

# **21st Century Motif: Relevance and (R)Evolution**

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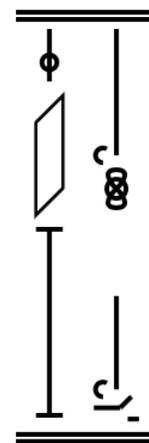
## **Abstract**

Motif Notation is the sleek, younger cousin of Labanotation (or Kinetography Laban). Its ease of use and variable granularity make it conducive to a wide variety of applications. The ability to selectively sketch the essential characteristics of a particular phrase of movement is what distinguishes it from the indiscriminate recording done by a video camera. However, for all its utility, Motif Notation is currently hampered in its adoption and evolution by a number of challenges. Its value is often not recognized, even by practitioners of Laban Movement Analysis. There is no formalized process for evolving the Motif symbol base. The tools for creating graphical Motifs are few in number, largely unsupported or stalled in development, and often difficult to use. And finally, there is no standardized, interoperable digital format for storing Motifs or transferring them between applications, as is routinely done with documents in other domains. Addressing these challenges requires caretaking Motif as a living language, embracing modern, Internet-based collaboration tools to allow for global participation in its evolution.

A Motif symbol is a crystallization. It is the distilling of an infinity of neural transmissions, muscular microcontractions, and spatial trajectories into a single image, a single idea. Take the organic mess which is movement, and out of it produce one honed, organizing atom. Then string a series of these atoms together—layer them next to each other in concurrent rivers, leapfrogging and racing each other to the top, where the final two staff bars bring the flow of life-as-movement to an abrupt but expected end. This game of abstraction and representation becomes the thing that records not only the movement but also the observer in their choice of what they did or didn't write down.

Motif Notation—the writing down of movement. As the sleek, younger cousin of Labanotation (or Kinetography Laban), its ease of use and variable granularity make it conducive to a wide variety of applications. The ability to selectively sketch the essential characteristics of a particular phrase of movement is what distinguishes it from the indiscriminate recording done by a video camera. However, for all its utility, Motif Notation is currently hampered in its adoption and evolution by a number of challenges. Even those who are familiar with Motif Notation, including certified Laban Movement Analysts, often do not prioritize it in their personal or professional practices. There is no formalized process for either registering or evolving the Motif symbol base, which makes adoption of new symbols haphazard and arrhythmic. The tools for creating graphical Motifs are few in number, largely unsupported or stalled in development, and often difficult to use. And finally, there is no standard, interoperable digital format for storing Motifs or transferring them between applications, as is routinely done with documents in other domains. As a result, Motifs are difficult to preserve and share.

From our vantage point of 18 years into the 21st century, on the cusp of the digitization of pretty much everything, just before we either flee our bodies for the limitless landscapes of virtual reality, or else embrace our bodies as finite and mortal but vastly potent and creative, let's take a look at why Motif Notation is useful, exciting, and even worth having tattooed on your skin. Then, we'll explore in more detail the challenges facing Motif Notation today, as well as some potential solutions.



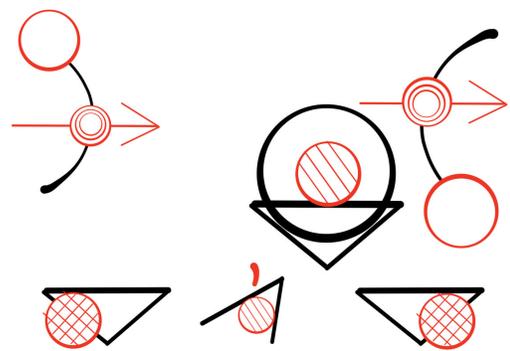
Simple Motif

## Why I ❤️ Motif

Motif Notation is one of many notation systems for writing down movement. Rudolf Laban was not alone in wanting to capture the seemingly infinite possibilities of human movement and tease from within them a conceptual skeleton by which movement could be categorized and understood. He and others knew that such a framework—and any notation system that might result from it, however detailed—could never capture the totality of the movement, the outer and inner experience of the mover. And yet it could be a useful starting point. Today, we can learn to see movement through the eyes of Laban Movement Analysis (LMA), Conté, Benesh, Eshkol-Wachmann, Axis Syllabus, and various sports perspectives. Each of these notation systems encodes the values of an underlying point of view. Benesh upholds the non-decomposability of movement in its reliance on pictorial sketches of movement trajectories. Eshkol-Wachmann emphasizes the spherical nature of space.

