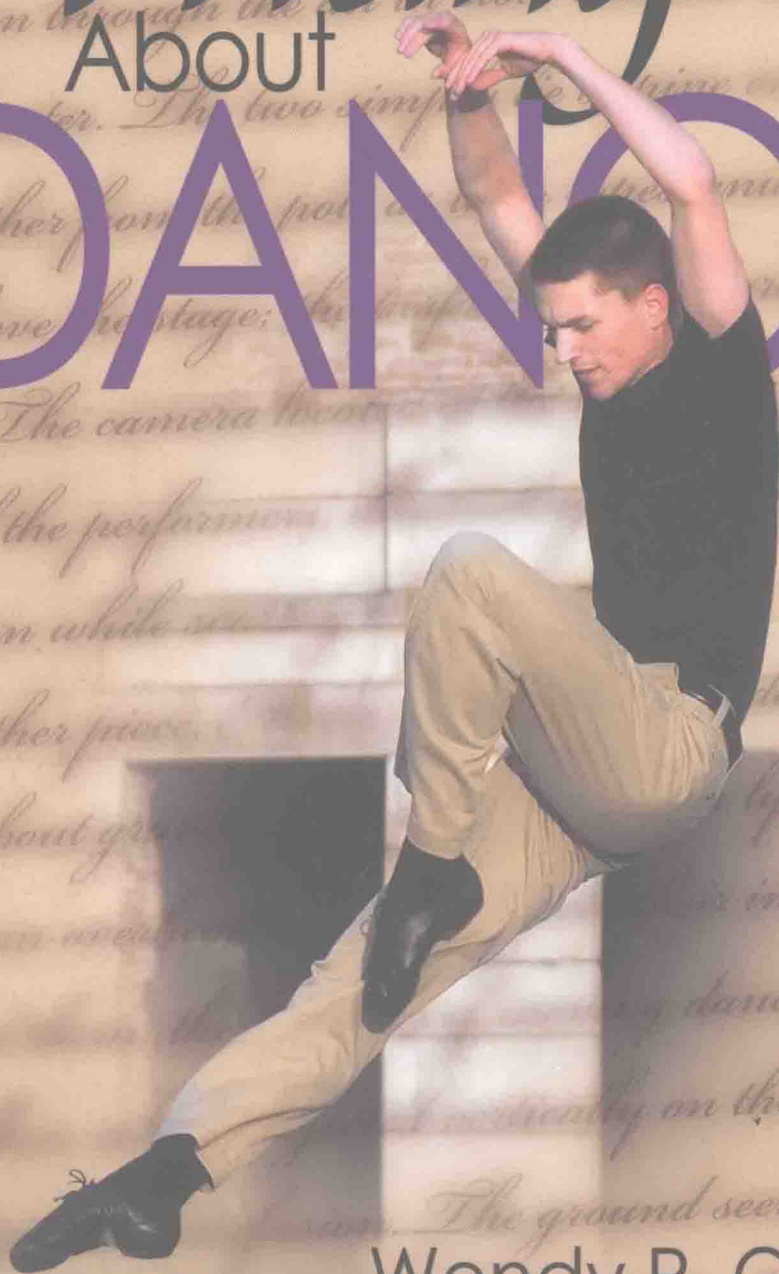


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Writing About DANCE



Wendy R. Oliver

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Writing About Dance



Wendy R. Oliver, EdD
Providence College



Human Kinetics

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preface

When I first began teaching dance at a small Minnesota college many years ago, I assigned dance critiques and research papers as a part of every course. For dance critiques in particular, students asked, “What should we write about?” and “How should we go about doing this?” I soon discovered that no book or article was available that would answer these questions. Although there were guides like Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*, there was nothing that specifically addressed writing about dance.

To solve this problem, I began writing down my goals and expectations regarding dance critiques, which I shared with my students. I attended workshops on writing across the curriculum and worked briefly as a dance critic. During my time in graduate school, I chose to delve even more deeply into teaching dance criticism. As part of my research, I sat in on the classes of writing instructors and read research on writing instruction, learning theory, aesthetic education, and dance criticism. I analyzed the styles of some professional critics and encouraged my students to emulate the best aspects of these critics’ work. I also assigned dance research papers, dance essays, journals, and reflection papers; as a result, I found myself needing to define what it meant to do excellent work in each case.

