

Ballet Vocabulary

Primary words

Listed in categories alphabetically

Please note that the definitions are general descriptions/translations of the terms

Terms related to *barre* and/or *centre*:

- Adagio:** Slow sustained movement
- Allonge`:** Extended, outstretched, as opposed to bent or curved.
- Arabesque:** A basic balletic pose, usually performed in profile: The position of the body when supported on one leg with the other extended to the back with the knee straight.
- Assemble`:** To assemble (or place together) the legs in the air
- Attitude:** The position of the body when supported on one leg with the other lifted to the front side or the back, with the knee bent. A pose inspired by the statue of 'Mercury' (by Giovanni da Bologna)
- Barre:** The long, pipe-shaped bar that dancers hold onto for support when warming up. The word is also used to refer to the set of exercised performed at the barre at the beginning of every class.
- Battement:** "rebound," any movement of the leg
- Cambre`:** A bend of the body from the waist, forward, sideward, or backward.
- Change`:** Literally, "changed". A term used to indicate that the feet change position in relationship to each other during the execution of a step (i.e., the foot begins in the front and finishes in the back, or visa versa).
- Cloche, en:** Literally, "like a bell". Refers to swinging movements of the working leg forward and backward through 1st position in steps such as battements degages en cloche.
- Combination:** A number of steps grouped together to form an exercise.
- Cou-de-pied:** On the "neck" (*cou*) of the ankle. The position of the working foot when lifted and pointed in front of, in the back of or wrapped around the ankle of the supporting leg.
- Coupe`:** To cut – The foot is raised to the ankle of the opposite leg.
- Developpe':** The working foot is drawn up the supporting knee and opened in the air in any given direction, "unfolding".
- Degage:** "To disengage" The movement of the foot outward from a closed position to where the toes leave the floor to a position of 15 degrees.
- Extension:** The height of a dancer's working leg when lifted from the floor. Also in reference to the lengthening of a body part.
- Fondu:** Literally, "melted", This term is used synonymously with the word "*plie*". It means on, or with a bent supporting leg.
- Frappe:** Strong brush of the supporting leg with the working foot in coupe, "strike".
- Pas:** A step. Used to refer to any single movement in the ballet vocabulary.
- Pas de cheval:** Horse's step.
- Penche':** "Inclined". Usually refers to arabesque penche', a position in which the dancer tilts forward from the hip, directing the torso and head toward the floor, and lifting the foot of the extended back leg toward the ceiling

- Plie (plier):** To bend - A bending movement of the knees, demi or grand.
- Port de bras:** Movements or positions of the arms.
- Preparation:** The musical phrase and/or movement(s) that act as a lead-in for the dancer.
- Releve`:** A rise. Describes a position of the supporting foot in which the heel has been raised from the floor, and the dancer is balanced on the ball of the foot (or on the toes, if en pointe). Also the combination of a demi-plie followed by the raising of the heel(s) from the floor.
- Rond de jambe:** Circle of the leg (**a terre**) on the ground, or (**en l'air**) in the air.
en dehors: Outward, foot travels in an arc from front to back
en dedans: Inward, foot travels in an arc from back to front
- Sous-sus:** Under-over. One foot being under, or in the back, and one foot being over, or in the front.
- Tondu:** "stretched" The action of the foot leaving a closed position to a fully extending position without the toes leaving the floor.

Terms related to centre:

- Allegro, grand:** Combinations of expansive and widely traveled jumping, movements that incorporate large, advanced-level leaps such as *grand jetes*.
- Allegro, petite:** Sprightly combinations of small jumping movements performed at a quick tempo
- Balance`:** A rocking step resembling a waltz, consisting in three parts of alteration of balance.
- Balon:** A term encompassing the desirable qualities of lightness, ease, and rebound when jumping.
- Batterie:** Jumping movements in which the legs beat, or exchange places with each other, in 5th position in the air one or more times before landing. The effect is one of interlacing or crisscrossing the legs in the air.
- Beat:** To hit the legs together, moving them in and out of 5th position in the air so they appear to crisscross. All batterie is composed of "beaten" movements.
- Cabriole:** Caper, like a goat's jump. The working leg opens straight out; the supporting leg pushes off and beats underneath the working leg, propelling it higher.
- Chaine`:** Linked like a chain – a series of turns with the feet in first position.
- Chasse`:** Chasing one foot with the other – a continuous movement.
- En tournant:** Turning.
- Entrechat:** A beaten jump in which the legs cross in 5th position in the air without change'.
- Fouette`:** Whipping. A strong whipping movement of one leg accompanied by a half or full revolution of the body.
- Glissade:** To glide or slide – a linking or preparatory step.
- Jete:** Spring from one foot to the other, "thrown". **Grand Jete:** Large leap.
- En Manege:** A term used to describe a series of steps (usually turns or jumps) performed while traveling in a circle around the periphery of the stage.

