

Dance Glossary of Terms 6-12

AB: A two-part compositional form with an A theme and a B theme; the binary form consists of two distinct sections that share either a character or quality.

ABA: A three-part compositional form in which the second section contrasts with the first section. The third section is a restatement of the first section in a condensed, abbreviated, or extended form.

Abduction: The movement of a body part away from the midline.

Abstract: Dance movement removed from a representational context; dance as the “thing-in-itself”; movement through space in time as its own subject matter.

Accent: An emphasis or stress on certain musical counts or within specific movements.

Accumulation: Repeating a sequence with the addition of one movement each time, e.g., 1, 1-2, 1-2-3.

Adduction: Movement of a body part toward the midline.

Aesthetics: A guiding principle in matters of beauty or artistic taste; a heightened sense of beauty; the branch of philosophy that deals with beauty, art, and artistic principles.

Agility: Moving with ease or kinetic flow.

Alignment: In ballet and modern dance, the placement of the body's segments one above the other so that the ear, shoulder, hip, knee, and ankle are as close as possible to a straight line that extends at right angle to the floor. Alignment in other dance forms may involve a different relationship between the segments of the body; proper alignment in a dance form allows for the greatest freedom of movement with the least amount of strain.

Apron: The area of the stage that extends toward the audience in front of the curtain line.

Articulation: Movement, with clarity and precision, of specific parts of the body that have jointed connectors, e.g., head (neck), arms (shoulders, elbows, wrists), hands (wrists, fingers), torso (shoulder girdle, spine), hips (lower spine, pelvic girdle, hip joints), legs (hips, knees, ankles), feet (ankles, toes).

Asymmetrical: A body shape or choreographic formation in which one side of the midline is not a mirror image of the other side.

Axial: A movement organized around the axis of the body in which the dancer remains in one spot in space, e.g., bending, stretching, twisting swinging; a non-traveling movement.

Backstage: The areas of a traditional proscenium stage not seen by the audience, e.g., the spaces concealed by the side and rear curtains, the dressing areas, scene or costume shop, etc.

Ballet: A form of dance originally developed in the 18th-century French court with a codified movement vocabulary. Advanced female ballet dancers work en pointe, wearing hard-tipped shoes that enable them to stand on the tips of their toes. A dancer must train in a consistent, rigorous daily ballet program for a minimum of three years before starting pointe work. Ballet training in soft slippers is often practiced by professional dancers specializing in modern, jazz, or tap dance to build a beautiful line and strength in leg extensions turns, and jumps.

Blocking: Planning and practicing the sequence of formations and positions of dancers on stage in a dance work.

Brushes: Standing warm-up movements executed with straight legs in which the working foot “brushes” the floor away from the standing leg until the foot is entirely extended in a point, with the toes either on or off the floor. In modern and jazz dance, these can be done with the legs parallel or turned out and from various starting positions; in ballet, they are done turned out from various starting positions and are called tendus when culminating with the toes touching the floor, dégagés when culminating with the toes off the floor.

Call and Response: A choreographic form, characteristic of African dances, in which a solo dance leader demonstrates and/or calls out dance steps, and the group responds by either repeating the step or with another step or movement combination. The same process can be used with two groups instead of a solo and a group.

Canon: The equivalent of a musical “round,” in which an identical movement phrase is performed by two or more dancers or groups of dancers, with staggered starting points.

Center Stage: The area in the middle of the floor space outlined by a proscenium stage.

Chance Operations: A choreographic device, deeply explored by Merce Cunningham, in which various methods may be used to obtain random selection or organization of movements or movement phrases, e.g., rolling dice to determine the order of phrases to be performed; also called “chance procedures.”

Character: The mood, feeling or style of a dance or a section of a dance; a specific role performed by a dancer in a dance.

Choreographic Device: A compositional process used to organize movements within a dance, e.g., canon, counterpoint, chance, unison.

Choreographic Structure: The overarching compositional form in which movements are organized in advance, e.g., AB, ABA, theme and variation, rondo, etc.; syn. “choreographic form.”

Choreographer: An artist who creates dances; one who originates and/or chooses movements and organizes them into a dance work.

Circumduction: Movement of a body part so that its extremity makes a circular path.

Collapse: Movement characterized by a release of the muscles so that the body’s weight gives in to gravity.

Combination: A series of connected movements forming a dance phrase.

Composition: The activity of putting movements together into a short dance study or a complete dance.

Concert: A formal performance of dance, featuring either a full-length dance work or a series of separate shorter dance works.