During that time, I became convinced ~~that~~ writing, learning, and critical thinking go hand in hand and ~~that~~ the most complete kind of learning in any subject area generally involves writing. As dancers, we understand that to be truly engaged in dance, we must experience the physical act of doing it. Writing, like dancing, is a form of doing that engages us intellectually, visually, and even physically (although in a more limited sense than dancing). Adding writing and dancing together offers an exceptionally well-rounded learning experience that involves many areas of the brain.

In discussing these ideas with colleagues, I found that although most dance instructors were assigning papers, they felt that they did not have the time to devise detailed instructions. Many dance courses are not structured in a way that allows class time for teaching writing. *Writing About Dance* helps both students and teachers with this problem. It brings together the many kinds of writing that

can be used in a variety of dance classes—technique, composition, improvisation, dance appreciation, history of dance, choreography, introduction to dance, and dance criticism. This book offers informal writing exercises, such as journal writing, as well as instruction in writing formal dance papers, such as dance critiques and research papers. Students can use this book as a guide for many kinds of dance writing and for general writing information that applies to all academic subjects. Teachers may use it for ideas about ways to incorporate writing in their teaching as well as to guide students' writing.

You may also be interested in exploring the various writing assignments included in chapter 3 of this book that a variety of teachers have created for their students. Some of these are exercises that can be done in class. For instance, if you have class discussions on dance issues or about dance performances, you will probably find that a brief in-class writing exercise preceding the discussion can have a positive effect on the quality of the discussion. Other exercises are to be completed outside of class, such as writing a thoughtful letter to the teacher regarding personal goals in dance technique class.

Although I am no longer teaching at that small college in Minnesota, my current students in Rhode Island still have the same questions about writing assignments. To answer those persistent questions and to provide a practical guide to writing about dance, I wrote this book, which I hope you, too, will find useful. Whether you read it from cover to cover or simply pick out the sections relevant to a particular assignment, this book will challenge you to do your best thinking and writing about dance.

acknowledgments

Many dance critics including Deborah Jowitt and Marcia Siegel have inspired me regarding my own writing as well as in developing my students' writing. At Temple University, Brenda Dixon Gottschild taught me about dance criticism and dance research; Sarah Hilsendager taught me about pedagogy. Penny Hanstein at Columbia helped focus my approach to dance criticism pedagogy and related research. I am indebted to all the dance educators who contributed writing exercises to this volume, and especially to Larry Lavender, who helped me in the earliest stages of developing ideas for the book. Thanks also to editor Judy Patterson Wright for assistance in shaping the content and structure of the book, as well as editors Rachel Brito and Amy Stahl for all their work.

how to use this book

Dance and writing already have an excellent partnership, as evidenced by the many wonderful publications in the dance field. Dance scholarship has grown by leaps and bounds in the last few decades, giving dance depth as a discipline. Integrating dance and writing in the classroom can only help dance to thrive as a field by enabling its students to better articulate the amazing experiences of participating in, observing, and studying the art of dance.

Writing About Dance provides you with instruction on writing about the discipline in many contexts. It addresses several aspects of writing and allows the flexibility to select the readings most appropriate to your courses. Each chapter consists of several short sections that may be used separately or together. This book is a tool for the understanding and practice of writing with the ultimate aim of helping you to become a better writer and thinker.

Organization of This Book

Chapter 1 looks at the connection between writing and learning; it explains the kinds of things that students can expect to learn from the process of each kind of writing. Chapter 2 looks at the writing process and some specific dos and don'ts of writing. Chapter 3 focuses on informal writing, such as journal writing and observation exercises, with sample assignments from a variety of teachers across the United States. Chapter 4 outlines an approach to writing dance critiques. Chapter 5 examines persuasive dance essays, dance reading analysis papers, and dance book reviews. Chapter 6 discusses dance research papers.

