



SPOTLIGHT

DANCE & PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

10 STEPS TO BECOMING A GREAT DANCER





10 Steps to Becoming a Great Dancer

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I have been dancing all my life, and it is with great pleasure I can share my dance experience with dancers and students around the world. Whether you have aspirations to perform on stage, or just want to learn a few dance moves, and gain confidence, these steps I have created will be very helpful to you.

Being a great dancer requires hard work and persistence. No matter what style of dance you are interested in, you must realize that dance is much more than just body movement. There is mental and physical work you must put in to become a great dancer. All the dancers you see on stage or performing at a concert or on TV did not just show up because they had rhythm. No matter what your natural abilities are, becoming a great dancer starts in the in the classroom.

I hope you will find these ten steps valuable and that you will apply them to your dance training.

Step 1: Technique, Technique, Technique



Good technique is what separates good dancers from the great dancers. You can learn dance moves but without technique, you will never be great. I advise every dancer that learning good dance technique is essential to a student's success. Just learning choreography may be fun, but to be a great dancer, students need to learn proper technique. Good technique will prevent injuries, build strength and flexibility, and refine the dancer's movements.

Proper technique will correct body placement and provide beautiful lines. Having a good foundation in technique will allow the dancer to move efficiently making dance movements look effortless.

Think about how effortlessly LeBron James plays basketball. He makes the game look easy. But LeBron spends hours in the gym, when no one is watching, homing in on his basketball technique. He works on every muscle group to ensure he is properly aligned when he takes a jump shot. LeBron will be the first to tell anyone who asks, the results on the basketball court came from hours of learning and practicing proper technique. It's the same with dancing. Without the foundation of proper technique my students will never become great dancers.

In order to achieve a strong technical foundation in your dance training, I highly recommend that you take as many ballet classes as possible. Even if you only want to dance Hip Hop, Ballet will give you the balance, strength and internal structure to help you execute all choreography.

The only way to learn technique, is to make sure your dance instructors are teaching you properly and promoting technique over dance steps. This brings me to Step 2, Finding a Great Dance Instructor.

Step 2: Take Classes from Great Dance Instructors



The key to becoming a great dancer is to train with great dance teachers. What makes a great teacher is different for every student, depending on your specific goals. However, if you want to become a great dancer with a foundation of proper technique, I highly recommend you find an instructor that understands and teaches proper technique. Make sure your instructors have the same passion for dance as you do.

There are many styles to teaching, so look for instructors that align with your tolerance for learning. For example, I have taken dance from teachers that have been very hard on me, like a Drill Sergeant. I was inspired by this teaching style and approach. Because I knew their goal was to build discipline within me and bring out the best in me. But this way of teaching is not for every student. I have had other instructors who were able to accomplish the same goals with their students, but their methods were very different. Students can excel with instructors who are less strict and take a motivating approach. A teacher can be extremely positive and supportive in their approach, but through motivation techniques, they are able to get their students to work hard and become better dancers. Find teachers whose methods bring the best out of you as a dancer.

Another important tip to finding a great dance instructor is to make sure your teacher has trained extensively in their art. Check out the instructor's biography, if available, and look into the instructor's reputation. Social media is a great place to find out what other dancers think about a specific teacher. Your teacher should have earned a good reputation among the dancing community. If the instructor has earned quality achievements in dance and is a member of reputable dance associations is a big plus.

Every student who enrolls in a dance class will have varying degrees of skill and will pick up the material faster than others. Make sure your instructor is patient with you and will allow you to learn at the right pace. This may mean that if you are falling behind, the specific dance class may be the wrong level and the best situation would be for the instructor to assist you in finding the right dance level and related class, so you do not get discouraged. I encourage my students to speak to me after class and ask how they are doing and what they can work on. Make sure your dance teachers are willing to offer constructive criticism and help you hone in on the areas you need to improve.

Make sure your dance teachers continue to educate themselves and stay on top of the latest dance moves, and technique. I have had instructors who were not current in their teaching styles and methods, and it set me back personally in my dance training. A great dance teacher is always learning and bringing new ideas to the classroom.

A dance teacher not only teaches new steps and techniques, but also corrects mistakes. When a dance teacher corrects you in class, consider this a special "gift" from the teacher. This is an indication that your teacher cares about you personally and is committed to your growth as a dancer.

Finally, make sure your dance teachers are professional. I will never discuss or compare one student with another student, and I make it a point to avoid gossip. The classroom can be very competitive, and students can be very mean to each other. When finding a great dance teacher, make sure they conduct themselves in the highest standards, and are focused on the

entire class and not one or two students. I have had teachers in the past who only favored the better dancers and ignored the rest of the class. Make sure you find an instructor who cares about everyone and is willing to respect each and every student in the classroom, no matter their skill level.