Contact Improvisation: Spontaneous partnered movement in which one dancer responds instantly to movements done by the other, leading to a seamless flow of movement initiation and response. The form is characterized by use of the floor, rolling and tumbling, and non-gender-specific lifting using natural momentum and leverage.

Content: The subject matter or meanings of a work of art, as distinguished from its formal aspects.

Contraction: A shortening of the muscles of any part of the body, resulting in a pulling inward; in Martha Graham technique, a shortening of the muscles in the front of the torso, as in exhaling.

Contrast: The use of movements with different or opposite dynamics (use of energy or effort), shapes, use of space or time.

Counterbalance: To oppose with equal weight or force, preventing a shape from collapsing.

Counterpoint: The juxtaposing of different movement phrases against each other simultaneously.

Critical Protocol: A set of guidelines and procedures meant to be followed during discussions of dance performance and choreography.

Cue: An external stimulus that motivates a movement or change of movements; a movement in a dance that motivates other dancers in the dance to perform certain movements; a point in a dance work at which a lighting or musical change occurs.

Cue-to-Cue: A technical stage rehearsal in which the dancers take the places they would be in at each lighting change without performing the movements in between those changes.

Curtain Line: On a proscenium stage, the imaginary line marking where the bottom of the front curtain hits the stage floor.

Dance Elements: The Body (shapes and actions); Dynamics (movement qualities through energy and time); Space; and Relationship (between dancers, dancers and audience, dance and music).

Dance Drama: A dance presentation using relationships between characters to convey a narrative; characteristic of Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Southeast Asian classical dance productions.

Dance Flooring: A flexible, portable floor covering that provides traction and a predictable surface for bare feet and various types of dance shoes; composed of a specially designed composite material. It generally comes in six-foot widths that are unrolled onto the floor and taped together with gaffer's tape.

Dance in the Round: A dance meant to be viewed from all sides, rather than from only one viewpoint as in a traditional theater.

Dance Score: A graphic representation of a dance using standard or invented elements.

Design: In choreography, the patterns and arrangement of movement in a dance.

Downstage: The area of a proscenium stage closest to the audience.

Dynamics: In music, the degree of loudness, softness, and attack; in dance, the degree of effort (force, energy) and the speed (time) with which a movement is executed; syn. movement quality.

Echoing: Repeating a movement exactly as shown.

Effort: The degree of energy or force with which a movement is executed, and the directness or indirectness of the movement; as defined by Rudolf Laban, effort actions include punch, press, flick, float, slash, glide, wring, and dab.

Ensemble: A group of dancers working together in a dance piece.

Exploration: A process in which suggestions made by a leader or teacher result in spontaneous original movement; also called "movement investigation."

Expressionism: An aesthetic movement in the arts characterized by the principle of depicting the artist's subjective emotions and responses, rather than reflecting objective reality.

Extension: Stretching any limb away from the midline; for the legs, defined by the degree of angle in the hip joint formed by a leg raised and held in a controlled fashion.

Facing: The direction towards which the front of the body is positioned.

Figure: A specific self-contained pattern of steps; in particular, a step pattern (with accompanying arm links and hand holds) executed by a couple in ballroom and swing dancing; also used to describe specific ice-skating moves. Improvisation in ballroom and swing dancing involves the spontaneous choosing and ordering of figures.

Flexion: Bending or folding a limb, resulting in a decrease in the angle of the joint.

Flocking: A group follow-the-leader activity in which the leader changes when the group changes its directional facing, very much like a flock of birds.

Floor Pattern: The pathway traced on the floor by dancers traveling through space.

Flow: Transmitting energy from one part of the body to another to link movements without a break.

Focal Point: A place within a group of dancers or on the stage that naturally draws the audience's attention.

Focus: The direction of the dancer's face and eyes; a dancer can project this focus into near or far space; focus can also be sharp or soft.

Fourth Wall: The imaginary wall between the audience and the performers in a proscenium stage setting; "breaking" the fourth wall involves the performer directly addressing the audience, either verbally or physically.

Framework: A description or suggestion that limits movement materials discovered during exploration and improvisation.

Fusion: Dance that blends several genres or styles to create a new way of moving.

Gel: The medium used to give color to white light produced by theatrical lighting instruments.

General Space: All the available space through which a dancer can move and which is also available to other dancers; differentiated from “personal space”; in a studio or room, also called “room space.”

Genre: A type or category of dance, e.g., ballet, jazz, modern dance, tap, European folk dance, African dance, ballroom dance.

