

# Making Connections: Writing and Dancing Creatively

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## **Introduction**

Words are often described as dancing across a page; the best way to describe dancing is a moving depiction of the words in our body. Many forms of expression have similar elements and the purpose of this study is to explore the connections between writing studies and dance and discover if there are positive correlations between the two. Aside from doing research and collecting information on the subject, I have been gathering my own data from a wide range of dance students, performers, and teachers, in an attempt to gain feedback on the importance of English in the professional dance world. This whole research process began when I found myself becoming increasingly frustrated at the thought of having to take numerous academic classes, including English, when I was a dance major in a conservatory setting. I was upset that I had to devote time and energy to something that I perceived as having no overall benefit to my dance career. The more I thought about it though, I came to the realization that there are many similarities between dance and writing, and that they can be connected to form a well-rounded and expressive performer and artist. This paper will attempt to explain some of those similarities and present a solution to the frustration felt by many dance students in a college environment about having to connect two forms of study that are seemingly unrelated.

## Choreography and Communication

To begin, it is important to look at the physical structures of the words for dance and writing and how they come together. In the article “Writing for the Body: Notation, Reconstruction, and Reinvention for Dance,” Mark Franko discusses the etymological roots of the word “choreography,” referring to the process of creating and structuring movement to form a dance. Franko says that it shows the two actions “writing (*graphie*) and dancing (*choros*)” and suggests a relationship between “writing as movement and dance as text” (1). This confirms a deep-rooted connection between the two forms of expression and storytelling and puts an emphasis on how writing and dance have characteristics of each other that make them very versatile forms of communication. This is a very interesting concept and it allows for a connection in artistry and technique in both arts, which is important for the continuation of creativity in the arts world, and the preservation of traditional works through recorded notes. It is good to think about the history of dance and writing and how both of them came to be. It helps us understand what connections they could have simply by existing on the artistic side of human invention.

Choreography is such a pivotal piece of the dance world and the creative process is a huge reason why writing is so important to dance. Mikea Brandon states on the concept of writing, “I’m the choreographer, and my words dance how I want them to” (1). This statement embodies the essence of creativity and what it means to be an artist. Writing and learning to express feelings through a pen and paper can be a way to begin coming up with ideas for choreography, or help the dancer feel more in tune with the character they are playing. Jasmine Ulmer dives further into writing in the dance world and talks about how writing in a choreographic setting provides an “alternative mode of

communication for dance writers” (1). To be able to communicate well is vitally important in any professional field. Learning to communicate ideas and artistic visions in many different ways is a skill that is amazing to have in order to help everyone involved in a creative process, and make sure the work comes to life according to the choreographer's vision. Along with being a way to generate ideas and record dance material, writing is also a very good skill to have in general as a professional. It gives dancers the ability to send important emails, pursue jobs through sending their résumés to companies or directors, or if needed, seek jobs in other fields.

### **The Impact of COVID-19 on The Dance World**

Right now, a lot of dancers are out of work due to the fact that most theatres have been shut down for COVID-19. With jobs in performing being so unsteady, it is crucial to have other skills that can help pay the bills. There are a lot of dancers that are ending up in administration work for dance companies or schools, and they are required to use writing skills every day. This year the majority of classes for college students have been online, and instead of learning in a hands-on setting, the courses consist of watching performances or documentaries about dance and then writing responses to analyze them. It makes the teacher's life so much easier that the majority of dance students know how to write formal essays and can communicate with correct grammar to express ideas. A *New York Times* article by Gia Kourlas entitled “Ballet Is Hard Enough. What Happens When You Lose a Year?” follows the pursuits of several professional dancers during the pandemic. James Whiteside, a professional dancer with American Ballet Theatre, said he gave himself two goals: “To maintain [his] body, and to flex [his] creative muscle” (Kourlas). He ended up recording music and writing a book that is due

to come out in August of this year. Many other dancers have also taken the route of channeling their artistry into other forms of creation. Writing books, blog posts, or even just journaling can be a way to let out the emotions of what many dancers are going through and share some of that struggle with others. Learning many new skills can be very fulfilling and can give dancers a new perspective on life. It is always important to be versatile and multi-faceted, and for the dance world in the midst of an ongoing pandemic, it is a matter of sustaining an entire field of art that is based on performance.

