

Dance Terms Glossary

Ballet • Jazz • Contemporary



Dance Terms Glossary

This glossary covers essential terminology from ballet, jazz, and contemporary dance styles, designed to help dancers and enthusiasts understand key movements and concepts.

It offers quick, clear definitions of the terms you are most likely to encounter in class, rehearsal, and performance.

Basic Positions and Stances

1. First Position

In this position, the heels are together, and the toes are turned out, forming a straight line. The arms are rounded and held in front of the body at hip height.

2. Second Position

The feet are turned out and placed at hip-width apart, maintaining a straight line. The arms are held out to the sides, slightly rounded.

3. Third Position

One foot is placed in front of the other, with the heel touching the arch of the back foot. The arms are held with one arm rounded in front of the body and the other extended to the side.

4. Fourth Position

This stance involves placing one foot in front of the other with a space between them, while both feet are turned out. The arms can be held with one rounded in front and the other overhead.

5. Fifth Position

The feet are turned out with one foot directly in front of the other, the heel of the front foot touching the toe of the back foot. The arms are rounded and held overhead, framing the face.

By familiarizing yourself with these basic positions and stances, you can build a strong foundation for all other ballet movements and techniques.



Ballet Terms

Term	Definition
Plié	A bending of the knees while keeping the feet grounded. It helps build strength, control, and alignment.
Arabesque	A position where one leg is extended behind the body while the torso stays lifted. The working leg can vary in height depending on the style and level.
Tendu	A sliding action in which the foot stretches along the floor to a pointed position. It trains articulation and placement of the foot.
Relevé	A rise onto the balls of the feet or pointe. It develops balance, ankle strength, and stability.
Pirouette	A turn on one leg, usually with the other leg in retiré position. It requires spotting, control, and strong core engagement.
Port de bras	The graceful movement of the arms through positions. It adds fluidity and expression to ballet technique.
Grand jeté	A large leap in which the dancer appears to split the legs in the air. It is used to show height, power, and extension.
Pas de bourrée	A small traveling step often used to link larger movements. It typically involves three quick steps in a smooth pattern.
Fouetté	A turning movement driven by a whipping action of the working leg and arms. It is often performed as a series of fast, controlled turns.
Adagio	Slow, sustained movement that emphasizes balance and control. It allows dancers to show line, poise, and musical sensitivity.

Term	Definition
Ball change	A quick transfer of weight from the ball of one foot to the other foot and back again. It is commonly used in jazz combinations and transitions.
Jazz square	A four-step pattern that traces a box or square on the floor. It is a foundational step used for rhythm and direction changes.
Kick ball change	A combination of a kick followed by a ball change. It adds energy and sharpness to jazz choreography.
Pivot turn	A turn made by stepping forward, rotating on the supporting foot, and transferring weight to face a new direction. It is often used to change facing cleanly.
Chassé	A traveling step where one foot chases the other. It creates a smooth, gliding quality and appears in many jazz routines.
Isolations	Movement of one body part while the rest of the body stays still. They are used to develop control, musicality, and style.
Fan kick	A high kicking action where the leg sweeps outward in a fan-like path. It is often used for flash and style in jazz sequences.
Layout	A leap or extended body position with a stretched, open line in the air. It creates a dramatic and dynamic look.
Contraction	A pulled-in movement of the torso, often with the abdomen drawing inward. It adds groundedness and expression to jazz and contemporary styles.
Jazz walk	A stylized walking step with attitude and rhythm. It is used to project confidence and stage presence.

Contemporary Terms

Term	Definition
Floor work	Movement that uses the floor as part of the choreography. It may include rolling, sliding, crawling, or transferring weight low to the ground.
Release technique	A movement approach that emphasizes letting go of unnecessary tension. It encourages natural flow, efficiency, and breath-led motion.
Spiral	A twisting action through the spine or torso. It creates a sense of rotation and continuity through the body.
Suspension	A lifted, held quality that seems to momentarily pause movement. It often creates a sense of weightlessness before the next action.
Fall and recovery	A technique that allows the body to yield into gravity and then redirect out of it. It is central to the dynamic flow of contemporary dance.
Improvisation	Spontaneous movement created in the moment. It helps dancers explore texture, timing, and personal expression.
Contact improvisation	An improvisational form built around physical contact and shared weight between dancers. It focuses on listening, balance, and responsive partnering.
Contraction and release	A phrase in which the torso gathers inward and then expands outward. It is used to create emotional and physical contrast.
Tilt	A balanced extension where the torso leans while one leg lifts or extends. It creates a long diagonal line and often appears off center.
Off-balance	A deliberate shift away from a centered stance. It adds tension, unpredictability, and momentum to movement.

 **Quick Tip:** Many dance terms are borrowed across styles with slight variations in execution. Understanding these foundational terms will help you communicate clearly in any dance class or rehearsal.

Continue Your Dance Journey

Keep practicing these terms as you see them in class, rehearsal, and performance so they become part of your working dance vocabulary. Pay attention to how teachers and choreographers use each term in context, and keep expanding your understanding over time. Mastering terminology strengthens both technical understanding and artistic expression.