

Ballroom and Latin Dance



For All Dancers

Practice? Practice I hear you say; practice why?

Practising ballroom and Latin dance between classes is absolutely essential. In this document:

Part 1 focuses on *why* practice is critical. **Part 2** will cover *what* to learn in classes for practice and *how* to practice effectively, while **Part 3** will provide *examples* of structured practice schedules.

Part 1: Why Practice?

Dancing isn't just about attending classes. Progress, technique, and overall enjoyment depend heavily on what you do *between* those lessons. Here's why consistent practice matters:

1. Muscle Memory Development

- **Consistency builds instinct:** Ballroom and Latin dances rely on precise movements, footwork, and body positioning. Regular practice helps build muscle memory, allowing your body to execute moves naturally, without having to think about each step.
- **Improved coordination and rhythm:** Practice sharpens your body's synchronisation with your partner and music perfecting your timing. The key to achieving fluid transitions.

2. Refinement of Technique

- **Posture and frame:** Proper posture, frame and technique are essential in both ballroom and Latin styles. Practice outside of class allows time to refine these, which can be hard to perfect during lessons focused on new steps or routines.
- **Attention to detail:** Classes often cover a lot at once. Between sessions, you can slow down and work on specific elements like footwork, balance, and turns.

3. Retention of New Steps and Patterns

- **Solidify what you learn:** New steps and patterns can be easily forgotten if not revisited. Consistent practice ensures you retain the material, building on it in future lessons.
- **Better comprehension:** Repetition allows you to better understand how steps link and transition, helping you grasp connections that might be unclear after one class.

4. Increased Confidence

- **Comfort with choreography:** The more you practice, the more comfortable and confident you'll feel performing routines without hesitation.
- **Reduced anxiety:** Being familiar with your steps reduces nervousness, both in class and during public performances.

5. Physical Conditioning

- **Build endurance and stamina:** Ballroom and Latin dances demand physical strength. Regular practice strengthens your body, enabling you to perform for extended periods without tiring.
- **Improved flexibility and strength:** Dance practice helps maintain and enhance your strength, flexibility, and agility qualities essential to all dance forms.

6. Enhancing Partnership Dynamics

- **Better partner connection:** Practising with your partner outside of class allows you to fine-tune your connection, leading to smoother coordination.
- **Trust building:** The more you dance together, the stronger your trust and synchronisation become, which is vital for leading, following, and executing complex moves.

7. Faster Skill Progression

- **Accelerated learning:** Regular practice accelerates your learning curve. You'll master concepts more easily and advance to higher-level material faster.
- **Self-assessment and goal setting:** Practising on your own allows you to identify weak areas and set goals, fuelling faster improvement.

8. Maximising Class Time

- **Come prepared for new material:** When you've already practised between classes, you arrive ready to learn new steps instead of revisiting old ones. This allows the class to move forward more quickly.
- **Focus on advanced concepts:** By covering the basics on your own, class time can be devoted to higher-level techniques, performance quality, and artistic expression.

9. Building a Strong Foundation

- **Master the basics:** In ballroom and Latin dancing, mastering the basics is key. Regular practice strengthens your foundation, making more complex material easier to grasp.
- **Prevent bad habits:** Consistent practice helps you catch and correct errors early, preventing them from becoming ingrained habits.

10. Consideration for Fellow Students

- **Help the group progress:** Practising regularly not only benefits your own growth but also prevents other students from having to repeat lessons unnecessarily which slows progress owing to repetition of previous lessons. This allows the entire class to move forward at a more consistent pace.

Conclusion of Part 1

There's no doubt that regular practice outside of class is essential for solidifying learning, refining technique, boosting confidence, and improving physical conditioning. It ensures continuous progress, keeps you motivated, and helps you get the most out of your dance journey. To make the most of your training, consider:

- Attending social dances to further enhance your skills.

- Renting space (such as a local village hall) if needed, to ensure you have enough room to practice. Some of our members do.
- Encouraging your school to organise practice sessions and make sure you attend.
- Visiting one of the most iconic ballrooms in the world at Blackpool Tower Ballroom open most days for you.

After all, why invest time and effort in mastering a skill if you don't plan to truly enjoy it? Incorporating weekly practice sessions into your routine maximises the value of your classes, keeps you on track, and prevents the frustration of feeling stuck. Dedicating regular time to practice will elevate your abilities and let you fully appreciate the rewards of your hard work.

Part 2: How to Prepare for Practice

In **Part 1**, we discussed why practice is essential. Now, in **Part 2**, we'll explore *what* to focus on during your lessons to enhance your practice and *how* to structure effective practice sessions. **Part 3** will outline specific practice schedules to guide your learning.

Practising between ballroom dance lessons is the single most crucial step in improving your skills and memorising what you've learned. In fact, consistent practice is often more impactful than taking additional lessons. Now that you understand *why* practice is important, let's dive into how to prepare for it.