Biomechanical awareness is a prerequisite for notating using Axis Syllabus. So where does Motif Notation excel?

One could argue that Motif is an eclectic mess, coupling different notational approaches from different eras and different people and not always reconciling their disparate points of view. Even now, slightly different versions of Motif are taught by different Laban programs around the world. However, this system of 500+ basic symbols is fairly unequalled in its breadth and richness. That it leaps beyond purely physical description of orientation and position into more subjective areas like energy dynamic and use of attention means that there are words for describing movements more precisely and with greater nuance. In a given movement, I might choose the lens of Shape to describe a Spoking movement; or call out the use of a Central Approach to Kinesphere via the lens of Space; or invoke a starfish-like sense of connection to



Movement phrase using Axis Syllabus  
Human Movement Alphabet

center, declaring it a Core-Distal movement; or observe the pointedness of the mover's attention as Direct Space Effort. I can choose the "best lens for the job."

On a drafting level, Motif is compact, fast to write, and intuitive. Simple things can be written in a small amount of space. (Good for scribbling theater blocking in the margins of a script!) Unlike notation systems like Conté and Benesh, there is no underlying scaffolding to draw, like a lined music staff. You only need to write something when there is something to be expressed. A value is placed on symbols that do not require many strokes to complete and which can still be recognized even if sloppily written. There are a number of elemental symbols, such as a filled-in dot for "Weight Center" ● or parallel lines for "Limb" ||, which, once known, aid in the comprehension of new symbols that incorporate these elements, such as the symbol for Falling ↓ or the symbol for Both Arms ↑↑.

As noted earlier, built into Motif Notation is an inherent prioritization of focus. This requirement of human willfulness distinguishes Motif from the indiscriminate eye of a video camera. When Motif is used descriptively, such as to capture movements one has just witnessed, there is a priority of perception. The observer records what is most important to them. A psychologist might record subtle changes in Weight Effort or aspects of Shape Flow Support. A historian of Merce Cunningham might note Planar motion or Kinesphere quadrants. The values of the observer are thus carried within the Motif. On the other hand, when Motif is used prescriptively, such as to give a group of business executives a sequence of Effort qualities to incorporate into their next dinner conversation, it represents a priority of intention. It tells the mover what to focus on doing. In both cases, whether Motif is used descriptively or prescriptively, it offers the ability to identify what is important in the movement.

Learning Motif Notation during a course of study of LMA can be a valuable aid to integrating the various movement concepts that make up the framework. When one learns a movement quality and also learns to associate that experience with a symbol, the symbol is "charged up" with a



On the skin: Advancing, Rising, Carving, Spiraling

visceral body memory. One need only see the symbol to recall the lived experience of that movement quality. The esoteric nature of symbols helps root the concepts in the unconscious and itself holds a kind of power.

So, given Motif Notation's breadth and richness, its ease of use, its utility in expressing exactly what's important to the notator, and its ability to bridge between the abstract conceptual framework of LMA and the sub-/un-conscious world of body experience, what is getting in the way of it being used everywhere? What is keeping it from feeling vital in the 21st century?

## **The Challenges**

First of all, it is not clear to many practitioners and even teachers of Laban Movement Analysis that they need Motif. Within the Integrated Movement Studies certification program, it is obvious that our students benefit from study of the symbols. Their ability to claim what they see and make distinctions is noticeably sharper. And yet the question still comes up about how much time to dedicate to it in the curriculum, especially given limited classroom hours, the difficulties that some students inevitably have remembering the symbols, and the fact that some students do not feel that knowing how to write movement in this way will be directly useful in their application area. Do we reduce the time we spend teaching our Touch for Repatterning<sup>SM</sup> curriculum, one of the specialties of our program, in order to fit in more Motif Notation?

