

Dance Etiquette – Part 1



INTRODUCTION

Dance etiquette is a set of guidelines that help us navigate the social dimensions of dancing.

Why do we care about dance etiquette? Because it is nice to know how to go about in the dancing circles. It makes the difference between having a happy or unhappy dancing experience, the difference between people wanting, or not wanting to dance with you.

WHAT TO WEAR?

Protocol

Dancing has its own culture. If you want to join a group of dancers and enjoy their company, it is a good idea to follow the accepted costumes of their dance group. One of the ways you get accepted into a group is by the way you're dressed.

The more formal the dance, the more formal the outfit. For example, if you are invited to a formal charity ball, anything less than a tuxedo for men or ball gown for women would be inappropriate. On the other hand, at a dance lesson at your local studio, there is usually no need to dress formally.

This is not as hard as it may seem; a little common sense goes a long way. Also, if in doubt, follow the crowd! See what others do and follow suit. If all else fails, you can always ask the dance organizers about the dress code. Below I give a guideline and explanation for dress code, which you may see on invitations and announcements, as well as a general idea of what to wear at different dance venues.

- **White tie:** White tie is the most formal category of dressing. For the gentleman, it means a black tailcoat with matching trousers trimmed by ribbon of braid or satin on the outside of each trouser leg, a white pique' tie, white pique' single or double-breasted vest, and a wing-collar shirt with a stiff pique' front. White gloves are nice optional accessories for gentlemen. The lady appears in a ball gown, which is an evening dress with a full skirt, possibly with open back and low neck line. Elbow-length gloves are a nice addition for the lady.
- **Black tie:** Gentlemen in black tuxedo coat, trousers trimmed with satin ribbon along the outside of the legs, cummerbund and bow tie. The phrase ``black tie'' does not refer to the color of the tie. In fact colorful ties (with matching cummerbunds) are very popular. Ladies appear in ball gowns.
- **Black tie optional:** Same as above, except gentlemen have the option of wearing a regular suit with a tie (bow tie preferred), and ladies wear a cocktail gown or dinner dress. Long to full-length skirts are preferred; short skirts are not recommended.
- **Formal:** Gentlemen in suit and tie (nowadays a sport coat is often an acceptable replacement for a full suit), ladies in cocktail gown or evening dress.
- **Semi-formal:** Gentlemen in dress slacks with dress shirt and tie, jacket is optional. Other options include a vest or a sweater that shows the tie. At the lower end of formality, these events can be attended without a tie, e.g. with a turtleneck and jacket. Ladies in evening dress or dinner dress, but other chic outfits are also acceptable (like flowing pants, etc.)
- **Dressy Casual:** Applies to most practice dances, workshops, and dance lessons. Gentlemen can wear cotton slacks with solid color T-shirt, turtleneck, mock turtleneck, or polo shirt. Ladies have a much wider set of clothing options. Use your imagination and sense of fashion. In general this is a conservative and toned-down appearance that has grown increasingly popular on the dance floors. Don't forget your dance shoes!
- **Country/Western:** Country western attire has variations across the country, but generally it is acceptable to go in blue or black jeans (not stone-washed) and cowboy boots. Make sure that the boots will not mark the dance floor. If you wear a hat, it may be a good idea to take it off when going on the floor. Note that country western folks can be very sensitive about their hats. It is improper to touch or otherwise handle

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someone's hat, even if it sits on a table. For a lady to pick up and put on a gentleman's hat is considered very flirtatious.

- **Milongas:** (Argentine Tango) For both ladies and gentlemen, black or dark themes are preferred.
- **Latin:** This refers to venues that specialize in Salsa, Merengue, Cumbia, etc. For gentlemen, any button-up shirt, solid T-shirt or mock turtleneck, dress slacks, and dance shoes. Jackets are nice, but a vest can be even more stylish. Unlike most other dance venues, bright and colorful outfits for gentlemen are acceptable, although dark themes are more common. Ladies can (and often do) wear sexy outfits: both short skirts and longer slit skirts are popular. Low necklines and exposed midriffs are not uncommon.
- **Swing:** There are no strict rules for swing outfits. Both the Gentleman and the Lady wear outfits that are reasonably neat and chic, although often not very formal. Many types of swing are fast-paced and athletic, so wearing suitable clothing is essential. For example, the Lady would be well advised to stay away from short, tight skirts. A cute trend, especially in Lindy Hop circles, is to wear vintage outfits from the 1930's and 40's. But this is not done everywhere and is not at all a requirement.

Comfort and safety

Wear clothing that makes it easy and enjoyable to dance, both for yourself and your partner.

- Regardless of how informal the dance is, always wear dance shoes. Do not wear sneakers or other shoes with rubber or spongy soles. They can stick to the floor during turns and spins and cause ankle and knee injuries.
- Avoid sleeveless shirts and strapped dresses, especially for active dancing: It is not pleasant to have to touch the damp skin of a partner.
- Sleeves that are baggy or cut low in the armpit are not a good idea, especially in Latin and swing dancing, because dancers need access to partner's back, and hands may get caught in baggy sleeves.
- Accessories like big rings, watches, brooches, loose/long necklaces, and big belt buckles can be dangerous. They can catch in partner's clothing, scratch and bruise.
- Gentlemen: if you have no place to leave your keys and loose change, carry them in the *left* pocket of your trousers. This makes it less likely to bruise your partner.
- Long hair should be put up or tied in a pony tail. It is difficult to get into closed dance position when the lady has long flowing hair (hair gets caught in gentleman's right hand). It is also not fun to be hit in the face with flying hair during turns and spins.

