Frequently Asked Questions about Dance Etiquette

Q1: How would one define dance etiquette?

Dance etiquette is –

- the polite consideration of your dance partner and others around you;
- treating others as you would like to be treated in a kind, generous, courteous, and considerate manner; and
- dancing in a safe way for yourself and others around you.

Q2: Why do we need dance etiquette?

We need dance etiquette to avoid accidentally offending or harming other dancers or people around us.

Q3: Is there different dance etiquette for males and females?

No. All aspects of dance etiquette apply to both males and females.

Q4: Can a woman ask a man to dance?

Yes. Either a man or a woman can ask someone to dance, as long as the person they are asking is not partnered for that dance – there is no ‘can I cut in?’ at ballroom dance Socials. When your invitation is accepted, take your partner’s hand and lead them onto the dance floor. At the end of the dance, thank your dance partner and escort them back to their seat.

Q5: Is it polite to refuse when asked to dance?

Typically, it’s good social etiquette to accept an invitation to dance and bad social etiquette to refuse a dance, on the basis of preferring to dance with someone else. In addition, declining a dance means sitting out the whole dance bracket of that routine. The choices are to dance with whoever asked first, or to sit out the dance.

Of course you may have your own reasons for not wanting to do a particular dance - it may be too energetic, or you may not be confident to dance it with a fellow beginner. If you don’t want to dance, politely say, “No thank you, I prefer to sit this one out.” The person asking you to dance must accept your refusal graciously. They should never persist with the invitation having already received a polite refusal.

Naturally, couples who attend a dance as one another’s partners are not expected to accept invitations to dance with someone else.

Q6: Can I book a dance for later in the evening with someone?
Yes, definitely. In fact it is wise to use the dance lists supplied at dances to note who you have promised a specific dance to. And, if your memory is challenged, bring a pen with you to write down the person’s name!

Q7: Is it polite to provide instruction on the dance floor when a sequence dance is in progress?

No. The rule is - the dance floor is for dancing the programmed routine. If you’re having a conversation, learning how to do a particular dance step, or someone asks for your help or instruction, find somewhere away from the dance floor to do this, so that you don’t obstruct the dancers on the floor.

If you wish to do some freestyle dancing during the ballroom program - perhaps you love the song and can’t possibly keep still - then find a space that’s off the dance floor in which to do it.

Q8: Is it okay to correct your partner on the dance floor?

No. It is not polite to correct your partner on the dance floor. Remember, this is a ballroom dance Social – it’s time to relax, enjoy the music and dancing, enjoy being with your friends and making new friends. Likewise, on the dance floor, and during a dance routine, is not the appropriate place for a learner to ask for dance step advice. The place for actual dance instruction is at Dance Classes, where Dance Class instructors, and their competent assistants, will correct your mistakes and praise your achievements.

Q9: Can I enter the dance floor when a dance has already commenced?

As a rule, don’t enter a crowded dance floor after the music has started. It is considered bad form to wander onto the dance floor and ‘cut off’ other dancing couples. However, if there is sufficient space to safely traverse the dance floor towards a clear dancing slot, then you may do so in a swift and courteous manner.

Hints to avoid arriving on the dance floor too late:

(a) keep an eye on the dance program and know what dance is next;
(b) book your dance partner early; and
(c) be up on the dance floor in plenty of time before the music starts.

Q10: What are the ‘traffic’ rules of the dance floor?

Here is some polite etiquette for navigating the dance floor -

(a) Usually the first couple on the dance floor will establish their dancing slot (or space) in the outer circle. You should establish your slot and circle, relative to the slots of other dancers already up. You should continue to dance in your slot and circle.
(b) At large events, in large dance halls, there may be two or three dancing circles. Watch the dancers around you and keep to your own dancing circle. Don't be a lane jumper 😊.
(c) The outside circle must always dance to the far corners of the dance hall. When you cut the corners on the outside circle you squeeze the dancers who have chosen the inner circle. Practice doing this at your dance classes.
(d) Keep your head up. Don’t look at your feet. Be aware of the dancing couples ahead of you and the correct direction of your dancing circle.
(e) Pay attention to the beat of the music and where the other dancing couples are in the sequence of the dance. You will see if you’ve fallen out of step. Quickly get back into sequence with the rest of the dancers. A few dancing couples, who do the whole routine out of step, can cause a ‘train wreck’ on the dance floor.
(f) Adjust your dance direction to suit a crowded room. Eg. If you would usually do a solo turn in line of dance, you may need to take the turn DIAG to wall or DIAG to Centre, to avoid bumping into other dancers – a bit like angled car parking.

Q11: Is it okay to dance ‘big’ at a ballroom Social?

In most circumstances it’s not okay to dance ‘big’. Let’s face it; we all love to see a beautiful dancing couple making those big steps that have taken them months of medal classes to perfect. And - if you are one of those dancers - it feels great to be able to dance that way. But the reality is that there are rarely just a half-dozen dancing couples on the floor, to afford you the space to do your ‘thing’. So, the polite etiquette at ballroom dance Socials is to dance ‘small’.

In addition, you must keep to your slot in your dancing circle, so don’t dance all over the floor. And save the arm waving, long and wide footsteps, and wild leg movements for elsewhere. They can be off-putting to your partner and to others around you. Safety and courtesy are the key.

And, if you find yourself on a partially deserted dance floor, go for it.

Q11: Is the man always the lead?

The term ‘lead’ is not gender based these days. When there is a shortage of male dancers, many women will assume the counterpart role to the female dancing position.