Step 3: Prioritize Your Dance Training



Prioritizing your dance training will make your skills and confidence grow tremendously. You will become stronger, graceful, mentally and emotionally more confident and expressive.

Most dancers who want to be great will train every single day in order to produce excellence in their style and performance.

As I mentioned in Step 1, LeBron James, and every world class athlete must train their bodies, minds and spirit each and every day, to achieve the desired results.

Take as many dance classes as possible (either virtual classes or at your local studio). If you don't take your training seriously and if it's not consistent, you will lose muscle memory, and also lose any technique you have learned.

If you want to be a great dancer, you must put your dance training as a priority.

Step 4: Musicality



Musicality is the heartbeat of the dancer, dancing to music. It's extremely important for the dancer to move to the music in order for the choreography and message to be fully developed. It's a language of expression to what the choreography is trying to portray.

The dancer must interpret the music, so it speaks volumes to the audience.

Musicality is an integral part of the training of the dancer, so it creates textures and tones that project to the audience.

The performance is the key ingredient for all dancers. An extremely technical dancer, without the depth of the performance is meaningless. It's one thing for a dancer to have great technique, but without musicality, you leave the audience with mechanical movement and lose the emotion and entertainment value.

Musicality makes the dancer's movements come to life. If I had to choose between a great technical dancer and a dancer who has a keen interpretive style in their movement, I would pick the later ever time. Especially because your audience will not necessarily be keen to the technical aspects of dance. A real dance performance will captivate people and make the story line believable.

Musicality must be developed in the classroom. A dancer must dig down deep to pull from their own life experiences to create the emotion required for every choreograph routine. You have to interpret the music with your dance moves and allow the music to direct your steps.

Musicality is the key to your performance as a dancer. You can learn dance steps, you can perfect your technique, but without musicality, you will never become a great dancer. That's how important this step is.

Step 5: Strengthen Your Core

You will never become a great dancer without a strong core. I recommend to all my dancers to include core conditioning into your dance training. This will improve your center and body placement. Your core provides your entire body balance, tone and presence.

Dancers are called upon to perform very challenging movements involving various muscle groups. Having a strong core will allow the dancer to benefit with building a strong core. A strong core can help you prevent injuries, and increase your strength and balance, which will lead to a better performance.

When I speak about your “core”, I am referring to central part of your body’s structure. It includes the muscles of the abdomen, the back and the pelvic area. There are many benefits to having a strong core. Let’s discuss a few important reasons a dancer must have a strong core to become a great dancer.

A strong core will help protect your back and other parts of the body from injury. Dancers can sometimes suffer injuries due to fatigue, overuse, improper technique, lack of coordination and weak stomach muscles. It is important that your dance teacher incorporates exercises within the warmup to strengthen your core.

There are some really good exercises that will build your core. Here are a few:

Crunches:



Crunches are a great way to strengthen your core. But crunches done the wrong way could lead to back problems and other physical issues. Without the proper technique you also won’t see the results.

When I refer to crunches, I’m not talking about regular sit-ups. Sit-ups can really cause problems for a dancer in your neck and back. Most people do not do sit-ups properly, and most trainers and dance instructors teach a proper way to do crunches to achieve the maximum results.

Follow these 7 steps to ensure you are properly doing crunches properly:

1. Lie down with your back flat to the floor.
2. Elevate your feet so your knees are at a 90-degree angle to your body.
3. Cross your hands in front of your chest, or place your hands on your temples, but do not hold onto your neck. You can also place your arms at your side.
4. lift your belly button into the base of your spine.
5. Sit up until your elbows or chest reach your knees. Be careful not to lift your head or neck. Let your abdominal muscles do the work.
6. Exhale as you sit up. Inhale as you lie down.
7. Do as many sets of 20 until you feel a burn. Then do 5 more.

Planks



Planks should be done on an exercise mat if at all possible. The proper way to do a plank is to lie face down on the floor and then raising your body, making sure you keep your backside in a straight line. Tighten your abdominal muscles and hold the position for around 30-45 seconds before resting and then repeating.

Remember to breathe during your sets. If you hold your breath you will get cramps.

There are many other core building exercises. You can find these online or on smart phone apps. Remember, make sure you are doing core workouts properly to avoid injury.

Diet also plays an important role in developing your core. That brings me to Step 5 – Diet Makes a Difference.

Step 6: Diet Makes a Difference



You may have heard the term, “dancer’s body”. When someone says he or she has a dancer body, they are referring to how the dancer stands, moves, and the specific quality of their muscle tone. Most dancers don’t carry bulk muscles, like a body builder, but a toned dancer will have long, firm muscles that have been developed through proper dance training and learning proper technique. You can work out every day, take numerous dance classes weekly, but without a proper diet, you will never have the “dancer body” I am referring to.