### **The Audience: Validation and Criticism**

Another very important piece of the narrative between these art forms is the position and importance of the audience in both writing and dance. Both dancers and writers often become taken over by the idea that there is a certain expectation or opinion held by the witnesses of their craft. A major purpose of writing and dancing is to share information or stories and communicate feelings with an audience. Unfortunately, it is very easy to get so caught up in the performative aspect of the art that sometimes the work and performers themselves are critiqued to the point that "the visceral reaction of the audience takes precedence over the art itself" (MacAulay et al. 93). The need to be recognized in a personal form of expression can be a wonderful thing to share with an audience, but it can also make the process difficult and create feelings that challenge one's identity and feelings of worthiness as an artist. The act of pleasing a viewer could most definitely be the driving point of a choreographer's vision, but it should not have to be. In a perfect world the artist should feel free to perform or create just for themselves and not feel like they have to prove anything to an outside party.

This is something that even dance legends have struggled with. Victoria Thoms discusses the legendary Martha Graham in an article on the intersection between writing and dance in Graham's work. Martha Graham is considered by many to be the mother of modern dance and she had a massive impact on the way dance is performed today. However, even she felt that the audience "provided a witness to confirm her 'being'" (Thoms). The fact that this legendary pillar in dance history felt this pressure to be confirmed or validated by an audience in her work proves how big an impact the people who partake in art have on the art itself. Dance and writing both have this commonality, especially when it comes to performance and reading literature. People want to read good books and they want to watch beautiful dances. They expect to be satisfied by their entertainment, but for the sake of their integrity, the artists need to focus less on trying to please the audience. This past year has been tough on dancers for many reasons, but the lack of performances and by extension the presence of the audience has left some dancers with a feeling of lost purpose. Why dance when it is not for anyone or any reason? The importance of performance arts can feel selfish when people look around and see others suffering or dying. The drive toward being back onstage can get pushed to the back burner when personal feelings of stress or fear get in the way of enjoying movement simply as it is. Dancers work for the applause and live for good reactions from critics and the audience. When there is no one to validate the performance, it can feel worthless. Many dancers have quit and those who are trying to stick it out are struggling to stay motivated during this time of uncertainty. Although this can be sad, many dancers are finding fulfilling paths for themselves in other fields where having the experience from college courses like English is crucial.

**Writing is Everywhere**

Even for dancers not pursuing other career options, writing is inevitable. It is very historically important to record dance notes in order to keep dances and choreographic expressions alive, when the original creators are no longer here. It is an incredible privilege to be able to look back and see what their vision was through the written records and still perform those pieces on stage today. Someone has to be able to take those notes and understand both the movements that need to be recorded and have the knowledge to record them efficiently and effectively. Aside from using actual dance notation, which is an alternate form of recording the movements, it is very helpful to write down information about the dynamics and quality of a piece. This is especially important when restoring traditional ballets that may not get as much performance time as more neoclassical repertoire. Another aspect is that for ballet specifically, the vocabulary is mostly in French. Having basic spelling and grammar skills, even if only in English, is immensely helpful when recording choreography and can make it much easier for everyone involved to take in information. In rehearsals there is often someone taking notes on rehearsals to post for the dancers to read later about corrections or changes to choreography that will make the piece look its best on stage. Aside from work in the studios specifically for the dancers, many times the teachers and choreographers are in charge of writing cast lists, ballet programs, and other very important communication such as newsletters or grant proposals. Considering these duties that a lot of dance teachers, choreographers, and studio owners see as common tasks, I thought it would be interesting to take a deeper look at what some professionals thought of getting a good education in English in addition to rigorous dance training.