Secondly, any language, for it to remain vital and relevant, needs to evolve as its practitioners evolve. New awarenesses awaken, new viewpoints emerge—all of which affect the ways that we observe and record our world. Motif Notation is no exception. The meaning of certain concepts has changed over time and by geographic location. For example, three-dimensional, voluminous movement might be called “Carving” by some and “Shaping” by others, depending on whether they were trained on the West Coast or East Coast of the United States. And while we say that we aim to have “a symbol for every LMA concept,” the fact is that there are swaths of concepts for which we don't yet have symbols, such as the meta-themes of Exertion/Recuperation, Stability/Mobility (as meta-themes rather than Effort States), Inner/Outer, and Subtle/Simple/Complex.

In recent years, it seems like the evolution of Motif Notation has proceeded haphazardly, with a few dedicated practitioners meeting at various times behind closed doors for tiny slices of time. Having remotely attended a couple of such sessions by video conference, I can say they were lively, thought-provoking, and truly delightful, and as such might have fully satisfied their intended purpose. However, as a process for evolving a language, they touched very few topics, lacked a concrete sense of traction or next steps, and seemed in danger of having their efforts slip back beneath the surface, vanishing like the momentary revelations within a dream.

Then, there is the question of how graphical Motifs are created. While a good portion of Motif's utility is in the ability for someone to quickly sketch movement sequences by hand, in any professional context we expect to be able to create graphical Motifs that can be sent as images or embedded in documents or presentations. Currently, we lack effective tools for doing so. LabanWriter, KineScribe, and LabaNotator are all software programs ostensibly designed for

Labanotation but which can be used to create Motifs. However, they are maintained by very small groups with limited resources, and so updates are irregular. The latest operating systems are not supported. In addition, they are hampered by user interface design choices that do not always facilitate ease of use or follow best practices for accessibility. My experiment to create a text-based Motif generator, "Motif

SpeedWriter," felt promising and novel in its use of simple text to generate graphical Motifs. However, it never made it past being a proof-of-concept and does not contain all Motif symbols nor handle the full grammatical complexities possible with Motif Notation.

Finally, building useful software applications to generate Motifs is hindered by the lack of a standardized digital file format for Motifs. Without such a file format, each application can only read and write its own documents. You are locked into the tool you've chosen, and the only way someone can edit what you've created is if they too are willing to invest in that same tool.

The screenshot shows the Motif SpeedWriter web application. At the top, the title "Motif SpeedWriter" is displayed with the tagline "Creating Motifs should be fast and fun!". Below the title is a search bar with the text "Try it! => ||stra3(qu+fre2),turn2(breath3),ges||". To the left of the search bar is a section titled "Examples" containing a list of Motif notation commands and their descriptions, such as "stra -- Straight Path for 1 unit" and "act3 -- Add Action Stroke for 3 units". In the center, there is a preview window showing a graphical Motif on a staff, with a "Generate Downloadable Image" button below it. To the right of the preview is a "Reference" section listing various Motif actions and body parts, including "Action Stroke (act)", "Gesture (ges)", "Any Path (path)", "Straight Path (stra)", "Curved Path (sour)", "Any Turn (turn)", "Right Turn (rturn)", "Left Turn (lturn)", "Hold (hold)", "Release (rel)", "Hold then Release (holdrel)", "Balance (bal)", "Fall (fal)", "Air Moment (air)", and "Body" (Breath, Core-Distal, Head-Tail).

Worse, if the tool you've chosen becomes obsolete and stops working, you are left with a bunch of dead files. Sure, the exported graphic might still be viewable, but it would be a frozen asset, unable to be changed.

Having named what I consider some of the core challenges facing Motif Notation today, I would now like to explore some specific actions we as a Motif-intrigued community might take towards reaffirming our relationship with Motif Notation and helping it evolve.