Pas de basque: A step derived from the national dances of the Basques. Taking in three distinct counts.

Pas de bourree: A step originating in country dances. This movement involves three or two steps in any direction that usually changes which foot is in front.

Pas de chat: A cat-like springing movement from one foot to the other, "Step of the cat".

Pas de bourre:

Pique: literally, "pricked" - to prick with the toes as with a needle. 1) A movement in which the strongly pointed toe of the lifted and extended leg sharply lowers momentarily to hit the floor, then immediately rebounds upward. 2) Adjective describing a movement in which the dancer transfers the body weight from one leg (in *plie*) to the other by stepping out directly onto *pointe* or *demi-pointe* with a straight leg; for example, *pike arabesque*.

Pirouette: Whirl or spin - A controlled turn on one leg on *demi-pointe* or *pointe* in any pose.

Promenade: A slow rotation of the body in adagio exercises, in which the dancer, maintaining a pose on one leg with the other raised off the ground, executes many little pivots of the supporting heel in order to turn the body around on the whole foot.

Saute (sauter): Jump.

Sissonne: Named for the creator of the step. Springing up from both feet, landing on one leg.

Soutenu: "Sustained turning."

Tombe`: To fall.

Tour: A turn of the body.

Tournant, en: Turning

Terms related to directions:

En Avant: Traveling forward.

Croise`: Crossed. Refers to a direction of the body in which the legs of the dancer appear, from the audience's viewpoint, to be crossed one in front of the other. Examples: *Croise` devant* (crossed with the working leg extended to the front) or *arabesque croise`* (crossed with the lifted back leg being the upstage leg.)

En Croix: In the shape of the cross. Refers to a ballet convention in which the same movement is performed in sequence to the front, the side, the back, and again to the same side.

En Dedans: Inward. Characterizes any circular or turning movement in which the working leg moves.

Derriere: To the back (behind).

Devant: To the front.

- Ecarte:** Spread wide. One of the directions of the body. (See sheet on body positions.)
- Efface:** Erased, shaded. One of the directions of the body. (See sheet on body positions.)
- En dehors:** Outward.
- En face:** refers to the position of the dancer's body when directly facing the audience. (See sheet on body positions.)
- a`la Seconde:** In the 2nd position. A movement in which the arm or leg is extended to the side of the body is said to be performed a`la seconde.

Terms related to the personnel in a ballet company:

- Ballerina:** A principal female dancer in a ballet company.
- Ballet master/mistress:** The person in a ballet company who rehearses the repertoire and teaches company class.
- Balletomane:** An enthusiastic ballet fan.
- Corp de ballet:** The dancers in a ballet company who do not perform solo roles. Typical of *corp de ballet* work is the performance of choreography in which the dancers move in large groups in unison while changing formation and creating beautiful spatial patterns across the stage.
- Danseur:** The leading male dancer in a ballet company.
- Danseur noble:** A male dancer who is tall, elegant, and aristocratic in appearance and dances leading roles such as the Prince in *Swan Lake* or the poet figure in *Les Sylphides*. He must be an excellent soloist and partner and possess pure classical line.
- Prima Ballerina (Absoluta):** The top-ranked female soloist in a ballet company. This title is usually reserved for only a few world-class ballerinas.

Terms relating to class

- Centre barre:** The exercises that are performed in the middle of the room without the support of the barre and that are directly related in form to the ten standard barre exercises. Examples: *plies, tendus, rond de jambe, fondus*.
- Center work:** All exercises in a ballet class that are performed in the middle of the room without the support of the barre.
- Line:** The sculptural shape formed in space by a dancer's limbs and body. Good line is one a dancer's most valued attributes. It is produced by a combination of flexibility, disciplined training in the positions of the body, and the naturally beautiful shape and proportion of body parts according to the ideal of classical ballet.

Terms relating to physical placement

- Alignment:** The arrangement of parts of the body in relation to each other according to the rules of classical ballet.

Placement: To be placed. A well-placed body is one that is correctly aligned, without useless tension, to allow free motion. The alignment of the parts of the body and the distribution of body.

Demi-pointe: The position of the foot when the heel is raised from the floor and the dancer is poised on the ball of the foot. The term is often used synonymously with the term *releve'* is also *en demi-pointe*.