Elevation: The height of the body off the floor in a jump or leap.

Energy: The degree and control of force in a movement in terms of impulse and follow-through; ranges from light to strong, and from free to bound.

Gesture: A movement of the body or part of the body that expresses an emotion or idea, e.g., a wave, reach, fist shake, stamping of the foot, nod of the head; a movement emblematic of a working activity such as planting, hunting, or fishing; a movement emblematic of a daily activity such as washing the face. Gestures are intensified and delineated with performer focus when used in mime; they are extended into larger movements and abstracted into related movements when used as a basis for developing movement vocabulary in dance.

Glow Tape: A special photosensitive tape that glows in the dark, used to mark dancers’ opening placement onstage; used as an aid for finding places in total blackness.

Gobo: A metal mask with a pattern of shaped cutouts that is placed at the gate of a lighting instrument to project a pattern of light and shadow on the stage floor or backdrop.

Grid: The system of pipes erected at ceiling level in a theater from which the lighting instruments are hung.

Hop: To go into the air, taking off from one foot and landing on the same foot.

Hot Spot: The most intense place in a pool of light thrown onto the stage by a lighting instrument.

Hyperextension: Extreme extension of a joint; extension of a joint beyond what is physically healthy or technically useful.

Imagery: Ideas, visual pictures, colors, objects, feelings, and sensations either suggested by dance movement or serving as a motivation for the creation of dance movement.

Improvisation: Original movement created spontaneously in a free or structured environment. Involves an instantaneous choice of actions on the part of the dancer affected by chance elements, such as the movement choices of other dancers or musicians in the room. It may involve focused and concentrated movement exploration of a specific movement problem or idea, or may be a simple individual response to music.

Impulse: The initial starting point or origin of a movement, e.g., breath, musical beat, or melodic line, physical reaction to a movement or effort action; syn. impetus.

Intent: In a dancer, the inner motivation made manifest in movement; in a piece of choreography, the desired effects or meanings to be communicated.

Interdisciplinary: Involving two or more arts disciplines.

Isolation: Movement restricted to one area of the body, e.g., eyes, head, hands/fingers, shoulders, rib cage, or hips; important in jazz dance; also used in African dance, Indian classical dance.

Interpretation: The step in dance analysis and/or criticism in which the viewer infers meanings from the form and content of a dance work; also, the unique choices of dynamic phrasing, character, attack, and musicality made by an individual dancer in performing a set piece of choreography.

Jazz: A dance form that developed along with jazz music; a major influence in Broadway show choreography; characterized by sharp body isolations, a presentational aesthetic, high kicks, and pelvic movements.

Jump: To go into the air, taking off from two feet and landing on either two feet or one foot.

Juxtaposition: In choreography, placing two or more different dance phrases side by side or one in front of the other so that they are performed simultaneously.

Kinesphere: The space surrounding the body of a dancer at any one moment, which includes all directions and levels as far as the dancer can reach with limbs or torso.

Kinesthetic: Pertaining to the ability of the body's sensory organs in the muscles, tendons, and joints to both respond to stimuli and to relate information about body position, movement, and tension.

Kinesthetic Awareness: Conscious awareness of the kinesthetic sense.

Labanotation: A symbolic notation system for recoding and analyzing human and animal movement developed by Rudolf Laban.

Leading: Refers to the part of the body that initiates or leads a movement; also, in partnered social dancing, the part taken by the person who determines the order of steps, signals cues to the partner which figure to execute, and guides the partner through space.

Leap: To go into the air, taking off from one foot and landing on the other foot.

Legs: Curtains at the sides of the stage that hide the dancers waiting to enter the performance area.

Level: The height of the dancer in relation to the floor, e.g., high, middle, low.

Light Boom: A vertical standing pipe weighted at the bottom on which lighting instruments are hung; generally used in the wings at the sides of the stage.

Literal: Non-abstracted, verbatim, directly representational in relation to a stimulus such as text, dramatic situation, or musical accompaniment.

Locomotor Movement: Movement that travels through space, e.g., walk, run, leap, hop, jump, skip, slide, gallop.

Lyrical: A movement quality that is calm and controlled with sequential flow, smooth transitions, and extended limbs.

Manipulation: Varying and developing movement phrases by changing the use of shape, dynamic energy, space or time, or by applying devices such as repetition, accumulation, or retrograde.

Material: Refers to movement phrases that have been developed and will be used in creating a choreographed dance work.

