced to the ethos of community living at NOLS Alaska. This phase includes:

- **Community Integration:** Understand the expectations and responsibilities of living in a close-knit outdoor community. Participate in activities that reinforce the values of teamwork and mutual respect and contribute to maintaining our campus facilities.
- **Classroom Instruction:** Dive deep into the educational framework of NOLS, focusing on inclusive teaching practices, effective debriefing techniques, and the core principles of wilderness education. These sessions are designed to equip you with the pedagogical tools needed to lead transformative experiences in the field.

### Expedition Phase:

After the campus phase, you'll transition to the heart of the course—preparing for and executing a wilderness expedition. This includes:

- **Gear and Ration Preparation:** Engage in the detailed logistical planning required for a successful mountaineering expedition. You'll be responsible for issuing gear, packing rations, and organizing group equipment, mirroring the processes you'll manage as a NOLS instructor.
- **Mountain Expedition:** Once preparations are complete, you'll embark on a challenging expedition into Alaska's wild mountain terrain. This phase is where theory meets practice. You'll spend the majority of the course in the field, honing your skills in:
  - **Glacier Travel:** Use your technical skills to navigate and lead teams across crevassed glaciers, ensuring safety through effective rope work, crevasse rescue techniques, and route finding.

- **Alpine Climbing:** Refine your alpine climbing skills, learning to manage the complexities of rock, ice, and mixed terrain under variable conditions.
- **Wilderness Living:** Perfect your ability to thrive in harsh environments by practicing advanced outdoor living techniques, including shelter construction, cold-weather cooking, and efficient camp management.
- **Leadership in Action:** Throughout the expedition, you'll be asked to take on leadership roles, making real-time decisions that affect the safety and success of the group. This hands-on experience is critical for developing the confidence and competence required of a NOLS instructor.

This course is designed to push your limits—physically, technically, and emotionally—preparing you to lead with confidence in some of the world's most challenging wilderness settings. Whether traversing a glacier, scaling a peak, or leading a team through unpredictable weather, you'll leave this course with the experience needed to inspire and educate future NOLS students.

### Three-day In-town Training

Your IC will begin with three intensive days of classroom-based training, laying the groundwork for your role as a NOLS instructor. During this time, we will focus on building a strong, inclusive community that fosters both personal and professional growth. Our curriculum is designed to equip you with advanced educational practices that empower you to engage students in meaningful, goal-oriented learning experiences.

Key components of the training include:

- **Experiential Learning Techniques:** You'll delve into the principles of experiential education, learning how to create dynamic, hands-on experiences that resonate with students and enhance their understanding of key concepts.
- **Cultural Competency:** We will emphasize the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity and provide you with the tools to foster an inclusive environment. This is crucial for creating a course culture where all students and co-instructors feel valued, respected, and supported.
- **Effective Debriefing Skills:** You'll develop the skills needed to facilitate impactful debriefs, turning experiences into learning moments. Mastering these techniques will help students and peers reflect on their experiences, draw valuable insights, and apply those lessons in future challenges.

- **Advanced Teaching Practices:** The course will also cover innovative teaching methods tailored to wilderness education. You'll learn how to engage diverse learners, adapt your teaching style to different environments, and ensure that your instruction is accessible and effective for all participants.

These in-town days are designed to set the stage for your success in the field, ensuring that you're not just ready to teach—but to inspire and lead with confidence in any situation.

### **Mountain Section Curriculum:**

This section of the course is designed to deepen your expertise in key areas critical to NOLS instruction: leadership, risk management, environmental studies, mountaineering, and wilderness skills. You'll engage with this curriculum through hands-on, real-world scenarios that prepare you to lead and educate in challenging mountain environments.

### **Core Curriculum Focus:**

- **Leadership and Facilitation:** You'll refine your ability to manage groups in dynamic and unpredictable mountain settings, stepping into the roles of facilitator, coach, and educator. The emphasis will be on developing your capacity to guide others through both the physical and emotional challenges of wilderness expeditions.
- **Risk Management and First Aid:** Practical application of risk management principles will be a constant throughout the expedition. You'll practice assessing hazards, making informed decisions, and executing first aid through realistic scenarios. (Note: Completion of a WFR-level multiple-choice test via an online module is required prior to the course.)
- **Wilderness Education:** Building on the themes introduced during the in-town phase, you'll focus on delivering effective wilderness education. This includes mastering facilitation techniques, conducting debriefs, and fostering inclusive learning environments that resonate with diverse groups.
- **Technical Mountaineering Skills:** You are expected to arrive with a solid foundation in mountaineering and outdoor living skills. This course will push those abilities further, integrating them into the context of leading and teaching in the field. You'll practice advanced techniques in glacier travel, alpine climbing, and wilderness navigation, all while managing the safety and success of the group.

This section will mirror a typical NOLS wilderness expedition but with heightened expectations for your role as a future instructor. You'll be challenged to integrate your technical skills with leadership and educational strategies, providing you with a comprehensive model of what an exceptional participant experience should look like. By the end of this expedition, you'll be equipped not just to lead but to inspire others to achieve their full potential in the wilderness.

### **Facilitation and Teaching Expectations**

Your Instructor Course (IC) will be structured like any other NOLS expedition, serving as a model for the first expedition you'll instruct. While traveling through the mountains as a team, you'll work toward the same learning goals and objectives as any other NOLS course, with additional education-specific objectives to prepare you for your role as a field instructor.