## **Let's Caretake Motif as a Language**

What does it mean to caretake a language? If we agree that Motif Notation is a living language, then first and foremost, we should be continually evaluating its on-going usefulness within the current context. Does it serve our movement observation needs? Can everything be represented that we want to express? Is anything left out? Can the existing system be made more intuitive? Easier to read and write?

At the same time, any evolution of the language needs to carry forward its core values, its "First Principles." What are Motif's First Principles? As an empirical observer, I think of these guiding ideas:

- Symbols should be simple and fast to write, with a minimum number of pen strokes.
- Symbols should be legible when written at different sizes and even if hastily written.
- Symbols should be writable with a single color.
- Symbols should not be tied to a particular human language or alphabet.
- More complex symbols should be built from basic symbols, where possible.
- The most general forms of symbols should be the simplest to write.
- Symbols can be either stretchable or non-stretchable.
- Unstretched symbols should have a bounding box of consistent height.
- Inclusion of both sides of a polarity within the same symbol (such as Rising and Sinking written together) means that either or both polarities are present.
- Motif Notation itself is not a static system but can evolve over time.

- The evolution of Motif Notation should strive to maintain compatibility with past versions.

These principles guide how new concepts and new symbols are brought into Motif Notation.

Caretaking a language also means providing the mechanisms for it to change.

### **Let's Give Motif a Process for Evolution**

Intentional evolution would be supported by having a clear roadmap, a mechanism for advancing symbol creation/modification, a way to open the discussion to all, and a way to share results with the public.

It might not seem obvious how to construct a development roadmap for a system which some might declare “complete,” but as noted above, not every LMA concept has an associated symbol. Also, sometimes concepts which are difficult or awkward to express using the current symbol set might be better served by a new symbol representing a different point of view. For example, movement within the Vertical Plane is awkward using traditional Space Directions———which only identify bounding points, whereas Carl Woltz’s newer symbol captures it in four strokes:  Grammatical revisions are also possible. Maybe someone will invent a more compact way of expressing Body Part involvement than using Pre-Signs, which take up an extra vertical unit within the Motif. Some needed updates to Motif Notation might arise from developments in the underlying LMA system itself, such as if Space Effort took on the sub-variations of Inward and Outward directing of attention.

Once desirable veins of development are identified, brainstorming, discussion, and decisions are needed to advance the system. The traditional approach of gathering a willing group of people, arranging schedules, and coming together in person has the benefits of in-the-flesh full-sensory engagement. However, it is inherently limited in its ability to address more than a few topics in any one session or incorporate people in different locations and timezones.

To overcome these physical limitations, we can take advantage of the Internet and the forms of public discourse enabled by it. Obvious, readily available mechanisms include discussion boards, mailing lists (with archives), blog posts, articles, and social media posts. All

of these allow for asynchronous discussion, where participants don't have to coordinate complex schedules to be available at the same time, and permit interaction from anywhere in the world where an Internet connection exists.

While these approaches provide the raw mechanisms for discussion, they don't necessarily, in and of themselves, shepherd a discussion towards resolution. If the goal is to arrive at consensus around resolutions which will be adopted by the LMA community at large, then at each stage of the creative process, the right mechanism with the right kind of curation is needed. For example, when symbols for a new movement concept are being brainstormed, a website where people can either upload or sketch symbol candidates might be appropriate. Visitors to the site might be able to "Like" or vote for their favorites, plus leave comments. More deliberate evaluation of different symbol candidates, on the other hand, might best occur in a discussion board, allowing for longer messages and moderated by community members. Final decisions about what changes in Motif Notation a particular authoritative body is endorsing could happen in real time via remote conferencing. And announcement of the results might happen in a blog post, with new symbol updates recorded in an Open Source information repository that tracks different versions and can be freely downloaded by the public at any time.

Making sure that each phase of the process is defined and supported will ensure that Motif as a language continues moving forward and maintaining its relevancy.