Meter: The division of music into small groups of pulse beats. Binary meters (as in a march) have pulse beats that can be counted in twos; ternary meters (as in a waltz) have groups of pulse beats that are counted in threes; mixed meters change the numbers of pulse beats in different measures.

Minimalism: A movement form based on repeated use of the same movement or movement phrase with only slight changes.

Mirroring: A partnering activity in which a dancer simultaneously reflects the positions and movements of a partner as if gazing into a mirror.

Motif: A recurring movement idea, shape, or form that appears in a dance composition.

Motif Notation: A system of recording and analyzing movement using simple pictorial symbols; based on Labanotation, which is more exact and extensive.

Mount: To place and position a dance onstage once the choreography is completed.

Movement Quality: The effect created by the varied uses of effort (force), attack, and energy in a movement; syn. dynamics.

Movement Sentence: A brief sequence of related movements that has a sense of continuity and rhythmic completion, with a beginning, middle, and end; it is delineated by stillness at the beginning and end; syn. phrase.

Movement Theme: A complete idea in movement that can be manipulated and altered; can be expressed by varied or related movement phrases.

Music Visualization: Choreography that directly expresses the structure, rhythms, and melodies of a piece of music in movement terms.

Narrative: A choreographic form that tells a story through character and/or situational development.

Negative Space: The space surrounded by parts of a dancer's body, or the space between dancers and/or prop elements, and the air shapes thus created; becomes part of the visual design of a dance work. Negative space can be charged with energy.

Non-Literal: Choreography that is non-representational, communicating directly through movement that needs no translation; an emotional theme or dramatic impact can nevertheless be achieved.

Non-Locomotor Movement: Movement done in place rather than traveling through space; syn. axial movement.

Opposition: Position or movement of the arm in opposition to the leg, e.g., the left arm moves to the right while the left leg moves to the left. Walking involves simple front-back opposition of the same arm and leg.

Organic: Dance movement or choreography that has an interrelationship of parts similar to the organization of parts in nature; movements that flow naturally from each other.

Pedestrian Movement: Everyday movement as it is executed by the average person not trained as a dancer; non-stylized movement.

Percussive: Movement characterized by sharp movements with sudden stops, strong effort, and angular shapes.

Performance Art: Performance pieces that do not fall into the usual categories of dance, theater, or visual art; performance that blends several kinds of artistic categories and conventions.

Personal Space: The “space bubble” immediately surrounding a dancer, including all levels and directions reachable by extending the limbs and torso; syn. kinesphere.

Phrase: A brief sequence of related movements that have a sense of continuity and rhythmic completion; delineated by stillness at the beginning and end; syn. movement sentence.

Positive Space: The space filled by the body of the dancer; the shape of the dancer’s body in space.

Proscenium: The architectural arch that defines the viewing space of a traditional theatrical stage. Performances on a proscenium stage are meant to be viewed from one direction only.

Pulse: An underlying steady beat, expressed in the body, either arising internally or in response to a musical beat; rhythms are patterns laid over and in relation to a pulse.

Reflect: To consider one’s responses to experiencing or observing dance, in either framed or open discussion.

Relationship: Dancers’ connections to or positions relative to their own bodies or parts of their bodies, another dancer or dancers, the audience, the stage space, music, or sets and costumes.

Release: A relaxing and lengthening of the muscles in any part of the body; in Martha Graham technique, an opening up of the front of the body, as in breathing in. It also refers to the technique developed by Trisha Brown that uses a release of tension in the joints to facilitate a relaxed, rapidly flowing style of movement.

Repetition: To perform a movement at least twice in a row.

Respond: To experience a reaction to performing or observing dance; to express a response to dance orally, in writing, or in movement.

Retrograde: To perform a dance movement or phrase backwards, in the body and in its spatial path; retrograde used in movement exploration can lead to the discovery of new and unexpected movements. It is also used as a device in sections of choreography.

Revise: To rework dancing or choreography with the goal of improving practice or product.

Rhythm: A structure of movement patterns in time, in relation to a pulse.

Rondo: A choreographic structure based on alternation between a repeated section (A) and contrasting episodes (B, C, etc.), e.g., ABACADA.

Rotation: Turning of the whole body around itself; a pivoting of a bone on its axis, limited by the joint (external rotation—away from the midline; internal rotation—toward the midline); in the legs, the degree of rotation is identified as turned out, parallel, or turned in.

Rubric: An assessment instrument used for evaluation that includes criteria and scored levels of performance.

Sagittal: Referring to the median plane of the body, and movements that align with that plane.

Sequence: An ordered series of connected movements.

