

How to Survive the Harsh Reality of Grading in Ballet

Advice from a graduating dance major to an incoming freshman

by Janine Montag

White knuckles grip the wooden barre, beads of sweat line the curves of your cheeks. You stare anxiously at your reflection hoping not to mess up the combination. You take a quick nervous glance at the professors, hoping for a second that they might smile back. They stare back at you with blank faces. Winter break anxiously awaits, and thoughts of this past quarter rush through your head—*I hope I was good enough.*

College is known to be a time of growth, experimentation, and self-awareness. You step into a new environment and constantly meet new people. Your mind is like a sponge, soaking in every opportunity. You're a student, same as everyone else, but there is one difference that separates you from the rest: You are a Dance Major. You've grown up learning time management because of your busy rehearsal schedule, teamwork due to your dance collaborations, and accepting criticism from the countless times your teachers have told you to "hold your core!"

Like many of your fellow dance majors you've probably chosen to come to this university because you know you will graduate with a well-rounded education both academically and in the performing arts. Something that you may not know yet, however, is how much a grade is going to affect the very thing you love the most: dancing.

My university program gears students to become professional dancers, which is great, but students routinely believe that you have to be good at ballet to succeed as a dancer. The department systematically favors ballet by having five levels of ballet, with a minimum three-day-a-week requirement—more resources than in any other form. Four out of the seven full-time faculty for technique classes are ballet instructors. For those dancers, like myself, who know they will not become professional ballerinas, this can be very difficult. Before becoming a dance major at university, you probably have never received a letter grade for dancing, and you assumed that if you did, it wouldn't be hard to get an A. You also know that after these four years you probably won't ever be graded in dance again. Still, these years are crucial, and although artistry is very important, grades can be the defining factor in higher education and lead to paying positions afterward.

Receiving a letter grade in ballet may restrict dancers to their professor's ideals of perfection and may stifle the kind of artistic growth specifically beneficial for them. In consequence, students' motivation to go to class decreases; lack of feedback leads to less effort, and those with "natural" ballet talent continue to reap the benefits. If you are anything like me—the future big booty, flat-footed, muscular try-hards out there that will continue getting Bs—this one is for you. Graduation can seem far away but will come soon enough, so I hope my advice and a few tips will ease your time here as artists in this rigorous yet rewarding program.

For many, the fact that attendance dictates a grade weighs heavy on a dancer's mind. Our attendance has a direct correlation to our grades, which makes sense, since the professor can't grade your capabilities in your absence. There's also an untold reality of attendance: much of the time the dancers who have the ballet body and come with good

training prior to this program seem to get more leverage for missing class. This can also be discouraging for those who attend class every day and put forth the effort and still can't manage to get the grade they believe they deserve.

A dancer gets better because of the amount of discipline and practice that is put in. It's a simple concept—show up, work hard, get better. “Practice makes perfect” is a saying that everyone knows all too well, but it becomes easily overlooked when the result of all that practice is a low grade. It is easy to start counting down your absences and taking advantage of the rules that allow some absences. I think due to the rigor of the program, it's honestly nice to have these days off, but too often I hear, “Ugh, I have to go to class, I have no more absences.” At this point I feel that the mindset has shifted from wanting to go to class and improve to dreading class and feeling obligated to go only because your grade will drop otherwise.

Often, because our major requires us to take class, we lose sight of the fact that we have extraordinary access to dance, the thing we love. We forget that it's a privilege to have “free” dance classes. Yes, we are paying tuition, therefore we are paying for classes, but, as part of our daily grind of university life, these classes often seem free. Most graduates from the dance major program warn us to take advantage of class because never will we have the time or money to take class all day.

Why do dance majors all of a sudden appreciate our classes after we no longer have them? Well, I believe the attitude of the dancer has changed in several ways after college. We are no longer “judged,” and by that I mean, we have the freedom to make mistakes in class, take risks without fearing a professor will take note, and a bad grade will ultimately lower our GPA. The stakes also get higher after college. You are no longer fighting for a letter grade but perhaps for an audition, a job. Which is why exploring freely in the studios now will really be the most beneficial to you in the long run.