### **Let's Invent More Tools**

The current arsenal of tools for creating graphical Motifs is shockingly small. We desperately need tools at all levels of application, from creating simple Motif graphics for embedding in social media posts to doing complete page layouts with control over all aspects of printing. Imagine...

- Being able to finger-sketch crude Motifs on a touchscreen device and have them instantly rendered as beautiful, professional-quality images, embeddable into any document

- A tool that takes Motif Text Notation as input and outputs Motif graphics as fast as you can type
- Using optical symbol recognition to transform an existing on-paper Motif into a digital Motif using the new standardized file format
- Use of voice plus mouse to quickly create Motifs on-the-fly
- A Motif font that allows Motif symbols to be directly typed into any document
- A version of Motif modified and optimized for the visually impaired
- Motif symbols input via hand gestures performed in the air above a sensor or using VR handheld controllers
- A professional-grade Motif layout program, allowing full control over symbol size, line thickness, color, maximum Motif column height, and other aspects of page layout

Any one of these ideas, however fascinating and useful by itself, has its utility multiplied if it adopts a standardized file format that can be used to communicate with other tools.

### **Let's Give Motifs a Digital Life**

Related to the lack of tooling, Motif Notation has so far lacked a universally accepted file format. The LabanWriter file format has come close, but it is only supported by LabanWriter and KineScribe, and its structure is neither published publicly nor guaranteed to be stable. If a standardized Motif Notation format were to be created and “given” to the community—perhaps housed in an Open Source information repository—it would facilitate the creation of tools that could all speak the same digital language. A Motif file created in any one application could be opened in any other. Having such a file format would also mitigate against the risk of a particular application going obsolete. You could just take your Motif file and open it elsewhere. Meanwhile, application developers would know that if they built a tool that could read and write the standardized format, it would be automatically compatible with an existing ecosystem of tools, reducing their own risk of investing time into building such a tool.

What would this file format be like under the hood? One could borrow some lessons from the creation of PGN, the standard chess game file format. Steven J. Edwards, its inventor, wanted to create a file format that could be read by humans, as well as parsed by machines. The result of his efforts was a flexible, compact file format that has been in use for over 20 years and has facilitated the creation of dozens of chess notation programs that all read and write PGN. The format also has the incredibly useful aspect that it is forgiving in what it can read (allowing for human error) but strictly correct in what it generates.

Motif Text Notation was invented as the input text syntax for Motif SpeedWriter. While still a prototype, it might be a candidate for a digital representation of Motifs. Here are a couple examples of this notation and what they mean:

```
|| stra3 rturn2 (breath3) ||
```

“A straight path for 3 units of time, followed by a right turn for 2 units, where the beginning of the turn coincides with the beginning of a breath action for 3 units”

```
|| [thm:|free+quick]3 ({hand}gest2 stra4) ||
```

“A theme bow of free flow and quick time for 3 units, whose beginning coincides with the beginning of a hand gesture for 2 units, followed by a straight path for 4 units”

It remains to be seen what digital format will prove the most useful as we head into the future. But it is a fact that without a standardized file format, the archival nature of Motif Notation will itself be compromised as it fails to be represented in the new, all-digital world.

## **The Final Charge**

Motif Notation represents the distilled traces of an observer’s priority of focus. It is both comprehensive and highly subjective. However, embracing that nature, one finds an extremely powerful tool for concretizing movement into magical symbols, each of which captures a gestalt

of movement expression. Read back a sequence of these symbols representing a movement you've done long ago, and at a neuromuscular level your body replays the lived experience.

As a system of notation, it faces a number of challenges, which can be addressed by us taking seriously our role as caretaker of a language: understanding Motif's value and its guiding First Principles, helping it to evolve, developing the necessary tools to make working with it practical and fun, and inventing the syntax of its digital incarnation, the lingua franca of an ecosystem of Motif tools, from the simple to the complex.

And while our cellphones might be what we favor for recording movement at a superficial level, it is Motif Notation that has the potential to serve as the bridge between the inner life of our intentions and their outward expression.