

Why Do Professional Dancers Need to Write?

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Professional dancers utilize writing much more than people think. They have to write their own choreography, analyze past works, and even keep a journal. Writing helps with everything from discussing other artists' work to starting the creative process of making a piece. All in all, dancers cannot afford to blow off English class.

I am planning on being a professional dancer in a company. I would like to move to New York or London so that I can join a company, because they are two of the best places in the world for dance careers. They offer many opportunities to perform as well as schools that will expand my knowledge and experience. Although dance leans more towards being a physically-based career, there are many instances where professional dancers need to use writing in their daily life. There is a stereotype that presents dancers as careless and only good for their bodies. Anyone who believes dancers are like this needs to be educated on the various skills dancers need. Dancers need to have precise techniques and must be intelligent. When dancers end their performance career and go into other parts of the dance world, like teaching or choreographing, writing can aid them in their success.

My Professional Dance Aspirations

During my performance career, I would like to create my own work. I want to show audiences throughout different cities my authentic voice and what

makes me unique in a large number of talented dancers. As a choreographer, I will need inspiration for every piece I create. While the inspiration does not have to be a singular light bulb moment, it does have to play a role in my artistic decisions. Inspiration can influence any part of a dance such as the title, the style, the music, or the story being portrayed.

So How Is Writing Going to Help Me with Dance?

I decided to interview my dance professor, Laina Reese Carney, who has had an extremely successful performance and education career. She was a company member at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, one of the most famous modern companies in the world, in New York and toured with them for several years. She also performed every semester during her undergraduate years at the University of Illinois as well as while she was earning her Master's in fine arts at Arizona State University. During this interview, she stated: "I want to end the stereotype that dancers are dumb. My goal as a professor is to build smart dancers. Scholarship is just as important as technique" (Carney). As a student of hers, I can say she does incorporate written assignments along with technique. An easy way to organize this process is to write down all your ideas in a journal. This form of writing allows the choreographer to write anything that could influence the piece and explain why a given choice was made. For our improv class, she has us bring a journal to record thoughts and lightbulb moments we had during a "jam sesh." Dancers can find inspiration for choreography through improvisation and use their notes to guide them later on.

Journaling is a great example of the P-CHAT term activity. Joyce Walker introduces P-CHAT terms (which she refers to as CHAT terms) in her article "Just CHATting." P-CHAT stands for pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory and "it refers to a set of theories about rhetorical activity" (Walker, 71). The term **activity** applies to the journaling process dancers engage in, because this kind of writing requires people to actually dance and learn from their mistakes. They can find a deeper understanding while recording what just happened and how it can be improved or used in the future. Journaling allows dancers to collect their thoughts while also having a physical copy of ideas they had while doing improv, choreographing, finding a concept for a piece they are creating, as well as many other focuses. I find journaling very therapeutic and a great tool to track progress throughout my college and professional careers. It has helped me find where I get stuck and how I can push further to have a steady flow while dancing. It has also brought my attention to what I feel are my strengths. Figure 1 is an example of my

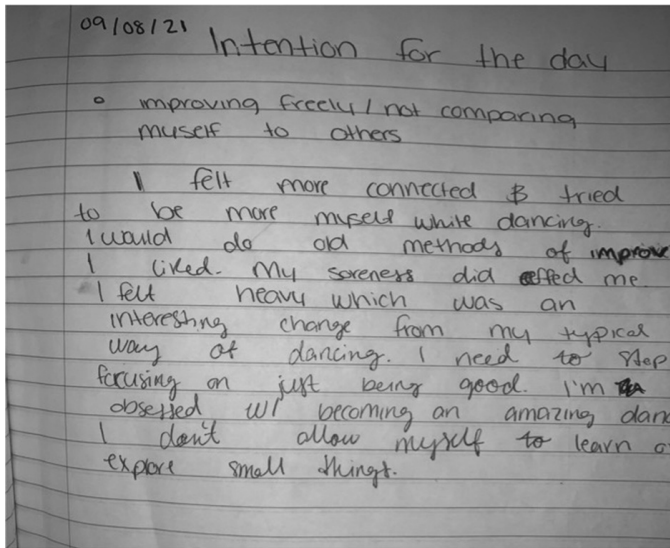


Figure 1: An entry in my improv journal about my intentions going into an improv jam and how my mindset was impacting my improvisation.

journal where I can look back to see how I can continue to grow in that area, as well as why I am uncomfortable with other techniques and styles we have learned this semester.

Steps of the Creative Process

Creating choreography not only requires creativity, but also planning and writing skills. Knowing how to write choreography is crucial because it is how a choreographer can add multiple details into one piece and it helps people who will go on to teach the same choreography in the future.

