Learning to dance is all about a successful marriage of body and mind. For many of us cerebral types, we spend most of our time in our heads.

*Dancing is extreme multi-tasking.*

All of your body parts must coordinate. You must think on your feet. You must learn how to be in your body and use your mental abilities to your greatest advantage.

Use this checklist to keep your learning on track. I’ve grouped the 10 skills into three categories based on **intelligence, learning ability, and practice.**

**Build Your Intelligence**

1. Body Awareness
2. Balance
3. Flow
4. Musical Intelligence
Body awareness

An inner sense of where your parts are.

To develop great body awareness you need an intuitive understanding of your anatomy. You need a felt sense of your joints and all the ways they move. Moreover, you must feel how all your pieces function as a whole.

Do your legs act like separate things with their own brains? Or do they work together with the pelvis and spine to push out of the floor? Do your arms move like you're a robot? Or are they connected dynamically to the core?

Get greater body awareness by challenging your body with different kinds of classes. That will give you a much broader movement vocabulary, teaching your body all the ways it can (and can’t) move.

Many dancers secretly take lessons in Alexander Technique or Feldenkrais. Get creative and think broadly. You never know what a movement class can teach you until you’re there.

Balance

Stability, equilibrium.

Everyone falls. In fact, the body is constantly falling and recovering. Balance is not a state of lock-down, where you tense every muscle to keep from falling.

Balance is a delicate equilibrium. The better your balance, the more quickly you recover from falling. Eventually, the amount of falling you do is nearly imperceptible. You sense the falling and it flows into your next move. Falling becomes purposeful (if not premeditated).
You won’t realize how poor your balance was until you get good at it. And when you’re good, it’s hard to imagine what better feels like.

Never, ever stop working on balance.

✅ **Flow**

Momentum, follow through.

To improve momentum, smooth out the bumps. Commit to your ideas. Move all the way through to the natural ending of your movements. Don’t stop yourself all the time.

Stopping yourself is an expression of fear. When you move without second-guessing yourself constantly, your body learns quickly by trial and error. The fear does not dictate.

So what’s the problem? Are you afraid of making a mistake? Are you trying not to fall, or look stupid? Are you worried about bumping into someone?

When you observe a moment of hesitation, identify the fear behind it. Give it some acknowledgement. And then keep going.

Experience will teach you that, ultimately, **flow is about mindfulness**.

Be present in the moment that is happening now.

✅ **Musical Intelligence**

Dance is still dance without music. But many people find it less so. Either way you feel, developing greater understanding of music will only help your dancing.

First, you’ll need to be able to decipher where the beat is, and match your movement to it. If you are rhythmically challenged, you can practice matching your walking to the beat of a [metronome](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metronome).
Eventually, you’ll be able to discern more complex rhythms, song structures, even different musical instruments in a composition. In simple genres, you’ll be able to anticipate where the song is going.

Listen to lots of music. Especially in, but not limited to, your genre. Short of learning a musical instrument or taking a music class, this is the best option.

If you’re a music beginner and you’re ballsy, try learning to read music online.

**Improve Your Learning Ability**

5. Visual Learning
6. Beginner’s Mind
7. Self Analysis

**Visual Learning**

There’s no way around it. In every dance class you take, the instructor will expect you to learn by watching.

This whole watch-and-learn thing can be a source of frustration for people who prefer to learn other ways. But here’s a secret: It’s sometimes frustrating even for people who ARE good at visual learning. Instructors can move too fast, or not demonstrate things clearly.

If you are feeling frustrated in class, you may need more repetition. Ask the instructor to demo the movements one more time. After class, ask someone to help you figure out the counts. Be proactive and get the help you need.

With practice, you will get better at watching and learning.
Beginner’s Mind

Openness, eagerness, a lack of assumptions about how things work or what the answers are.

Children are experts at Beginner’s Mind. An adult, however, hears the word “step” and thinks s/he already knows what it means and how to execute it. Adults try hard to put new experiences into safe, recognizable categories.

The most successful learners actively pretend they are seeing and hearing everything for the first time.

Imagine you’d never heard of “step.” Now, what can you learn about what it means to “step” in dancing? It’s not going to feel like anything you’ve ever done before.

Some people want to know exactly how everything is done before they are willing to try something that looks complicated. Often, however, we are better off adopting a trial by fire mentality.

Be willing to not know something. Be excited to constantly find new answers and new questions.

And remember, even a sensei can be a grasshopper.

Self Analysis

The ability to evaluate your movements.

You’ll get loads of feedback from your dance instructors over the years. Oh yes, you certainly will. But when it comes down to it, you ultimately hold the key to improving your dancing.

Does it feel right? When you answer that question with a solid “yes” or “no”, that’s self analysis.
Good body awareness is the foundation for self analysis in dance. Interpret your answers without self judgement. You'll inevitably be your own worst critic, so don't beat yourself into the ground too hard.

Here's a method for honing your self analysis. Practice a dance step that is hard for you. Video yourself, if you can. When you think you've figured out what you're doing wrong, don't fix it yet. Instead, show the move to a trusted dance friend and ask, “What can I do to make this better?”

Match their responses to your analysis. Get several opinions if you can. Each will inform your ability to scrutinize your mistakes.

The Zen of Practice

8. Right Kind of Practice
9. Reward Substitution
10. Tenacity

✔️ Right Kind of Practice

Practice hard things the most. Review easy things to make them better. Do a lot of it.

Ignore the illusion that you've got something figured out, or that it's “good enough.” Practice a bit past the point of feeling frustrated or bored, and slowly build your tolerance for longer periods of focused practice. Take breaks and come back to it.

And never do mindless repetition. Muscle memory is hugely important. Mindless repetition will certainly get you there... but imagine if you walked the same way you did the first time you took a step? Ug. You'd walk like a one-year-old.

“Perfect practice makes perfect.” Often your teacher will throw out suggestions in class. Listen for those, and write them down after class.

Amateurs practice until they get it right; professionals practice until they never get it wrong.

You can be either. It helps to know which one.
**Reward Substitution**

Getting yourself to practice is often hard. You know you want to get better at dancing, but the results are not immediate. So how do you make yourself practice now, to get those results in the future?

You need to create a reason to do it now. Something that is immediately satisfying. This is called reward substitution. Even if you sometimes really enjoy practice, there will be other times it’s really hard.

Reward substitution is one of the most important skills you need.

You might decide you’ll wear your cutest dance outfits to practice in. You may buy your favorite chocolate bar to eat during your 2-hour practice, since you’ll be burning enough calories. Give yourself something you love but don’t normally get, and make it so you can only have it during practice.

Unless you have a reason for doing something now, you will procrastinate.

**Tenacity**

Perseverance, determination.

Even when you’re good at practicing, great at reward substitution, there will be times you want to give up.
Those are the times you need to dig deep and remember why you started dancing. Tenacity doesn’t magically manifest because you have passion. It takes effort to keep passion alive. Concrete hard work. An ability to say, “Screw it. I don’t care if this is hard, I’m doing it anyway.”

Tenacity is a state of mind. It’s a stubborn refusal to give up on yourself. The feeling of doggedly working past a boundary is unmatched. But you won’t learn that until you get there.

Keep trying. Don’t let anyone or anything get in your way.

**Bonus Tip!**

After reading through this whole article, you might be feeling some overwhelm, some trepidation. All these things to learn! Who has the time?

Breathe. Relax. Let yourself digest. The overwhelm will pass.

Thanks for reading! Stay awesome,

*Rebecca Brightly*

**P.S.** Did you get this from a friend? Click here to get more of my [free brain candy for dancers](#).