**Personal Research**

I selected a range of dancers, teachers, and administrators in the dance field and asked each person to respond to three questions that would give me a good idea of their perspective on the subject. Did they in the past, or currently, take an English class in a college setting? Did they see any benefits or downsides to taking (or not taking) an English class? Do they use writing skills on a regular basis within their dance related career or studies?

There were various responses, but the majority were in agreement that English has a huge benefit on the overall success of a dancer or student entering the professional world in any field. Many of my peers who are still in the midst of the college setting agreed that even though it seems like a pain at the time, balancing dance time with academic classes is very healthy and expands their minds. One senior dancer emphasised that reading literature is very important and gives dancers valuable cultural knowledge. Especially now when dance choreographers are able to travel all around the world to bring their choreography and ideas, it gives dancers a huge advantage to be able to learn about all kinds of cultures and history through reading. Anything that can open a dancer's mind to the vastness of the world, and the dance community more specifically, is always a bonus.

I had the privilege to get feedback from Cynthia Crews, a former ballerina with Tulsa Ballet, and the current artistic director of Lawrence Ballet Theatre. She had much to say in favor of taking English and learning writing skills, especially at a collegiate level. She says that through taking English “a student can explore different thoughts and belief systems than the familial ones they know. Studying non-fiction, fiction, and poetry is a tool to become educated, but also to become intelligent as one navigates

through a changing world” (Crews). She took many English classes in college in pursuit of her BFA in Ballet Pedagogy, and uses these skills almost everyday as a director, teacher, and especially as the president of the MidStates branch of the prestigious Regional Dance America. If not for those writing skills she would not be able to make such a positive impact on the dance community.

Another professional I talked to, Hanan Misko, is the current School of Dance Director at the Lawrence Arts Center and uses writing and business skills daily. Misko danced as a young person and graduated from The Juilliard School of Dance. He says that he was required to work with a tutor to improve his English and grammar skills and take liberal arts courses even in the conservatory setting. (Misko). I looked further into the ideology behind why those courses are required even for dancers trying to succeed professionally in New York City. The Juilliard website has a blurb that discusses this concept. It says that all undergraduate students participate in courses in literature, philosophy, history, social sciences, arts, and languages. Classes that will help them develop a deeper understanding of themselves and the greater world they are a part of (The Juilliard School). Mr. Misko’s career truly shows the versatility of people who gain these skills. He danced and performed with many well known companies before settling down to have a family. He continues to teach dance and runs the Arts Center School of Dance very well due to his experiences as a dancer combined with his studies in liberal arts. It truly goes to show that as a dancer there are so many pathways that can be followed and it is better to acquire extra skills that may not be needed, instead of wishing later that more options were available.

### **Physical Processes and Technique**

Transitioning to look at some more technical elements of connection, we can focus on the physical process of writing. Writing a successful piece is never simply done in one draft, instead it is “roughened by interruption, deletion, erasure, and overwriting” (Brandstetter 6). This to me sounds a lot like the process of rehearsing a dance piece. We are constantly striving for perfection and finding that perfect combination of steps and artistry to reach the ideals of the choreographer. On the other hand, this same article takes a quote from William Forsythe that states, “The choreographic idea traditionally materializes in a chain of bodily action with the moments of its performance being the first, last and only instances of a particular interpretation” (Brandstetter 7). This concept of never truly dancing a piece the same way twice is accurate, and one thing that is notably different from writing. In writing you end up finding the perfect combination of words to tell your story, and you leave it at that, but in dance the movement is constantly being revised and done just slightly differently. The idea of the writing process and having certain drafts and steps leading up to a final draft can be loosely translated to choreography and dance, but the fluidity of the art of dance makes it less permanent. The interpretation of the choreography can depend on big changes such as which dancer is performing, or even tiny differences such as the time of day, the dancer’s diet, or the support of their shoes or costume. This difference is very fascinating, and the living, breathing, and changing form of performance is one of the things that makes dance so exciting.