In addition, the ‘lead’ can be taken by either of the dancing partners during the course of a dance routine. It all depends on who is backing or facing the direction of dance, because the partner facing direction of dance is the one who has clear vision of the other dancers in the room and who can guide their partner away from danger.

In ballroom hold Rotary Chasse turns and Waltz turns, the lead changes each half turn, depending which of the two partners has the most impetus at the time.

The three rules for whoever has the lead are –

(a) make your partner comfortable;
(b) keep your partner out of danger; and
(c) be aware of the dancers around you.
Q12: I am an experienced dancer, should I bring an inexperienced dance partner up to my standard?

No, it’s polite etiquette to work as a team, and don’t show off. If you are dancing with a less experienced dancer, dance to their skill level. If you have done ballroom dancing medals or competitive dancing, remember that your technique differs considerably to the average social dancer. Directional differences and unexpected foot and arm placements can be quite off-putting, not only to your partner, but to other dancing couples around you.

Q13: Is it okay to say the steps or count the timing for my inexperienced dance partner at a ballroom dance Social?

This is a question more for ballroom instructors, or experienced partners who are teaching their inexperienced partners how to dance. The answer is ‘yes’ it’s okay to help your partner by calling the dance for them, if that is what you have agreed prior to the dance. However, your instructions can confuse those around you, so the polite etiquette here is for the ‘callers’ to keep it quiet. If you must count and give verbal leads, keep it low enough that just you and your partner can hear.

Q14: Can I do a sequence dance routine when the program says Quickstep, Foxtrot, Modern Waltz, or Slow Foxtrot?

Sequence dance routines are rarely done in a continuous forward movement. For this reason they should not be danced when freestyle (travelling) dances such as Quickstep, Modern Waltz and Slow Foxtrot are on the dance program. Travelling dances should move on the dance floor in an anti-clockwise direction - which is the standard line of dance - and always progressing forward.

Sometimes, while dancing to the same song, some couples will dance a long, travelling style while others may dance a virtually stationary style. In this case, the travelling dancers should travel along the outside of the dance floor while stationary dancers should dance nearer to the centre.

Q15: What should I do if I collide with another dancing couple?

Always try to be aware of the dancers around you to avoid bumping into others. It is inevitable, however, that you may inadvertently bump into someone, kick someone, step on their foot, or that they may bump into you. Although this sounds funny, it rarely is funny at the time. Polite etiquette is to always apologise whether it was your fault or theirs. Even a short non-verbal gesture will do in some situations - a simple show of concern that no serious injury occurred.

Q16: What can I do about a perspiration problem?

Take care of your personal hygiene. For your partner’s sake, avoid eating garlic, onions, or spicy foods and always brush your teeth before going out dancing. It’s also a good idea to carry some peppermints with you to freshen your breath prior to dancing with a partner.
Shower and put on clean clothes prior to going dancing and use an antiperspirant deodorant as a precaution. If you perspire a lot, pace your dancing, or bring extra shirts, T-shirts, blouses, etc., and change sweaty clothing. It’s also a good idea to bring along a hand towel - or two - and mop yourself off in between dances. And the ladies will find a hand-held, oriental fan a blessing – and the men can borrow it from you.

In the winter time, dress for summer, but wear lots of layers that can be peeled off as your body heats up, and replaced as you cool down during dance breaks. Dance halls will have overhead fans and air conditioners to keep the room cool enough for dancing, so extra layers are a must for those times when you are sitting out a dance. Make sure you wear a warm coat to go home in.

This all probably sounds fundamental to most of you, but until you have experienced 4 hours of ballroom dancing, you can’t believe how hot you can get – even in the middle of winter. It’s the best aerobic workout around.

Q17: I’ve seen people clapping at the end of a dance bracket, is this ballroom dance etiquette?

This is a polite tradition, rather than etiquette. If there are, say, two repetitions of a particular sequence dance, then the dancers will clap at the end of the 2nd repetition, as a show of appreciation to a live band or ballroom DJ. It lets them know their song/music choices have been enjoyed. At the end of a Social it’s also a polite gesture to go up to the band or DJ and let them know how much you enjoyed their music.

Q18: How can we keep the dance floor safe?

Sticky floors or overly slippery floors are both dangerous and unpleasant to dance on. For this reason, food, beverages, or dirty/wet shoes must not come onto the dance floor at any time during the ballroom Social. Some country-style dances bring tables of food out onto the dance floor for a shared supper. In this event, the floor will be swept and, if necessary, cleaned prior to re-commencement of dancing.

The other danger factor is non-ballroom dancers on the dance floor. Sequence dance routines have a continuous, synchronised flow to them - sometimes fast, sometimes slow - but always everyone moving in the same direction. A sudden stop in front of a dancing couple would spell catastrophe - both for the ‘stopper’ and the ‘stoppee’ - and could even cause a pile up. It’s okay for a hesitant beginner to be on the dance floor with a competent instructor who can lead them through a dance without a break in flow; but two hesitant, partnered beginners would be best to sit out any dances they have not yet learned, if there is any risk that they are going to stop in the middle of a dance routine.

Likewise, small children must at no time be permitted to enter the dance floor. Small children have no awareness of danger, or what’s going on around them - and they are impossible to see. So the rule is ‘don’t bring them’. Teenage children, however, who have competently learned the dance routines, would pose no problem. That being said, the only teenagers I’ve seen at a ballroom Social had medals and were competitive ballroom dancers - after all, as much as we
would love to have the teenagers there, hanging out with us ‘oldies’, and dancing to ‘our’ music, would hardly be the choice of most teenagers, would it?😊