Benefits of Informal Writing Exercises

1. Writing is a learning tool. Even five minutes of writing time at the beginning or end of an occasional class can be a learning tool. Some suggestions for in-class writing are found in the first two chapters of the book. If there is no class time available for writing, there are many options for take-home assignments. Here is an excerpt from a student assignment that explains how writing helped her in ballet class:

I have taken dance classes both as a young child and as an undergraduate, but I think I got much more out of this class than my previous ballet classes—and in a large part I attribute that to the way the writing assignments influenced my full, cognizant participation in the course. Writing about myself as a dancer personalized the class; it allowed me to define what goals I wanted to focus on and brought a new level of awareness to my dancing. (Cooper 2008, student 1)

2. Informal writing stimulates thought without the pressure of a formal paper. The main point of informal writing is to stimulate or improve your thought process, not to create a polished product for the teacher. Many of these exercises increase self-awareness or creativity or provide a preparation for discussion. Informal writing is usually graded on a pass-or-fail basis. Journals, free writing, critical-thinking exercises, creative assignments, creating questions for discussion, and answering questions about readings or videotapes are all examples of writing assignments that could be graded pass or fail.

3. Thoroughly explained informal writing assignments get you started directly on writing. This book is designed for use without extensive instruction from a teacher. The informal writing exercises and formal papers are explained thoroughly so that you can apply the information as you write. While it is always helpful for teachers to share expectations for each assignment, this book offers the flexibility of using assignments that are already laid out and can be used as is or with a teacher's modifications.

The informal writing exercises are offered buffet style so that teachers may select the ones appropriate for the class and amount of time available. At five minutes, the Quick Write exercise in chapter 3 is the shortest option in the book; others take longer, and some

are spread out over the entire term. These exercises are organized into three groups: reflection, creative process, and focus on writing. Reflective writing exercises examine some aspect of your own dancing or beliefs related to dancing. Creative process exercises stimulate artistic work and are especially well suited for classes in improvisation or composition. Focus on writing exercises offer practice in description, analysis, and summarizing.

Benefits of Writing Formal Papers

Assignments of papers in the dance class serve many purposes and enhance the teaching of any subject matter. As research on writing has shown, writing deepens learning in a way that discussion alone cannot (Carter et al. 2007; Hilgers et al. 1999; Quitadamo and Kurtz 2007). Writing is also a tangible record of your involvement with assigned subject matter and shows the teacher that some learning has taken place. Both critical thinking and creative thinking are involved in the writing process, with parallels in the process of making dances; these kinds of thinking are important to real-life success and enhance almost any career path that you might take. Finally, good writing is an important skill to have both during the undergraduate years and afterward. Most jobs today involve some form of written communication, so it's a good idea to become a proficient writer before you graduate. In addition to these general reasons for writing about dance, here are some of the specific benefits of writing each formal paper discussed in the book:

Dance Critique

- Gets you out to see dance performances
- Assures the teacher that you have actually attended the event
- Requires careful observation of the performance
- Requires thought and discussion about aesthetic matters, helping to develop your sense of taste
- Develops skills in descriptive and analytical writing

Philosophical Dance Essay

- Gives a sense of dance's connection to the greater world
- Develops argumentation skills
- Introduces you to the idea of dance as a realm for serious discussion of abstract ideas

Editorial Dance Essay

- Gives a sense of dance within contemporary society
- Develops argumentation skills
- Connects you to ideas that might serve as the locus for social, political, or artistic change

Dance Reading Analysis Paper

- Assures the teacher that you have read the material beyond a skimming level
- Prepares you for class discussion
- Familiarizes you with outstanding readings selected by the teacher
- Engages you in critical consideration of historical and contemporary dance issues

Dance Book Review

- Assures the teacher that you have read the material beyond a skimming level
- Prepares you for class discussion or oral presentation
- Familiarizes you with a particular author, artist, or set of concepts deemed important by the teacher
- Develops skills in analysis and evaluation by requiring a supported recommendation

Dance Research Paper

- Increases awareness of dance as an art form that has its own history and theory
- Develops knowledge of a particular topic
- Develops skills in analysis, argumentation, and synthesis
- Develops interest and curiosity about specific aspects of dance

Sample Papers

Included in chapters 4 to 6 are some sample papers that might aid you as you write your own papers. These papers were written by college students who had strong writing skills but little previous

experience in writing about dance. Their success at this task serves as a reminder that dance writing is a learnable skill. When reading these papers, keep in mind that each is just one example of a way that a particular type of paper can be written, and yours may take a different approach. These papers are examples of good dance prose; they are not intended to restrict your style.