Sequential Movement: A movement characterized by an impulse that originates in one part of the body and travels one after the other through connected body parts.

Shape: The spatial contours of the body, such as curved, angular, twisted, straight, symmetrical, or asymmetrical; the overall form of a dance; v.t. to give form to a piece of choreography.

Site Specific: Choreography that is intentionally designed to make use of a performance environment, e.g., a park, a public building or plaza, a warehouse.

Skip: A step followed by a hop.

Slide: A traveling movement in which the legs are separated by sliding one foot along the floor in any direction until both legs are bent, and bringing the other leg to meet it such that both legs straighten and the body is momentarily lifted off the ground. A gallop is a form of slide. In ballet, this movement is called chassé.

Somatic: Having to do with the body and its sensory organs.

Space: The area in which dance takes place; defined by the use of size, shape, levels, directions, pathways and focus.

Spatial Design: The arrangement of bodies in space.

Spatial Pattern: The pathways on the floor or in the air through which a movement travels; in choreography, spatial patterns in group dances can best be viewed when an audience is placed above the level of the stage.

Stage Left: The direction to the left of a performer facing the audience on a proscenium stage.

Stage Right: The direction to the right of a performer facing the audience on a proscenium stage.

Standing Leg: Refers to the leg bearing the dancer's weight, leaving the other leg free to move on and off the floor.

Style: A distinctive manner of moving; describes the appearance and movement principles of a dance genre or a specific technique; also applies to an individual approach to moving.

Suspend: To temporarily hang in space at the very top of a swinging, jumping, or leaping movement, before gravity pulls the body back down. Drawing out this moment of lingering in the air can create an exciting dynamic and a sense of suspense similar to the feeling of being at the top of a roller coaster hill.

Sustained: Movement that is smoothly executed with flow and continuity, without apparent starts or stops.

Swing: Movement based on the principle of a pendulum: starting suspended, falling by giving into gravity in an arced pathway, and rising back to suspension with momentum in the opposite arced pathway. Swings may be whole-body movements, or maybe movements of individual parts of the body, e.g., arms, legs or hips.

Theme: The ideational content that informs a piece of choreography. A theme for a dance may be taken from the movement itself (e.g., Expanding and Contracting in Space), or from other sources (e.g., ideas, images, principles, or emotions found in the world or in other arts and disciplines). Also, a movement theme refers to a phrase of movement in a dance work that can be developed or varied.

Theme and Variations: A choreographic structure in which a movement phrase is established, and then followed by a number of variations, ending with a repetition of the original phrase. The variations do not alter the essential intent and character of the initial phrase.

Time: The duration of movement; may be continuous, as in slow-motion movement; alternatively, may be broken up into increments by natural elements such as breathing, or into beats, meters, and rhythms at varying speeds.

Traditional Dance: Dance forms that have arisen out of the tradition of a people and are performed throughout that culture in substantially the same way, as opposed to original forms that have been created by a single individual, e.g., Indian Bharata Natyam and Haitian Shango are traditional dance forms; Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham styles are not. Ballet may be said to have arisen from Western European traditional social dances, but then developed by a series of individuals and altered for dramatic purposes. However, it should be noted that both traditional dance forms and non-traditional dance forms may be social, ritual, or theatrical in their purpose and performance, or a combination of these categories.

Transition: Moving from one movement to another, or one shape to another. The quality of transitions affects the overall flow of dancing: transitions may be smooth or abrupt. There are techniques that support control of transitional moments.

Transpose: To render a dance phrase into another dance style or form of expression.

Unison: Movements performed simultaneously by two or more dancers.

Upstage: The area on a proscenium stage that is farthest from the audience.

Variation: A choreographic device in which an initial phrase of movement is treated differently by changing the use of the body, dynamics, levels, directions, speed, or use of music, without altering its essential character or intent.

Vibratory Movement: Movement characterized by rapidly repeated bursts of percussive energy, shaking, or trembling; can be whole-body movement or movement of a part of the body.

Visual Image: A motivation for movement that resembles a picture held in the mind.

Warm-up: Movements and movement phrases designed to raise the core body temperature and stretch the muscles in preparation for dancing. In a dance class, the warm-up may contain elements of the movement that will appear in the movement combinations later in the class. A warm-up is most effective when the dancer approaches it as dancing, investing it with focus and expression.

Wellness: Physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual good health.

Wing: The areas at the sides of a proscenium stage, situated behind and hidden by the legs.

Working Leg: The leg that is actively moving on or off the floor; opposite of “standing leg.”