As a dancer, it's important to maintain a healthy lifestyle. One of the most important aspects of health for a dancer is diet. A proper diet for a dancer is extremely important in order to maintain strong energy levels, endurance and to avoid injury. For a dancer, their body is their “product”. Successful dancers should maintain a balanced diet consisting of plenty of fluids, good fats, proteins, carbohydrates, and plenty of vitamins and minerals.

As most serious athletes know, proper hydration is an extremely important part of their workout. This is especially true for dancers. Make sure you are drinking plenty of fluids during your class and workouts. Water is essential for the body, but you lose fluids (sweat) when you work out. You need to keep the body hydrated at all times to maintain the necessary electrolyte levels. I recommend to my dancers to drink water before, during, and after class.

Carbohydrates should be an essential part of a dancer’s diet. Carbs will provide a dancer with energy for long periods of time. But be careful not to confuse carbs with sugar. I recommend to my serious dance students to avoid sugar at all costs. Make sure you are choosing “good carbs”, such as brown rice, potatoes and pasta.

A dancer should also include fats in their diet. When I refer to “fats”, I’m referring to “good” fats. Foods such as fish, avocados (my favorite), unsalted peanuts, and even seafood contain high levels of the “good fat”. Make sure you avoid or reduce the amount of intake with foods that contain saturated fats (milk, cheese, butter, ice cream, pork).

When it comes to snacking, I highly recommend selecting fruit and vegetables as your snack choices.

Please also avoid drinking soda. I had one of my dance teachers explain to me that drinking soda is like drinking carburetor fluid you put in your car. Soda contains high sugar, sodium and caffeine and it dehydrates the body, which is obviously detrimental to everyone, including dancers.

I want to make sure I’m clarifying my position on recommending a good diet for a dancer. When I speak about having the proper diet, I am not talking about “going on a diet to get thin”. I am speaking about eating properly to stay fit. I never want to promote dieting, especially to my younger dancers. However, I am a big advocate of eating healthy. If you follow a practical approach to eating the right foods, and avoiding the bad foods, you will create the “dancer body” that is strong and healthy.

Step 7: Practice



I am always preaching to my students that after they leave the classroom, they must practice every chance they get. I tell them to start at home, practicing two minutes each day. Review their choreography, work on specific technique taught in class that day. I then tell my students to go from two minutes a day, to 5 minutes. Then expand to 10-15 minutes, and ultimately work up to an hour each day, outside the classroom to home in their skills, choreography and technique. If you want to be a great dancer, you must put in the sweat equity. In other words, to be the best you can be, you must practice! Especially when no one is watching. You can work on areas of weakness or improve and define your dance moves in front of a mirror, alone in your room, where you are not being judged or criticized.

All my top students will take practice very seriously. I also can tell when students are not practicing. They do not progress at the same rate as students who do spend time alone going over their routines and technique. As I discussed in Step 3, Prioritizing your Dance Training, if you want to be a great dancer, you must put your dance training as a priority. But not just in the classroom. Practicing outside the class is also putting your dance training as a priority. All great athletes improve their skills when no one else is watching. This is true for the great dancers as well.

My bottom line for any aspiring dancer...If you want to become a great dancer, you must practice!

Step 8: Surround Yourself with Positive People



If you want to be a great dancer, you cannot be associating with others who are gossips and overly critical. Dancers are very competitive, which is mostly a positive attribute. But sometimes this can be a negative, especially in the classroom. I am always watching my students interact with their peers. I want to make sure they are supportive, and helpful to each other. When I see any type of bullying or “destructive criticism” from one student to another, I do my best to stop this behavior. It can ruin a person’s self-esteem, which will show up in their dance performance.

To be a great dancer, you must surround yourself with people who will help you be a better person. But they are hard to find. Make sure you know who your real friends are and avoid gossip at all cost. Like I said, gossip can destroy a person’s reputation and even affect their dance performance. I preach the “sowing and reaping” principle. If you sow good seed in others, you and the other person will reap big rewards. Find people who will sow good seed in you through support, compliments, positive feedback, and constructive criticism (not destructive criticism).

I also believe that surrounding yourself with people who make you feel good about your dancing is a key to performing well. If you are around a negative person or a group of people who isolate you or put you down, it’s time to move on. Choosing the right group of friends will dramatically increase your happiness, esteem and performance as a dancer.

Step 9: Perform



When I was a professional dancer, I was not the best technician. But I would be selected for dance jobs because I knew how to perform. I was able to “sell” the choreography. In other words, I could take dance movements and perform with energy and great joy. I was known as a dancer who had the “it” factor. My reputation was I could make the choreographer’s work look great because of my ability to “perform” the material. I was able to beat out much more technical dancers, because of the entertainment value I would bring into my dancing.