1. Competitor vs. Social Dancer: Different Approaches to Practice

- **Competitors:** For beginners or novice competitors, the focus is on mastering a few dances with a limited set of figures. The goal is precise execution, so *technique* is the primary focus.
- **Social Dancers:** Social dancers must remember many more dances, choreography, and amalgamations. While technique is still important, the emphasis is on memorising sequences and being versatile on the dance floor.

Both competitor and social dancers benefit from regular practice, but the content of their practice sessions may differ. Competitors should focus more on perfecting technique, while social dancers should spend more time memorising choreography and transitions.

2. For Beginners: The First 10-20 Hours

The early stages of learning ballroom dance can feel awkward and challenging. However, persistence is key. Commit to at least 10 lessons (group or private) to gain about 10 hours of dance experience. At this stage, dancing will start to feel more natural.

- **The first 10 hours:** You're building a foundation. Focus on getting comfortable with the basic steps and rhythms.
- **At 20 hours:** You should begin to feel more confident and see noticeable progress—provided you've been practising consistently outside of class.

Remember, early learning is often more mental than physical. Progress won't always feel linear, but with consistent effort, you'll experience breakthroughs.

3. Structured Classes for Efficient Progression

Even world champions started as beginners, and the structured approach we use ensures gradual, efficient learning. Each class builds on the previous one, and the way we introduce dances and figures is designed for optimal progression.

- **Focus on technical fundamentals:** Whether it's ballroom or Latin, each dance has unique qualities, but certain technical aspects like posture, footwork, and timing are universal. Practising these between classes will lead to faster progress and stronger muscle memory.

4. If Practice Doesn't Make Perfect, What Does?

The saying "Practice makes perfect" is misleading. It's *correct* practice that leads to improvement. Some dancers practice frequently but make little progress because they aren't focusing on the right things. Others practice less but improve quickly by practising *effectively*.

- **The key is quality over quantity:** Be mindful during practice. Repeating incorrect techniques will reinforce bad habits, which are harder to correct later.
- Although you have tone in your muscles, especially upper body, try to be relaxed for practice. Being tense and over trying does not help learning and retention.

5. Key Points to Focus on in Lessons for Later Practice

During lessons, focus on absorbing the most critical elements, such as:

- **Foot positions and alignment:** Understand where your feet should be and how to align your body for each move.
- **Technical corrections:** Pay attention to the teacher's feedback and take notes (mentally or on paper) after class so you know what to work on in practice.

For example, if you're learning the Waltz, start by mastering the basic figure and its alignment, then focus on additional elements like the rise and fall technique as you continue practising.

6. Differentiate Between Lessons and Practice

- **Lessons:** This is where you learn new material, receive feedback, and make corrections with the teacher's guidance.
- **Practice:** This is where you reinforce and internalise what you've learned. Repetition is critical for building muscle memory and developing confidence.

Together, lessons and practice form a cycle that strengthens both your mental understanding and physical execution of dance.

7. How Much Practice is Enough?

For beginners, aim for at least **30 minutes of practice, three times a week**. This is a manageable routine that will allow you to see steady improvement. Stick to specific days, and be consistent, don't procrastinate! Regularity is key.

8. How to Practice Effectively

Effective practice means focusing on specific aspects of dance without distractions. Here's how:

- **Pick one element at a time:** Spend 10-15 minutes working on a single aspect, like footwork, posture, or arm placement. Avoid trying to improve everything at once.
- **Use slowed-down music:** This helps reinforce your movement patterns without overwhelming you with speed or rhythm.

For example, if you're working on the Waltz, you might focus solely on the rise and fall action in one session. In another, you might practice the timing of your turns.

9. Cultivate Self-Awareness and Seek Feedback

Being aware of how your body moves is crucial for improvement. Pay attention to how different parts of your body (like your hips, arms, or legs) affect your dance performance.

- **Ask questions:** If something doesn't feel right, seek clarification from your instructor. Your question may help others too.
- **Review practice footage:** If you're filming your practice sessions, review the video immediately. This allows you to catch mistakes early before they become habits.

Conclusion of Part 2

To maximise the value of your lessons, come prepared with clear goals and specific questions. Arrive 10-15 minutes early to get in a quick warm-up or practice session.

- **Ask for practice exercises:** Ask your teacher for specific exercises to focus on between lessons (but not during class).
- **Observe others:** Watch videos or live performances of experienced dancers to see what you're aiming for. Focus on one element at a time as you observe.

In short, consistent and correct practice is the key to improving your skills, retaining what you've learned, and enjoying the process. *Happy practising!*

Part 3: Ballroom Dance Practice System with Examples

Part 1 of this guide explained why practice is essential, and **Part 2** covered how to learn and practice effectively. In **Part 3**, we will delve into *how* to structure your practice sessions, complete with specific examples of practice schedules.

Having a structured practice system is crucial for consistent progress. Below is a simple yet powerful three-step method that will help you stay focused and maximise the benefits of your practice time.