At NOLS, "teaching" encompasses a range of methods that, when used intentionally, help students learn. Our curriculum includes both the content we teach and the activities, experiences, and reflective practices that create a powerful learning environment. Often, the most impactful lessons come from day-to-day experiences as part of a wilderness team.

To maximize experiential learning, we take a student-centered approach. This means crafting educational experiences with clear goals (the WHAT) while empowering students to take an active role in their own learning (the HOW). During your IC, you'll be challenged to step into the educator role, practicing a variety of teaching methods, including direct instruction, briefings, debriefings, reflection, community building, scenarios, and more.

You'll have structured opportunities to teach your peers throughout the expedition, both through traditional instruction and informal facilitation. We'll focus on the topics, skills, and methods most relevant to your future role as an instructor, ensuring you're prepared to conduct meaningful feedback sessions, lead engaging activities, debrief challenging situations, and coach students in mountaineering, wilderness, and leadership skills. You'll also receive constructive feedback from peers and instructors to help you grow as an educator.

Upon acceptance to the IC, you'll receive additional details and expectations for your teaching role.

## **Weather and Other Challenges**

### **Weather**

Mountain weather is highly unpredictable, with cold, snowy, and rainy conditions possible year-round, especially in early May. Below-freezing temperatures are common. On the glacier, expect intense sun exposure due to near 24-hour daylight during the Boreal summer. Much of the course involves camping on snow and traveling with snowshoes.

### **Terrain**

You'll navigate challenging terrain, including bushwhacking through dense vegetation, scrambling over boulders, crossing steep snowfields, and traversing heavily crevassed glaciers. You may encounter icy rivers, necessitating long scouts for safe crossings. Camp tasks include melting snow for water and digging snow kitchens. The course also involves traversing loose rock slopes and carrying heavy packs over steep passes. Prior experience in avalanche terrain assessment and rescue is highly recommended.

### **Wildlife**

The course area is home to grizzly bears, Dall sheep, mountain goats, caribou, and moose. NOLS has developed specific bear avoidance practices, including carrying bear spray, maintaining strict cleanliness at cooking sites, and proper food storage. You'll need to follow these practices daily, and due to bear safety, the minimum group size is usually four people, limiting opportunities for solitude.

### **Remoteness**

You'll be far from civilization, often days away from medical care or communication. Managing risks from falling rocks, storms, animals, and steep terrain will be a constant focus. IC students are not permitted to carry cell phones or any other communication devices during the expedition (including InReach).

### **Group Dynamics**

You will live and work closely with a small, diverse group in challenging conditions. Success depends on cooperation, patience, and humility. Supporting each other in trying circumstances can be one of the most rewarding aspects of any NOLS course

## Evaluations and Future Employment

During the course, you will be evaluated on leadership, expedition behavior, risk management, mountaineering and travel skills, wilderness education, and environmental studies.

Upon completing the course, you will receive a comprehensive written evaluation that reflects your performance and development. Successful participants become eligible for contract-based positions as backpacking and/or mountaineering instructors with NOLS. Typically, new instructors start at the foundational level for backpacking. However, those with substantial prior mountaineering instruction experience may be directly assessed for the mountaineering program. For those less experienced in teaching mountaineering, additional training and advancement opportunities are available through NOLS's Faculty Development program. Full instructor certification is awarded after a successful evaluation during your initial course as an instructor.

To enhance your chances of securing a position, it is essential to be fully available for a minimum of eight consecutive weeks during the summer (June 10 - August 20). While NOLS has a strong record of offering work to nearly all IC graduates who meet this availability, we cannot guarantee employment without full availability.

NOLS instructors are contract-based employees, requiring an application to work courses four months before each season. Opportunities are based on courses enrollment, your skills and level of assessment. Initial contracts typically involve four-week backpacking courses, providing a solid foundation for a rewarding future career with NOLS. We are committed to supporting your professional growth and helping you succeed in leading and inspiring others in the wilderness.

## Learning Goals at NOLS

NOLS courses are designed to impart essential wilderness and leadership skills through both expeditions and classroom instruction. Our approach fosters a supportive learning environment where high expectations encourage students to tackle challenges and grow.

Through our programs, students gain a transformational experience, leaving inspired and empowered to take meaningful action.



Our courses aim to prepare graduates to:

- **Assume Leadership Roles:** Lead confidently and competently in diverse outdoor and team settings.
- **Live and Travel Outdoors:** Navigate and thrive in various wilderness environments.
- **Respect and Collaborate:** Work effectively with others, fostering respect and collaboration in expeditions, teams, and communities.
- **Care for Themselves and Others:** Demonstrate self-care and support for peers in challenging situations.
- **Understand Personal Growth:** Recognize personal habits, strengths, and areas for development.
- **Make Informed Decisions:** Apply thoughtful decision-making skills in complex circumstances.
- **Communicate Effectively:** Engage in clear communication and manage conflicts constructively.
- **Embrace Simplicity:** Appreciate and thrive in a simplified lifestyle.

Our goal is to equip students with the skills and mindset needed to excel in their personal and professional lives, ensuring they leave with a profound sense of empowerment and purpose.