There are five essential steps in instrument reprocessing:

1) **Clean & Disinfect**
   Cleaning and disinfecting is critical to the sterilization process. Soil CANNOT be sterilized, so the presence of soil or organic material on instruments reduces the effectiveness of disinfection or sterilization. If your instruments need to be high level disinfected, you must check the concentration of the high level disinfectant in the processor/soaking tray to ensure it is at or above the minimum effective concentration. When timelines are tight and ORs are requesting quick turnarounds, there may be pressure to cut corners in the cleaning process. Failure to thoroughly clean and disinfect items for sterilization, however, can jeopardize the entire process.

2) **Prep & Pack**
   When preparing items for sterilization, instruments should be dried and inspected for cleanliness and functionality. Multipart instruments should be disassembled. Instruments should be held open and unlocked. Whether using sterilization wrappers, paper-plastic pouches or rigid container systems, it’s important to properly place Internal and External Chemical Indicators to effectively monitor sterilant penetration and other exposure conditions. AAMI and AORN recommend labeling each individual pack, so items can be located easily in the event of a recall.

3) **Sterilize**
   Next, instruments are exposed to the actual sterilant (steam, ethylene oxide, etc.). Successful sterilization depends on sterilant contact with all surfaces for the prescribed time. To ensure effective sterilization, the process must be monitored routinely through equipment displays and printouts and also through proper selection and use of Biological and Chemical Indicators.

4) **Store**
   Packages are removed from the sterilizer and quality system documentation is completed. Appropriate storage is required to ensure the integrity of the packaging and the continued sterility of the packages.

5) **Issue or Use**
   Finally, upon request, items are retrieved from storage, checked again to ensure the external Chemical Indicator has reached its endpoint, and then issued for use. Once in the OR, the Internal Chemical Indicators are checked to ensure that the sterilization process was sufficient to penetrate inside of the pack.