Personal Grooming

Dancing is an activity where two people come in close contact. Before a dance:

- Shower and use a deodorant,
- Brush teeth and use mouthwash or breath mint,
- Abstain from foods that produce strong odors, like those heavy in garlic
- The odor of cigarettes on one's breath or clothing can be very unattractive.

During a dance

- Check your grooming periodically
- During active dance sessions, freshen up and towel off periodically in the bathroom
- Gentlemen, you can carry an extra shirt with you to the dance, in case you need a change.

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REGARDING CLIQUES AND "SNOBBERY"

Sometimes a perception exists that good dancers only hang out with other good dancers. This is a by-product of the fact that many dancers have been dancing together for a long time and know each other better. For the most part, few people within the scene are intentionally reinforcing this perception. Feel free to break the ice if they don't.



ASKING FOR A DANCE

When asking for a dance, it is easiest to stay with traditional phrases:

- "May I have this dance?"
- "May I have this Waltz/Rumba/Foxtrot/etc.?"
- "Would you like to dance?"
- "Care to dance?"
- "Shall we dance?"

Notice what the person is doing before you ask them to dance. Be wary of interrupting conversations.

- Ask politely, "Would you like to dance?" Avoid grabbing a partner and pulling them onto the dance floor.
- One dance at a time is the norm within our dance community (in contrast, there are other dance communities where two consecutive songs per partner is the norm). Should you want a consecutive dance with your partner, ask them first. Consider asking them if they want to dance at a later time.

- It is very acceptable for ladies to ask gentlemen to dance. Most gentlemen are flattered by the offer.
- When there is a group of leads or follows, asking one specific person to dance is less awkward than asking the entire group (i.e. "would one of you like to dance").

How To Say "No"

Ideally, we would all say "yes" to everyone that asked. In cases where you wish to decline a dance, be polite: smile and say "No, thank you." If there is a reason why you can't dance that song, give them a reason. While opinions differ, the authors of this document generally believe that it is not a good idea to just make up a reason not to dance. In other words, try to deal with people honestly and directly. If you would like to dance with the person some other time, offer to dance with them later and make a point to follow up. If you have no desire to dance with this person, simply say "No thank you," with a pleasant, sincere smile. Also, please keep in mind that some people consider it rude to refuse to dance with one person and then dance with another person during the same song. Along this line, there may be valid reasons why somebody will dance with somebody else after turning somebody down (i.e. the song tempo changed, the other person was too forceful, etc...). If this happens to you, realize that it may not necessarily be a personal rejection.

What to Do If They Say "No"

You can always ask again, but give him or her time and space and ask again later. It is usually a good idea to let several songs pass. Also, do not get discouraged if you are turned down. All dancers get turned down from time to time. There are other people who would very much like to dance with you.

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DANCE FAUX PAS TO BE AVOIDED BY WOMEN

The Claw. This is when a woman clutches the man right arm with an iron grip. This can be excruciating with long nails especially in combination with The Cadaver.

The Cadaver. This is when the woman does not support the weight of her own arms or body but hangs off her partner as dead weight that he must drag across the dance floor. Less extreme but much more common are women with a weak frame and spaghetti arms. This is physically taxing for the man since he has put in twice as much effort to lead the woman.

The She-Male. The most common complaint voiced by male dancers are women who lead and/or will not follow the man's lead. This form of gender identity disorder is a guaranteed way to end up on the sidelines and blacklisted unless you are stunningly good looking.

The Iron Maiden. There are women who wish to avoid all body contact short of wearing a chastity belt. The only way for the man to lead a woman who insists on dancing at an arm's length distance is to shout out the dance steps. Body contact is a necessary element of proper ballroom dancing; hence it is not an appropriate activity for those who need their "personal space". This faux pas is only forgivable when the man has poor hygiene.

Miss Sourpuss. Shaking one's head, rolling one's eyes, looking bored, unenthusiastic or pissed off and ignoring one's partner all fall into this category of bad attitude. As one of my dance teachers once stated: "In dancing, it is the job of the woman to look like she is having the time of her life."

DANCE FAUX PAS TO BE AVOIDED BY MEN

The Phantom Menace. Ambiguous or non-existent leading is the most common complaint voiced by female ballroom dancers since it is usually the woman that ends up looking bad when the man doesn't lead properly. It is not the job of the woman to know what steps to do, hence, a firm lead is always appreciated. Lack of frame and spaghetti arms are bad enough in women but dancing is almost impossible when it is the man that is guilty of this faux pas.

The Dictator. Men who lead by barking orders and arm-wrenching are unpleasant. Although this is somewhat rare, what is more common are men who, to varying degrees, bulldoze and drag their partners across the dance floor. This is particularly harrowing when dancing the faster dances with larger men, an experience that is akin to being slammed by granite block.

The Kitchen Mop. Dancing with a man wearing a sweat-drenched shirt is like dancing with a wet dog. Gentlemen, please bring a spare shirt to change into if you have overactive sweat glands. Anti-perspirant is always appreciated.

The Egoist. "The primary job of the gentleman is to make his partner look good." It is, therefore, considered impolite to dance above the level of one's partner. If you sense that a lady is not comfortable with a certain step, take care to avoid it. This particularly true of dips and acrobatic moves, particular those involving throwing the lady into the air. Please be sensitive to your partner's level of dance experience.

The Pervert. A good way to make a lasting impression is to commit this faux pas. In fact, the victims will remember you for all of eternity as "The Pelvis Man" or "Mr. Groper". Wandering hands, indiscreet stares, stalking, unwanted advances, the list of lecherous behavior goes on and on and on...