

Beginners Line Dancers Guide

Your First Steps

Linedancing is a choreographed style of dancing. That means, variations and mistakes aside, when you step out a linedance, you are following a sequence of steps that have been conceived by the choreographer or choreographers. Rather than write out a dance sheet or learn a dance step by step, choreographers and linedancers have come up with names for short sequences of steps - thus instead of saying "step to the side, cross behind, step to the side, step together", one merely says "vine". While this does make things a *lot* easier, quicker and simpler for instructors, choreographers and dancers alike, it does have the unfortunate result that linedancing is full of jargon. And like any activity that is full of jargon, unless you know the jargon, ie: the names for at least the basic step sequences, you will, without doubt, be totally clueless when you first try to learn a dance.

When you start off at a beginner class it is the task of the instructor not only to teach you dances and to boost your confidence, but just as importantly, to also teach you at least the basic step sequences. Of course teaching these step sequences is usually done as part of teaching a dance - the instructor will teach a series of steps and then inform the class the name for that sequence. As the class improves, the teacher will increasingly just use the step description. Very rarely an instructor will teach a particular step sequence by itself - back when I first started I remember my then instructor getting the whole class in a circle and then practicing shuffles, around and around and around, until we'd gotten it right. Remembering the named step sequences is actually more important than trying to learn a particular dance - while dances come into popularity and then vanish into oblivion, the step sequences are eternal - at least as eternal as linedancing, long may that be! Progressing from novice to beginner to intermediate and finally to advanced is really a matter of learning more and increasingly complex step sequences and putting them together.

Some step sequences are syncopated, others are not. A non-syncopated step sequence is one where each step in the sequence is done on successive beats of the music. Syncopation is where you do two steps in the one beat. Syncopation is usually not part of beginner level dancing, however there are a few syncopated step sequences which can be found in beginner level dances.

Phrasing & Counts

Line dances are usually phrased as either an 8-beat dance or a 6-beat dance, the latter being known as waltzes. You should not confuse a linedance "waltz" with a ballroom waltz - whilst some linedance waltzes are very similar to ballroom waltzes (especially when done as a partnered dance), other's are anything but. One of the fastest dances I've ever learnt was, amazingly enough, a waltz - simply because it was a 6-beat dance. Strictly speaking, it is the song that is phrased in either 6 or 8 beat and this phrasing is imposed on the dance, but since this is written for line dancers, not musicians, I'll not worry about the distinction.

Whether a linedance is a 6-beat or an 8-beat phrased dance, it can be broken up into blocks or 6 or 8 counts - something that is immediately obvious when you look at a dance sheet (there are exceptions, but that's the choreographer playing games). A beginner dance is usually 32 counts long (for an 8-beat phrased dance) or 4 lots of 8 counts. Most waltzes are 48 counts, beginner or not.

Starting Tips

If you are a beginner, the following is a list of suggestions that may make learning to linedance easier, less frustrating and more enjoyable. Many of the points I have scoured from various sources, others are the result of my own learning experience.

Be patient! Rome wasn't built in a day - don't expect to be dancing with the best of them after just one lesson. For most folks it takes about three weeks before they are confident with their first dance. If it takes longer, don't worry - how quickly it takes you to pick it up initially has little bearing on how good you'll be a year on.

Practice, practice, practice! Practice may not make perfect, but it will increase your confidence and help you learn a dance. Don't just practice the dance in class - run through it at home, at work, at school .. anywhere and anytime you have the chance (and the room). Also practice the basic steps .. vines, shuffles etc. Grab a copy of the dance sheet - either off the net or from the instructor to help you practice away from class.

Balance is important. Keep your body straight and your centre of weight over the foot your weight is on.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Remember, YOU are paying the instructor to teach YOU how to linedance. If you are having trouble with a particular step or can't seem to pick up a dance and need more help, ask the instructor.

After all, that's what you are paying them for. And don't hope that someone else will ask that "stupid question" you really need answered - if everyone is hoping someone else will yell for help, no one will ask and the instructor will probably think no one is having trouble.

Don't be discouraged if you seem to be the worst dancer in the class - everyone started off as a novice. Today's two left-foot stumbler may be tomorrow's champion.

No, you don't need a partner.

Proper footwear is very important. No, I don't mean y'all have to all wear cowboy boots, rather you need to wear shoes or boots that are comfortable and provide just the right amount of traction. Leather soled footwear is best, but not compulsory - especially for beginners. For my first year or so I wore a pair of sneakers whose tread had been worn flat. If there is too much traction (ie: grip), then your ankles will be quite sore afterwards (this is also the case if the floor is in a poor way). If there is not enough traction, then you'll be slip-sliding all over the floor and, for a beginner, that'll likely mean an occasional fall. If the floor is too slippery for your footwear, there are various types of tape which you can put on the soles - ask around, someone will be able to tell you what's available locally. I use "fabric tape" which I get from the local hardware store. If the floor has too much grip (eg: a poor wax job or lots of spilt drinks), talcum powder works wonders - however be sure it's the floor and not your footwear and be warned that some clubs don't permit this (it's also a no-no at a social). Other than that, common sense should dictate your choice of footwear. Remember, you are dancing on a wooden floor so anything that could damage the floor is a no-no. High heels are also a big no-no - apart from the damage to the floor, they're a killer on your feet while dancing. Oh, and the rest of your outfit is entirely up to you.

When you go to your first class make sure it's a beginner class and introduce yourself to the instructor beforehand, making a point of telling them you are a novice. When the class starts, the best place is up the front, in the middle. Yes, you can hide up the back, but that makes it harder to see the instructor and more importantly, the instructor's feet.

If you bump into someone, briefly apologize and keep on dancing. Bumps, and worse, are a fact of life on the dance floor. No matter how good you may be, you'll still occasionally bump into people or fall over. I've seen people trip over whilst competing - far more embarrassing than doing the same in class!

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