One way to document choreography is **labanotation**. As described by Christian Griesbeck in “Introduction to Labanotation,” it is “a way of writing which tries to record every aspect of motion as precisely as possible” (Griesbeck, 1). The reception of labanotation is limited to those who understand dance theory and movement analysis. Dancing, or knowing about the history of dance, is a necessity in order to properly read this genre of writing. It also helps people have an idea of how the choreographer wanted the piece to look and how it should be performed throughout time. Dancers should know how to correctly use this form of writing because it has been a successful way of preserving choreography for years. To write in labanotation, there are multiple rules that you need to follow. These rules include that the setup has to have three vertical lines with a horizontal

line crossing through them to signify the beginning of a phrase; shapes are drawn to represent limbs; small horizontal bars are drawn after a phrase is completed to show the timing with the music; and the filling of a shape has to be in the form of lines, a dot, or shading to represent the level in which a move should be completed (low, mid, or high). Look at Figure 2 for a basic guide to labanotation. Writing in this style is a difficult skill to master. This is an example of why dancers need to have a solid understanding of how to communicate through writing. It teaches dancers, choreographers, and pioneers in the dance world what can be passed on through various forms of writing.

Labanotation Is Difficult. Can I Explain Choreography Differently?

A simpler way to record choreography is writing down the composition. Composition can be written in different ways depending on the goals in mind. It can be freestyle or an outline the choreographer follows. Dance composition is another way meant to organize the creative process so small combinations of choreography come together to form a full dance. Compositional writing is a way to record the choreography on paper. Choreographers do this because it ensures they, along with the dancers, will not forget the movement they learned.

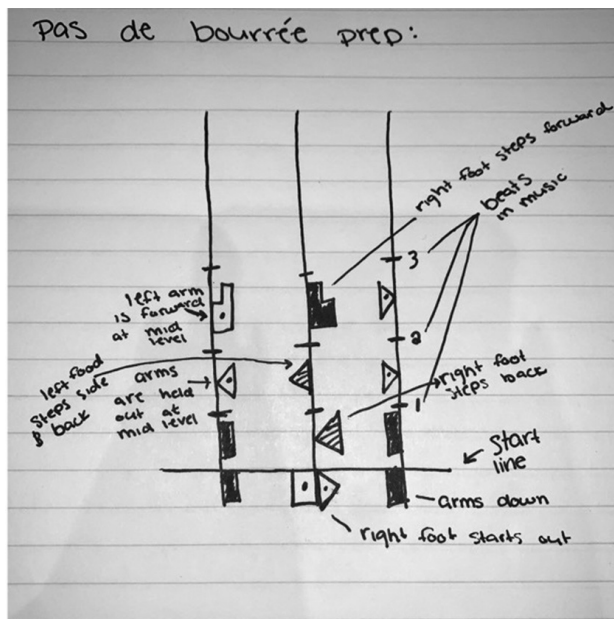


Figure 2: Example of labanotation. A pas de bourrée preparation step has been drawn.

Writing the composition is a combination of labanotation and creative writing. It gives dancers more freedom in how they chose to explain their thoughts, ideas, concept for the piece, and the choreography itself. This concept is further looked at in chapter 4 of *Discovering Dance*, “Exploring Dance Composition:” “you evaluate the movement and determine what works and what does not work as part of the dance work. The final step in the process is elaborating on the movement ideas you have selected” (Kassing). It is crucial to record unique movements on paper because it is very easy to forget a complex step. Composition focuses on writing choreography, so it is easier to add on right where you left off. If the original movement was not described thoroughly, it is likely it will not be done the same way in the future.

Dancing Requires More Than Just Writing

Another way composition aids dancers is when pieces require collaboration. While working with others, it is important for all those involved to have experience with writing and good communication skills. Talking about ideas is effective, however recording these thoughts on paper or an online document will allow the collaborators to be more organized and professional. The difference between people who want to have a career in dance and those who only want to dance in general becomes very clear when they are asked to write anything about dance. In these situations, it is crucial to be able to thoroughly explain your reasoning through writing. For some people, it is easier to explain their thoughts by speaking rather than writing because it flows more naturally and does not have the formality of writing. But writing clear explanations demonstrates the professionalism a dancer has, which will help them stand out while trying to get a job at a company. Professional dance is more than prancing around in a costume, it is a career that demands scholarship and a good grasp on multiple forms of communication. The P-CHAT term, **socialization**, comes to mind when discussing dances created by multiple people. While writing the choreography, the artistic directors, choreographers, and dancers all must come together in order to create one piece. This can influence different parts of the dance since everyone comes from different backgrounds. Everyone can bring new ideas which will make the dance more intriguing to the audience and even for the dancers that are in it.

Yes, Dancers Are Smart

Wrapping up, there are multiple ways to incorporate writing into dance. Most of the writing for dancers tends to be personal and a way to emotionally

connect to the dance. Writing can also be beneficial when remembering why certain artistic decisions were made in the moment. Dancers should utilize writing more because it shows others that more goes into this form of art other than just being pretty on a stage. The stereotype that dancers are careless or are only good for their bodies is insulting. Dancers need to take many classes that prepare them for the professional dance world, and writing is a skill that shouldn't be overlooked.

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Tava Matesi is enrolled as a dance performance major in the ISU Theater and Dance program. She hopes to join a professional company in New York or London soon after graduating. She values traveling and seeing different parts of the world. One of her personal goals is to visit every National Park in the United States.

