

# “What Class Expects of You” & “Getting the Most Out of Class”

Excerpted from *The Ballet Companion* by Eliza Gaynor Minden.  
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In today's world of instant informality and less than perfect manners, ballet class provides an oasis of true courtesy and dignity, a remnant of the royal decorum of the Baroque age. Studio etiquette may seem mysterious at first, but its importance soon becomes apparent. You are creating an environment conducive to learning, and you are physically demonstrating the esteem in which you hold your art, your teacher, and your fellow students.

Considerate, respectful behavior is expected. Courtesy is especially important for performing artists; putting a show on stage requires cooperation among directors, managers, performers, technical crew, and front-of-house staff. A performance is a complicated machine with a lot of moving parts, and politeness is the essential lubricant.

**Be on time.** Arriving late disturbs other students. Your teacher has carefully planned the class so that it builds on the exercises done at the beginning. If you must be late ask permission to enter (you can do this with eye contact and a hopeful and contrite look). Locate a spot at the barre before walking into the room, and take your place quickly and quietly. Do a few pliés on your own to warm up. It's especially important that you not try to sneak in unobserved after roll call. If the teacher does not note your presence, your attendance record looks bad and that can make all the difference in when you are allowed to go on pointe or how you are cast in a production.

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**Be neat.** Keep your hair off your face and neck. Hair that moves is a distraction. It should be tight against your head so that you can spot freely. If it's long, fasten it securely in a bun or French twist. Ponytails and long braids are hazardous; they could smack you or someone else. A general rule: Don't wear jewelry in the studio. It could fly off or stick someone, especially in a partnering class. Small stud earrings are allowed in some studios, but never dangling earrings, bracelets, large necklaces, or a wristwatch. Dark or bright red nail polish looks creepy on stage and for that reason it is often prohibited in class as well.

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**Be clean.** Respecting others means wearing clean clothes and sweet-smelling shoes, and attending to your personal hygiene. Shower before class and use antiperspirant or deodorant; keep some tucked in your bag as well. Avoid strong perfumes or cologne. What smells fine to you may be overpowering to someone else.

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***Dress the part.*** Follow the dress code. The intention is not to quash individuality but to enable the teacher see clearly. Even if there is no uniform, don't wear wild outfits or hide under layers of clothing. Wear clothes that show you are ready to take class. This not only sends a message to the teacher about your seriousness, it also sends a message to yourself. You will dance better if you are properly dressed for class.

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***Mind your manners.*** Dancers are ladies and gentlemen. They are polite. They don't lean on the wall or the barre, and they don't sit down unless directed to do so. They wouldn't dream of chewing gum in class.

It is a privilege to have live piano or other instrumental accompaniment rather than recorded music. Treat the accompanist with the utmost respect. Never lean on the piano, use it as a barre, or place things on it.

Rudeness to teachers or the accompanist is unthinkable in ballet; you could be dismissed from class or even expelled from the school. Yawning, talking, whispering, or having private giggles with your friends counts as rudeness.

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***Pay attention.*** You're there to work, so watch and listen, especially when the combination is given. Some teachers may not show it twice.

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***Stash your stuff.*** Your studio may well be so honest that you can blithely leave your dance bag unattended in the dressing room. Sadly, that's not the case everywhere. Especially in big cities, your dance bag goes with you into the studio. Look for the pile of dance bags and place yours with it, making sure it is safely out of the path of dancers. In crowded, unfamiliar studios put it where you can keep an eye on it.

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***Do the combination as given, and do it in its entirety.*** If everyone is doing one thing and you've decided to "improve" it, it's not only a distraction, it's downright disrespectful to your teacher. There are exceptions: a teacher might ask more advanced students to do a combination on demi-pointe or to add beats. If there are steps you must modify because of a physical condition, speak to the teacher beforehand so it isn't a surprise to her.

Always finish every combination. Even if you flub it completely, the discipline of ballet requires that you finish it, and finish it with as much poise as you can. Sighing, making faces, or otherwise showing your frustration or other emotions is inappropriate.