So, let's fix this problem before it starts. It all begins with remembering your roots, why you like to dance, and why you wanted to be a part of this program. Making your dream of becoming a professional dancer into reality is important and can get lost in the mix of performances, midterms, and trying to maintain some sort of social life. In order to combat losing your goals in the university dance setting, Sanna Nordin, dance psychologist and writer of *Dancing Head First* suggests writing down “S.M.A.R.T.” goals. This translates to goals that are specific and measurable, achievable/ambitious, rewarding responses, and time limited. These will help you remember why you will be spending the next two hours in a studio instead of relaxing on the beach.

One of the biggest aspects of having S.M.A.R.T. goals is getting rewarding responses, meaning that you get regular feedback. In our department the feedback that is received in class is often too generalized, and although general corrections are useful, you may still not know what you need to work on personally. In other academic classes on campus, more formal methods of review and feedback are offered for the students' improvement. In science, for example, we are able to take the test and get the graded paper back, noticing where our mistakes happened and how we can fix them for the next exam or course. In a dance department, the “tests” are based on our bodies. The graders/professors are writing down their evaluation as the final is occurring, yet students rarely get to see that paper. The anxiety that is felt throughout the year due to the

guessing game that occurs with improvement feels endless. Personal feedback from instructors is almost non-existent.

Although we receive corrections throughout class, not many students receiving personal pointers for improvement unless they ask for a separate meeting outside of class, which makes seeing the final grade even more tense. In many courses, the professors could use more transparency when it comes to the final. A way they could do this would be to have the dancers come to the dance office during finals week and pick up the sheet that the professors write on during the final.

Another change that could help to improve the grading process in ballet would be to have a midterm, which is standard in other disciplines across campus. It would allow dancers to know where they stand and how they can improve before the final. Because there isn't a midterm in place for ballet, I encourage you to pick a date and ask to record yourself taking class. Take notes on what you think might be worth practicing and never let your self-dedication die.

In general, the biggest piece of advice I could give you as an incoming freshman to help solve this problem is to set up appointments to meet with professors early on in the year. These teachers are always busy, and every year there's a new batch of eager students who want to make an impression. Still, the best way to have a teacher notice you is for you to demand that they do. Don't be nervous—email and set up a meeting simply to talk. This will allow you to set up future appointments with professors with more ease. By taking initiative and attempting to receive feedback before the quarter ends, you will show that your interest in learning, not just getting a good grade.

I interviewed a wide range of dance majors from freshman to seniors about their ballet background and how they felt about grading in ballet at the university, I found almost all of them mentioned perceived favoritism in ballet technique classes. They thought that those who got the most attention were “naturally talented,” meaning they had the ideal ballet body, being thin, with very arched feet, great turn out and high extensions. Hard work and dedication in class, it was thought, could often get overlooked for lack of facility. Frustrating as that sounds, this is the world of dance. Just keep in mind that you are not in class to impress your teachers, you are there because you ultimately want to improve your technique and artistry.

Grading in ballet can be very subjective, and if you perceive there are biases in the grading system, this can lead to a decrease in effort and overall disliking of your art form. It is up to you to remind yourself constantly why you love to dance. A great tip for this would be to carry a journal, as tedious as that sounds. Write down what dance has taught you that day, and what you did well. This positive reinforcement will lead you to appreciate yourself and the program. I look back at my four years and really wish I'd done that.

As I approach graduation I look back and know these tips would have been very helpful to learn early on, so that my drive to continue in ballet wouldn't die. So, although the system favors ballet and grading in dance can be very difficult in general, these key points could help ease your time and keep you focused and happy.

Just remember:

- Take advantage of all your opportunities, especially class!

- During class remind yourself that you are more than a grade and that your personal effort and self-motivation will help you become a better artist.
- Create your S.M.A.R.T goals.
- Email professors and set up meeting times so they get to know you.
- Ask what is being graded on in the final.
- Ask for a midterm
- Film yourself once and examine how you can grow.
- Ask to see your final exam sheet so you can improve next time.
- Carry a journal to write specifically about class and dance.
- Try to not get discouraged when you think you've reached a grading cap—you are always growing
- **HAVE FUN!!** You only have four years to work before graduation, so manage the system to your benefit.