Evaluation and Rubrics

A rubric is a set of criteria indicating how an assignment will be evaluated. It typically lists specific qualities of papers at the levels of excellent, good, adequate, and poor, although the number of levels may vary. Rubrics are useful because when you know the specific criteria by which papers are graded, you are more likely to do a good job with the assignment. Each of the chapters for formal papers in this book (chapters 4, 5, and 6) includes rubrics that describe expectations for the style and content of the work and may be presented as a list or as a table. Rubrics created for the papers in chapters 4 to 6 were based on rubrics for writing proficiency in Rhode Island and New Hampshire (*Rhode Island and New Hampshire Local Grade Level & Grade Span Expectations for Written and Oral Communication including New England Common Assessment Program, State Grade Level and Grade Span Expectations for Writing* 2006). Each was modified to suit the particular assignment as well as the writing ability of beginning-level undergraduate students.

Some suggestions for students using the rubrics include the following:

- Before you begin your writing process, read the rubric appropriate to the particular kind of paper you plan to write so that you are aware of what elements should be included.
- After you've completed the first draft of your paper, check it against the rubric and incorporate anything that is missing, or strengthen elements that need improvement.

Here are some suggestions for teachers using the rubrics:

- The rubrics in chapters 4 to 6 may be used for evaluation of formal papers. The ratings of excellent, good, adequate, and poor may be translated to number or letter grades as you see fit. If you

like, you may assign a point value to each area of the rubric: 4 points for excellent, 3 for good, 2 for adequate, and 1 for poor. Total point values can be tallied and ranges assigned a grade. For example, the rubric for dance critiques in chapter 4 has eight elements, so the highest possible number of points that could be earned would be 32 (i.e., 4 multiplied by 8).

- Some people (as I do) prefer a more global approach, using the rubric as a general guideline for grading without using points.
- The rubrics are offered with the intention of being helpful, not restrictive. However, despite good intentions, any list of necessary elements runs the risk of being inadequate, incomplete, or not exactly appropriate. Feel free to modify the criteria so that they reflect your own impression of excellence for each assignment.

Tips for Teachers

This section provides teachers with ideas for implementing the various exercises and assignments discussed in this book. You will also see some antiplagiarism strategies and some suggested reading on writing.

Teaching Suggestions for Informal Writing

The informal writing exercises in chapter 3 are designed to be included in a variety of courses. At the beginning of each writing exercise is a list of the classes for which it is most appropriate. You will also see the objectives for each exercise as well as an overview of what it entails and how long it takes.

As mentioned earlier, the three groups of informal writing exercises are reflection, creative process, and focus on writing. The third group, focus on writing, is particularly helpful as a preparation for writing formal papers: *Dancing to Write*, *Writing to Dance*; *Observation and Description Exercise*; and *Dance in a Ritual Context* are all excellent practice for writing a good performance critique. The summary paper is a precursor to writing an essay, reading analysis paper, or research paper.

Here are two additional ideas for informal writing assignments based on required readings:

- Students generate their own questions for discussion based on the reading. Questions should promote thoughtful contemplation rather than a quick, factual answer. These may be used for prompting class discussion or simply collected as evidence that the reading has been done.
- Students write answers to specific questions from the teacher about the reading.

Teaching Suggestions for Dance Critique

Another good precursor to writing a critique of a live performance (as discussed in chapter 4), in addition to the writing exercises suggested previously, is to watch a DVD of a single dance work in class and follow up with a guided discussion. This exercise is included in the appendix.

I require students to write one to three dance critiques for every dance course that I teach, including all technique classes, dance history, pedagogy, and dance composition. Critiques are a wonderful way to guarantee that students will attend live performances and think about them critically.

Teaching Suggestions for Dance Essays, Reading Analysis Papers, and Book Reviews

Persuasive essay assignments, such as those in chapter 5, ask students to express an opinion on some aspect of dance that they might not otherwise consider. Since every high school student preparing for college already has considerable practice in writing short essays, a persuasive essay can be a good first writing assignment for a technique class. It allows you to get to know something about each student's opinions and writing style and encourages students to think of dance as a distinct discipline with its own content and controversies.

Reading analysis papers (RAPs) are an excellent way of ensuring that students do in-depth reading of assigned materials. These assignments also encourage students to "converse" with the material by considering whether or not they agree with ideas presented and why. RAPs are an excellent preparation for discussion: When students have carefully thought about ideas in the readings, they are more self-assured about discussing them. RAPs are appropriate

in any type of dance class with required reading, whether it is in the studio or in the classroom. I use them in my classes in beginning technique, dance history, and women in dance and sport.