Dessous: Under: Describes a movement in which one foot steps behind or cuts across in back of the other, sometimes replacing it, as in *coupe dessous*, when the back leg replaces the front.

Over: Describes a movement in which one foot steps cuts across in front of the other, sometimes replacing it, as in *coupe dessous*, when the front leg replaces the back.

Epaulement: Shouldering. Refers to the manner in which a dancer slightly twists the torso when facing straight ahead, bringing one shoulder forward of the other.

Ferme: Closed, as in *sissonne ferme'* (a jump in which the legs finish closed in 5th position).

Ouvert: Open, as in *cabriole ouvert*, a jump finished on one leg with the other held aloft.

Haut, en: High. Describes the height of the arms when they are being held above the level of the head, as in 5th position en haut.

L'air, en: In the air. Used to indicate that one or both feet are off the floor, as in *rond de jambe en l'air* (one foot) or *tour en l'air* (both feet).

Parallel position: Not turned-out; usually used to refer to 6th position, in which both feet are place together facing straight front, parallel to each other.

Par terre: On or along the floor.

Pointe, en: The position of the foot in a pointe (or toe) shoe, in which the heel is raised with the foot pointed vertically, and the dancer stands balanced on top of her toe(s).

Sur les pointe: En pointe. Standing on the toes.

Pronated: Same as 'beveled'.

Quatrieme, a la: In the 4th position.

Sickled: An incorrect position of the foot in relationship to the ankle, in which the dancer overextends the outside of the foot by turning the foot inward from the ankle toward the inside of the leg.

Rolled in, rolled over: An incorrect position of the supporting foot or leg in which the weight is allowed to drop forward onto the inside of the foot or leg.

Terre, a: On the floor.

Tucked under: An incorrect position of the pelvis in which the buttocks are pressed forward, forcing the pelvis to tilt and throwing the hips out of proper alignment.

Working leg: The leg that is performing (as opposed to the supporting leg, upon which the dancer is standing).

Terms related to performing

Character dance/style: A stylized type of dancing derived from folk-dance forms but based upon classical ballet technique. Most of the large classic ballets such as *Swan Lake* or *Coppelia* include character dances, and all serious ballet students are required to study character as part of their training. Typical character dances are those based upon the Hungarian *czardas*, the Polish mazurek, the Italian tarantella, and the Spanish flamenco styles. In addition, the term can refer to any dance based on movements associated with a particular profession, personality, or life-style, such as a sailor's dance. A specific example is the clog dance for Mother Simone in Frederick Ashton's *La Fille Mal Gardée*.

Choreography: The arrangement of the steps and patterns in a dance composition.

Demi-caractere: A term describing a type of classical ballet choreography that is heavily flavored with character-style or folk-dance references. An example of a demi-caractere divertissement is the Don Quixote pas de deux, with its many poses drawn from Spanish dancing. A demi-caractere dancer is one who is better suited to performing these roles than strictly classical ones for reasons to do with his or her physique, line, or natural quality of movement.

Deux: Two.

Pas de deux: Literally, "steps for two." A dance for two people, usually a man and a woman. Structure is 1) an entrada for both dancers in which the man partners the woman, followed by 2) a male solo variation, 3) a female solo variation, and 4) a *coda* in which both perform individual feats of virtuosity, then dance together at the conclusion.

Divertissement: A suite of short dances designed to display technical prowess and charm of the dancers.

Repertoire: The works choreography, or ballet, that are performed by a dance company.

Variation: A solo dance choreographed primarily for the purpose of displaying a dancer's technical prowess.

Virtuoso: Highly skilled. A virtuoso dancer is one who displays dazzling technical prowess, one whose ability is far above that of the average dancer.

Other terminology

Accent: That which is emphasized, usually a particular musical beat

Demi: Half.

Grand: Large. Describes movements on which the legs are lifted to a height of 90 degrees or above, as in grand battement.

- Lunge:** A wide-open (i.e., legs apart stance on two feet in 4th position, in which one leg (usually the front) is bent and the other straight. It is often used as preparatory position for *pirouettes*.
- Mark:** To suggest movements, to dance without doing all the movements “full out”.
- Petite:** Small. A term describing small movements that are not performed high in the air, such as *petite assembles*.
- Rose', ric:** What a teacher!
- Spotting:** The technique of turning the head during pirouettes so as to avoid becoming dizzy. When spotting, a dancer quickly whips the head around and refocuses the eyes with each turn of the body.
- Turn-out:** Rotation of the legs outward from the hip joints so that the kneecaps and toes face outward away from the center of the body. All traditional movements in classical ballet are performed turned-out.