Step 1: Choose 2-3 Specific Subjects to Improve

Start by identifying 2-3 specific areas or "subjects" of your dancing to focus on during practice. These should be targeted aspects of your performance or technique. Here are a few examples:

- Maintaining rhythm and timing in every step
- Achieving sharper leg actions
- Increasing hip movement in Latin dances
- Improving posture for better balance
- Coordinating arm movement with leg action
- Leading more effectively with your frame
- Transitioning smoothly between figures
- Pushing off the standing leg for smoother movement
- Being more aware of your partner's positioning
- Maintaining head position correctly
- Building volume and presence in your body (for competition)

Make your subjects as specific as possible. For instance:

- Instead of "Improve timing," say: "Stretch counts '1' and '3' longer in the Cha Cha."
- Instead of "Improve following," say: "Respond quicker to directional changes in Rumba."

Why specificity matters: By narrowing your focus to a particular element, you can improve more quickly and effectively.

Step 2: Allocate Your Practice Time

Once you've selected your subjects, it's time to allocate your practice time efficiently. For example, if you plan to practice for 45 minutes, divide that time into three 15-minute blocks. Dedicate each block to one of the subjects you've chosen. Here's how that might look:

- **First 15 minutes:** Work on turning out your feet in your Rumba routine.
- **Second 15 minutes:** Focus on the rise and fall in Waltz.
- **Third 15 minutes:** Stay on time during basic Foxtrot steps.

How to Practice Effectively:

Focus on one thing at a time: Start with a single element, like perfecting your posture or refining footwork.

Dance at different speeds: Begin slowly, then gradually increase the tempo as you gain control. This reinforces movement patterns and improves muscle memory.

Repetition is key: Stay disciplined and stick with one subject until your time is up. Resist the urge to shift focus before you've fully worked through an element.

Step 3: Create a Weekly Practice Schedule

A weekly schedule will keep you organised and ensure that you cover all dances and key areas. Here's an example of how to structure a week:

Example Practice Plan

Let's assume:

- You plan to practice on **Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.**
- Your primary focus this week is on **Cha Cha, Tango, and Foxtrot.**
- Your 3 general subjects are **posture, timing/rhythm, and leg action.**
- Each practice session is 45 minutes.

Schedule:

- **Day 1 (Monday) – Cha Cha Cha**
 - 15 minutes: Focus on posture
 - 15 minutes: Focus on timing and rhythm
 - 15 minutes: Focus on leg action
- **Day 2 (Wednesday) – Tango**
 - 15 minutes: Work on posture
 - 15 minutes: Refine timing and rhythm
 - 15 minutes: Improve leg action and footwork
- **Day 3 (Friday) – Foxtrot**
 - 15 minutes: Maintain good posture
 - 15 minutes: Stay on time with the basic steps
 - 15 minutes: Focus on leg action and smooth transitions

Additional Practice Plans

Here are some examples of how to adapt this structure based on skill level:

Practice Plan for Beginners

- **Day 1 (Monday) – Cha Cha Cha**
 - 10 minutes: Partner connection and awareness
 - 10 minutes: Footwork in the basic figure
 - 10 minutes: Checked forward walk action
- **Day 2 (Wednesday) – Waltz**
 - 10 minutes: Posture and poise
 - 10 minutes: Rise and fall technique
 - 10 minutes: Footwork in a chosen figure

- **Day 3 (Friday) – Rumba**
 - 10 minutes: Applying floor pressure
 - 10 minutes: Timing and rhythm
 - 10 minutes: Hip action in a chosen figure

Practice Plan for Improvers/Intermediate Dancers

- **Day 1 (Monday) – Cha Cha Cha**
 - 15 minutes: Improve leg and foot speed
 - 15 minutes: Refine arm styling
 - 15 minutes: Leg action and footwork in the Lock Step
- **Day 2 (Wednesday) – Waltz**
 - 15 minutes: Focus on posture
 - 15 minutes: Perfect rise and fall technique
 - 15 minutes: Work on sway
- **Day 3 (Friday) – Rumba**
 - 15 minutes: Refine Rumba walk actions
 - 15 minutes: Timing and rhythm
 - 15 minutes: Hip action in a chosen figure

Additional Tips for Effective Practice

- **Short on time?** Practice multiple dances in shorter segments (e.g., 10 minutes per subject, per dance).
- **Solo practice is valuable:** Even without a partner, you can improve body awareness, footwork, and technique.
- **Plan ahead:** Write down your practice plan before each session. This will help you stay on track and maximise productivity.

Self-Awareness and Feedback

As a dancer, cultivating self-awareness is crucial for improvement. Pay attention to how your body moves and how it feels. If something doesn't feel right, don't hesitate to ask questions during your lessons. Being inquisitive helps you and others around you.

- **Review your practice footage:** If you film your sessions, review the video right afterward. This helps you catch mistakes and correct them before they become ingrained.

Conclusion of the document

Good luck with your practice, and most importantly, enjoy it! To learn to dance you *have* to practice. Social dancers will need to practice more frequently to retain choreography and build memory, while competitors typically focus on refining technique to perfection (which doesn't exist!). However you practice, plan it and be consistent with the plan. No matter your path, consistent and deliberate practice will help enable you to become the dancer you aspire to be.

Wishing you Happy Practice and Happy Dancing !