Book reviews are great for a course in which each student is assigned a different book to read. In my class on children's dance (a pedagogy course), each student reads a different instructional book, writes a book review, and makes a brief presentation on it. In a dance history class, students could each select a choreographer's biography to read, review, and report on.

Teaching Suggestions for Dance Research Papers

To promote advance planning and encourage deeper engagement with subject matter, I highly recommend a brief preliminary assignment that is due about two weeks before the finished paper. This causes students to gather their resources and begin reading well in advance of the deadline for the paper. The assignment includes the topic, guiding question, bibliography, and one sentence about the direction of the paper, including names of people or works that might be used as supporting examples, if appropriate to the topic. This allows you to ensure that students have chosen a good topic and have created an interesting guiding question for their research. (See chapter 6 for an explanation.) You will also be able to see if the references they've selected are appropriate for the subject. By writing your comments on the assignment and returning it quickly to students, you will help them get or stay on course.

My suggestion for references is that students be required to use mainly books, journals, magazines, and newspapers, either in hard copy or online. Internet sources such as single-owner Web sites, blogs, and Wikipedia should be prohibited or kept to a minimum. The main reason for this restriction is to make certain that students are using reputable sources for their research that have been checked for accuracy. Students may occasionally need to break this rule, for instance, if their topic requires quoting confessional statements from dancers with an eating disorder, which can be found on personal Web sites. However, using non-refereed sources should be discouraged unless there is a very good reason provided by the student.

I realize that convenience is a big factor in student research and that students will do most of their work from their computers. But I encourage students to actually browse the shelves of their libraries, where they might happen upon materials that they cannot easily find using the online search function. Using online journal, magazine,

and newspaper articles is a good supplement to browsing the shelves and using interlibrary loan. I also encourage students to use videos, DVDs, or video clips from the Internet for any topic that requires knowledge of a particular dance style, technique, choreographer, or work. Short movement descriptions can dramatically enhance the effectiveness of discussing specific dances or choreographers.

A Word About Plagiarism

Some colleges and universities, including my own, require a statement about plagiarism on every syllabus. This statement defines plagiarism and states the specific consequences for committing it. Highlighting this statement on the first day of class and then again on the day that a research paper is assigned helps students understand the importance of this issue. Especially because some plagiarism is inadvertently committed in ignorance, students should be educated about what it is and why it is problematic. (See chapter 6, p. 140, for more information.)

While plagiarism can occur in any kind of assignment, it is most common in the writing of research papers. The kind of research assignments that you give to students can reduce the possibility of academic dishonesty. The use of a guiding question along with a topic (discussed in chapter 6) will help make students' research more original. However, some students may be tempted to buy dance papers on the Internet or to copy sentences, paragraphs, or major ideas from sources without attribution.

To deter and detect plagiarism, it is a good idea to use a service such as www.Turnitin.com. This program requires that students upload their papers directly into the Turnitin site, where their papers will be scanned for possible plagiarism. Many colleges and universities have an institutional subscription to these services; contact your teaching technology staff to see if the service is available.

However, some online companies have figured out a way to work around computerized plagiarism-detection systems. These services market papers as “unplagiarized” because they are custom-written to customer specifications and can pass undetected through plagiarism-scanning devices. If students have the money and desire to purchase such a paper, they can. Since no system for plagiarism detection is foolproof, it's a good idea to combine technology and your own best judgment when it comes to detecting plagiarism.

Suggested Reading for Teachers

I have found several books helpful in my own quest to help students become better dance writers. Here are a few of them:

The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines, by Katherine Gottschalk and Keith Hjortshoj. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2004.

Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom, by John Bean. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.

A Short Guide to Writing about Art, by Sylvan Barnet, 9th ed. New York: Prentice-Hall, 2007.

Writing about Theatre & Drama, by Suzanne Hudson, 2nd ed. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006.

Wrap-Up

Writing About Dance offers both informal and formal writing exercises that are linked to your experiences in dance class. Informal writing includes journal writing, free writing, creative and critical-thinking exercises, and goal setting; this type of writing is usually graded pass or fail. Formal writing includes dance critiques, dance essays, dance reading analysis papers, dance book reviews, and dance research papers; rubrics for these papers help you understand how excellence is defined in each case. Teachers may choose whichever assignments seem the most interesting and appropriate for their classes. Some suggestions for teachers regarding implementation of assignments round out this section of the book.

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