It is important to note how many different forms of both writing and dance there are. Elizabeth Claire discusses the body in motion and the “readability and interpretation” of dance in the forms of text, performance, gesture, symptom, and archive (10). Within these five forms, expression and communication can be achieved

without words, and considering how people use forms of movement every day to show other people their feelings or thoughts, it is very easy to see how they can be used.

Comparing these five forms to writing, there are so many different mediums of writing that include text posts, essays, books, blogs, etc. There are so many ways to connect with others and share inner monologues or thoughts. Also connected to these forms there are varying genres of storytelling. In writing there are fiction, non-fiction, historical, romance, and many other types of stories being told, while in dance there are ballet, modern, contemporary, and many other historical, traditional, and cultural dances. This reiterates the fact that humans are not single faceted, and neither are our forms of communicating. Being aware of how much people are capable of and not staying inside the comfortable places for the sake of laziness or ease is incredibly important. Art is about challenging our inner thoughts to come out and be displayed for others, and as scary as that is, it is also miraculous and beautiful that writers can create such beautiful stories and poems, and that dancers can choreograph movement that brings people the same amount of joy.

### **The Current College System**

Looking at the college system of most dance programs there is definitely a disconnect between academic classes and the 'more important' dance technique classes. Yes, dance technique is absolutely necessary and without it there is no point in trying to attain a career in dance, but there is not enough emphasis placed on traditional schoolwork. Often rehearsals can be scheduled at any time up until the last moment, which makes it hard for dancers to attend in person academic courses. Something to consider after reading this research is that maybe there should be courses in English

specifically tailored to the needs and specificities of a dancer's career. Learning to write well in the context of résumés, grant proposals, performance notes, and the many other ways dancers use writing, could be very useful. It might also open up dancers to the options they have as intelligent human beings in a world that is always looking for innovative creators to bring color and light to the entertainment industry. Instead of being forced to take generic classes that are targeted toward any college students who could get any office job and succeed, it would be far more beneficial and worth the time that any English class demands, to allow dance students to take a course that values their skills as dancers and builds upon the things they will really need to know as aspiring performers and creators. Inspiring students is something that many teachers take pride in, and finding a way to teach students things that will benefit them, while also letting them explore a skill they may not realize they enjoy, is something to encourage.

## **Conclusion**

Concluding this paper by stating that dance and writing both have a place in communication, and that there is a positive link between the two, seems redundant, but this research has made it clear that there are huge benefits for dancers, or any human being, in taking English and other liberal arts courses. Writing studies are crucial to this complex world we live in. Communication is an ever important factor in any professional or non-professional setting, and learning the skills to be competent at expression through writing will only add to someone's ability to express themselves through other forms of art, which in turn allows people to be more open to sharing their authentic selves with others. After this pandemic, finding ways to connect with each

other is more important than ever, and looking at the dance community there is an amount of awareness that needs to be brought to performance in general. Writing about the struggles and triumphs of this past year has been and will continue to be something many dancers turn to in an attempt to get their feelings out and move on. It is my hope that anyone who reads this paper will gain some respect for both writers and dancers and the amount of work and energy it takes to be good at either. They have much more in common than anyone would ever assume, and it is fascinating to study the rhythms of storytelling in whatever form it takes. In the future I would love to see dancers finding joy in the more sedentary aspects of learning and gaining valuable skills in a way that allows for their individual skill set. There is a vision here for learning environments filled with motivated students excited to pursue whatever their dreams are, and it is time to get rid of the antiquated concept of general and baseline education requirements and create more focused courses that allow students to realize the full extent of their passions. Dance and writing are just two aspects of creativity, and there is infinitely more that can be discovered about the connections and benefits of cross training in any aspect of learning.

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