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**Know where to stand.** If you're new in class, notice whether the other dancers have set places at the barre. Dancers are as territorial as lions, so try not to displace anyone. The teacher may suggest a spot for you. Otherwise, find an empty place, ask your neighbors if there's room, and settle in. You need to be able to extend your leg in grand battement as far as it can go both front and back without whacking the person next to you. If there isn't enough room, angle out when doing extensions.

If there are portable barres in class, help set them up and remove them. If you're new, offer to help, but let someone who knows where the barre goes place it. Men, be cavaliers. Take the barres away for the women.

When class moves on to center floor, the teacher may find a place for you in line. In some schools the lines rotate when the combination repeats so that everyone gets a chance to check placement in the mirror. In many classes no one is allowed to hide in the back and be a habitual follower; all must take a turn at being in front and on their own. If the lines don't rotate, then the honor of standing in front usually goes to the best students: it means the teacher trusts you to be an example to others. Work hard for that honor.

When everyone lines up to dance across the floor, take your place in line and be ready to go. Know the right number of phrases or counts between groups so that you start on cue. If you're not going to go, make it clear by getting out of the way.

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**Drink politely.** Do drink before class starts and carry a water bottle—but the norms of the gym don't apply to ballet class. If the teacher allows it, you may drink from your water bottle between barre and center, but not between barre exercises and never while a teacher is giving a combination.

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**Ask permission to leave.** Even if you are suddenly taken ill, you should ask permission to leave the studio. Wandering in and out of the room is not allowed. If you absolutely must leave early, ask the teacher's permission before class starts. Don't leave in the middle of a combination. Acknowledge the teacher by catching her eye and communicating your thanks with a silent wave then leave unobtrusively.

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**Make time for ballet.** Your brain understands what you ought to be doing before your muscles do. Coordination, line, speed, and strength develop only if you train your muscles through regular repetition. It's great fun to take ballet recreationally, but you can't expect much improvement in your technique if you take class only once a week.

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**Make time for rest.** Professional dancers generally take one day off a week. Allow yourself at least this much rest. Your body needs it.

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**Be ready for class.** Arrive in time to bring your mind into focus and stretch or warm up. If you need them, have your pointe shoes ready in your dance bag, no fumbling with toe pads in the middle of class. Once class starts there are no bathroom breaks except for real emergencies; plan accordingly. Don't eat a big meal just beforehand, but don't dance on an empty stomach either.

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**Take barre in a different spot periodically.** Don't fall into the "this is my spot" trap. It's helpful to see yourself from different angles to be certain of your placement and line. Face the mirror straight on at some times; look at yourself in profile at others. Also practice without the mirror—there isn't one on stage.

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**Mark the combination.** To mark means to move through steps without doing them fully. Most people learn combinations much faster if they mark while the teacher demonstrates or explains. Lift your leg just a little rather than to your full extension or walk a step instead of jumping it. Change direction and orientation. Arm movements, however, should be done fullout and not marked to avoid developing bad habits. Be mindful of getting in the way of other students.

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**Work on corrections immediately.** Even for professionals, class is not about being perfect. Don't be frustrated by a correction; be honored that the teacher feels you are worthy of his personal attention. Take corrections very seriously; they not only improve your technique, they protect you from injury.

Teachers expect you to try the combination again, incorporating their corrections right after they give them. Do the best you can: you may be able to correct the error immediately, or it may take more practice.

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**Stay after class and practice any step that's giving you trouble.** Use a quiet corner or an empty studio. Be careful about practicing at home or unsupervised when you are beginning ballet. If you do a step incorrectly repeatedly, it's that much harder to set right. Bad habits can sink into your muscles as easily as good ones.

The world's greatest, and probably shortest, commencement speech is said to have contained only three sentences, "Never give up. Never give up. Never give up." Take this to heart and realize that you are not alone. When the combination seems so fiendishly difficult that you despair of ever getting it, look around; if you're having trouble it's likely others are as well. An amateur dancer told me that he was about to admit defeat on a series of turns when he noticed that a principal dancer from a major company was falling over, too. Try again.

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