

TEACHING | How-To

by Elaina Loveland

A Game Plan

for Game Day

Get students feeling ready and confident for a college dance audition.

The college admissions process is daunting for all students. But for college-bound dancers, the prospect of auditioning can be even more intimidating.

The good news is that, with some effective coaching, you can ease students' fears. Here are some tips on how to help prepare them for the big day.

Step 1: Get the details.

With as many audition formats as there are programs, it's often overwhelming for students even to begin thinking about how to prepare. Are auditions required for acceptance or scholarship? Are students required to prepare a solo?

Call ahead of time to get details on what to expect. And keep in mind that auditions often reflect the philosophy and focus of a program.

The audition at State University of New York, Purchase College, for example, determines whether a student will be accepted as a dance major before he or she even applies for admission to the college. Auditioning students take a ballet and modern class; some are then invited to present a solo.

At the University of Arizona, students are required to take ballet, modern and jazz classes, because all three dance techniques are equally emphasized in the program. "Students have to be technically proficient in enough disciplines so they can survive the program," explains Jory Hancock, head of the dance division. "We look for a combination of both the quality of the student's [existing] dance technique in addition to his or her



A neat appearance and appropriate attire are just as important as stellar technique at an audition.

Colin Fowler

potential. We try to imagine what the student could accomplish at the end of a few years of study in our program.”

Butler University has yet another approach. Instead of one or two large auditions, the school holds 10 to 12 smaller ones with only 10 to 12 students in each, with no solo requirement. “You take two ballet classes at two different levels within regular ballet classes with dance majors already at Butler,” explains Libby Dye, now a senior at BU. “This allows the faculty to see how you would work with the dancers already in the program, and you get a feel for the classes you would take as a Butler student.”

Step 2: Evaluate repertory.

If a solo is required, discuss the possibilities with your students. The choreography should highlight a dancer’s abilities, incorporating adagio phrasing, for example, if he or she is a strong adagio dancer. By the same token, don’t choose a solo for a dancer in an unfamiliar genre.

Ideally, the piece should be one that the student already knows well and loves to perform. If joy can be seen in a student’s dancing, then that piece has the most potential for helping him or her achieve a top-notch audition performance. However, if a student hasn’t already mastered a solo, recommend a few from established repertory that might be more suitable. Some dancers may think they can do something well, but it is a teacher’s watchful eye during regular technique classes that can offer the best advice about what choreography will best reveal their abilities.

As for original choreography, call the department and ask what kinds of solo pieces they have seen students perform recently and if they have any recommendations. If they don’t mention original choreography, ask if it is appropriate.

Step 3: Make the most of rehearsals.

Regular technique classes are, of course, key to students’ success at auditions. However, you will also want to set aside time to coach them privately. Students should begin rehearsing with you a few months before a scheduled audition to truly master the choreography.

Once you have selected a solo together, make sure dancers can perform the choreography in any space. “Rehearse the solo in different spaces and [facing]

Top 4 Finishing Touches

Make sure your students’ appearance and conduct are as impeccable as their technique.

- 1. Neat appearance and proper behavior.** Hair should be worn very neat and off the face. Jewelry should be minimal. No talking and no gum chewing.
- 2. Simple, appropriate dress.** Programs usually inform students of proper attire, but when in doubt, be neat: For a ballet audition, women should wear a black leotard and pink or beige tights, and men should stick to black tights, a white T-shirt and white socks. For a modern audition, have students wear a solid color leotard and tights or unitard (no holes, no bicycle tights, etc.).
- 3. Professionalism.** Students should dance with grace; they should know how to use the mirror without staring at themselves, and not make faces. They should have the knowledge of when to observe the teacher, when to mark a combination, when to do it in their heads or with their hands, when to do it full out and everything in between.
- 4. A smooth interview.** If students are interviewed, they should make eye contact with as many panel members as possible and speak clearly and not too fast. It is imperative that they know the names of their teacher and choreographer, as well as the composer of the music to which they will perform.

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different directions,” counsels Carol K. Walker, dean of the School of the Arts and director of the Conservatory of Dance at SUNY Purchase. “You never know what size studio the audition will be held in.”

Walker offers these additional words of wisdom to dance teachers and students:

- Don’t try to have students learn choreography from a video.

- Make every second of the solo count. “From the first second we want to see you dance,” she says, “so make sure there are not 10 to 15 seconds of waiting time at the beginning of your music.”

- Never exceed the time limit in the solo. If the requirement is a minute and 30

seconds, be sure to adhere to that rule.

Step 4: Review audition etiquette.

It’s also essential to go over proper audition etiquette and the importance of following directions. According to Walker, teachers should coach students on how to quickly change groups, move across the floor, line up and stand when the teacher enters the room. They should also coach dancers not to block the musician’s view of the teacher and not to walk in front of the teacher when he or she is demonstrating.

What should students do if they make

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Thomas Moore/Courtesy of SUNY Purchase

a mistake? Advise them to stay professional and keep dancing to the best of their ability. “If, during the audition, we see someone fail at something and then fall apart, we write them off,” says UA’s Hancock. “But if they fail at first, and then fight through it, we get some sense of not only their technical skills, but their will.”

Step 5: Remember the “je ne sais quoi” factor.

Finally, remember that knowing the steps is not enough. Just like a professional audition, a college dance audition must show a dancer’s personality, not just solid technique.

“There is a fine line between being correct and following directions quickly and clearly [yet] showing yourself as an individual who has something to say through movement,” explains Walker. “We want a dancer who almost understands before we say it what we expect.” SUNY Purchase also looks for students who can assimilate new information quickly and are confident and hungry to do more—“a dancer who silently demands that we see him or her.”

Hancock agrees: “We look for dancers with a kind of fire in their eyes...18 year olds who dance as though they are 10 years older. Some sense of humility in what is worn, coupled with a look of determination and joy in the face and carriage, sends the most positive, promising message.” Most of all, Walker says, “we look for dancers who have something to say through dance.” **DT**

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