Throughout this document, I have preached that a dancer must have amazing technique to become a great dancer. But without performance ability, a dancer will lose the audience. When you can perform, and you have a strong technical foundation, the sky is the limit for you as a dancer!

One of the hardest things to accomplish for dance teachers is to help dancers find the balance between building a strong technical foundation and pulling out the performance abilities of their students. I have mentioned this before, but I will always choose dancers who can perform over dancers with great technique who are not selling the choreography.

When you are dancing on stage, are you the dancer the audience can't take their eyes off you? Is your entertainment factor matching your dance ability? If not, it's time to focus on strengthening your performing abilities.

The first thing a dancer must do is realize that when they are on the stage their main job is to entertain the audience. It's not to show off how good a dancer you are. That's what performing is all about. You need to grab the audience's attention and bring them on a journey. You accomplish this by demonstrating the joy of your movements, not the movements themselves. You are literally telling a story with your body, be it a ballet piece or a hip hop routine, the audience must believe in what you are conveying to win them over.

Becoming a great performer starts with your eyes first, then your entire face. Let me explain what I mean. One of my pet peeves is when dancers are on stage but never "look" at their audience. They may get lost in the performance, but if they do not connect with the audience with their eyes, the audience will not be engaged. I preach to my students that their eyes are more important to their performance as their dance moves. Your eyes can tell a story just with a certain look. Your eyes can peer into the souls of your audience and captivate them.

After you master performing with your eyes, let your face come along for the ride. When a dancer is performing choreography that is telling a sad story, the face has to have the proper inflection. In other words, you can't be smiling during a routine, when the choreography and music is telling a painful or heartbreaking story. Your face has to convey the proper emotion. Conversely, if you are dancing to a happy or fun routine, you should be smiling, and your entire facial expression should be one of joy and happiness. So many students forget to smile during their performances, mostly due to the dancer's nerves during a performance, or if they are concentrating too hard on performing the dance moves properly. But with the right amount of practice, the moves will come naturally, allowing the dancer to "feel" the music and display the correct emotion of the specific choreography.

When you add great performing ability to your dance training, you will be unstoppable as a dancer! Start with your eyes, then work on your face.

Step 10: Persevere



My final tip to becoming a great dancer is to have perseverance. This is extremely important trait for every dancer. Not only is perseverance vital to a dancer, it is imperative. As a dancer you must be diligent. Nothing is ever handed to you, especially if you want to make a living as a dancer. There is much rejection to deal with. You can be the best dancer in the world, but 9 out of 10 times, you will not win the part. You may have not have fit the typecast for the job, you were too tall, too short, you had blonde hair, you had dark hair, etc. But a dancer has to maintain persistence.

Perseverance is all about training your mind to handle everything thrown at you. No matter what you experience as a dancer and performer, your mind needs to be as strong as your body so you can handle the rejection, negative comments, and destructive criticism that every dancer

will face. Perseverance is when you overcome all the obstacles in life to stay on course and accomplish your goals.

Sticking with something to completion is hard when you don't have perseverance. I always preach to my students to start what they finish, no matter what the odds. I have had students who did not start off with a lot of talent. I have had students who no matter how hard they tried, could not accomplish a certain dance move. Other students struggled with their performing ability. But some of these same students have gone on to become the top dancers and choreographers in the industry. Despite the odds, they were able to overcome everything that

held them back. If you asked these dancers what was the secret of their success, I am sure they would tell you it was a combination of the first 9 tips I presented, but the most important thing to them was #10, perseverance. They practiced harder, overcame barriers, became passionate and determined about their craft, and despite all the negative shots they took, they kept going...they persevered under the most severe circumstances, to achieve greatness.

In summary, becoming a great dancer will take all 10 steps – having a foundation of technique, studying with the best dance teachers, making dance a priority, learning and applying musicality to your performance, strengthening your body and having a strong core, eating right, practicing when no one is watching, being around the right people, developing your performing ability, and having the perseverance to fight for what you truly want in life.

About the author:



Gina has been dancing since the age of 3 and has been teaching since she was 16 years old. She has extensive experience in Ballet, Lyrical, Modern, Hip Hop and Jazz.

Gina performed professionally for 10 years in Hollywood, California, where she danced with major celebrities, television commercials, music videos, and has worked with the top choreographers. She has performed all over the U.S. and in Japan.

Gina has a passion is teaching, and her students have gone on to perform and choreograph on TV, in movies, on Broadway, and prominent dance companies around the world.

Gina is currently living in Ohio and is the Creative Director and Owner of Spotlight Dance Center, a prominent dance studio specializing in the training of dancers in all dance styles.