



Contemporary Dance Syllabus for Adults

Dragonfly Dance Contemporary Syllabus for Adults
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Principles of contemporary dance

Contemporary dance, by its very nature, is a constantly evolving art form without a singular technique. Each technique builds upon or reacts against those that came before it, contributing to its dynamic and ever-changing landscape. This document outlines some of the key principles and concepts found across various contemporary dance techniques.

Our syllabus at Dragonfly Dance is influenced by a diverse array of techniques, including the Graham Technique, Cunningham Technique, Limon Technique, and Release Technique, among others. While this list of principles and concepts is by no means exhaustive, it provides a foundation for understanding the rich diversity within contemporary dance.

Balance and off balance

Your **centre of gravity** is the part of the body where your weight is centred. It is inside your body at about hip height, in other words, just in front of your spine inside your pelvis.

You are **off balance** when you displace the pelvis, for example, if you tilt your body to the side your body, or during 'fall and recovery'.

Off balance movements give a sense of urgency, vitality or danger to dance.

Cardinal planes of movement

The body moves through space in three main directions. These are called the cardinal planes of movement.

The **frontal plane** divides the body into front and back. An example of this type of movement is raising and lowering your arms to the side

The **sagittal plane** divides the body into left and right. An example of sagittal movement is lifting your arms from your sides forward to shoulder height and back down.

The **horizontal plane** divides the body into top and bottom. An example of horizontal movement is holding your arms out to the side and twisting from left to right.

Change of facing

Facing is the direction the front of your body is facing.

You learn most movements initially facing the front of the room.

All forms of dance involve **changes in facing**, but in contemporary dance there are frequent changes in facing, especially at more advanced levels.

Facings includes the front, back, left or right side, and the four corners of the room.

Constructive rest

Constructive rest means you are lying on the floor, with your arms relaxed by your side. Your knees are bent so that your feet are flat on the floor. Your knees and feet are parallel and about hip width apart.

Many floor exercises begin, end or move through constructive rest. Developed as part of the Alexander Technique, constructive rest is a simple and practical way to release tension from your body.

Contraction and release

This concept in dance was made famous by modern dance pioneer Martha Graham.

Graham Technique is based on **the opposition between contraction and release**, a concept based on the breathing cycle.

The classic Graham contractions initiates in the deep pelvic muscles and abdominal muscles which pull the spine into a concave arc from the base of the spins to the nape of the neck. The spine grows longer, not shorter, in a contraction, whereas the abdominal muscles shorten.

The release is a passive return to a normal state, or an outward propulsion of energy.

The contraction is associated with an exhalation of breath, and the release with an inhalation.

Fall and recovery

This concept in dance was first developed by modern dance pioneer Doris Humphrey.

The **fall** is the complete release of muscles as the body gives into gravity. It releases kinetic energy that can be harnessed and used in the recovery.

The **recovery** uses the rebound energy passing through the bottom of the fall and continuing on the same path, like a pendulum swing. The rebound uses elastic reaction of the muscles at the limit of their stretch to spring back.

Suspension is the high point created at the peak of the movement by continuing the movement and delaying the takeover of gravity

Floor work

Floor work refers to dance movements performed on the floor. While floor work is used in other dance forms, such as jazz, it is used more extensively in contemporary dance. It includes movements done sitting or laying on the floor, such as rolls, and movements in and out of the floor, such as going from standing to kneeling or lying, and back up again.

Initiation of movement

Initiation of movement refers to what part of your body starts a movement. Movements can be initiated from your core, and flow out to the periphery, eg your hands, feet and head, or they can be initiated from the periphery, causing the core and other parts of the body to move in response.

Opposition

Opposition means there are **two things working against each other**, such as forces, body parts, or people.

It is a way of using the entire body to create the **feeling of stretch or lengthening**, without tensing or gripping muscles.

There are **five points of opposition in the human body** – the head, left and right hand, and left and right leg. Each can oppose any of the others to get stretch and length and to feel connection with each other.

Parallel and turnout

Contemporary dance uses both parallel and turnout, and switches frequently between the two.

You are **standing in parallel** when your knees and feet are facing directly in front of you and are parallel to each other.

You are **standing in turnout** when you have turned out your legs from your hips, so that your feet and knees point away from each other.

Release technique

Release technique focuses on ease of movement and fluidity. Dancers minimize the tension in the body to create a freedom of movement. Release of body weight into the floor and use of breath to initiate movement are part of the learning process in release technique. Key concepts in release technique include moving in and out of the floor, articulation of the body, alignment, balance and off centre, spatial relationships, direction of force and energy, mind body connection (awareness of tension in the body), understanding impetus and motivation for movement draws a link between intention and movement.

Spiral

The turn of the body on its own axis. Spirals are used for balance, control and turning.

The spiral is a key element in Graham technique, which uses different parts of the body in opposition to each other to create spirals for dramatic tension.

Succession

Succession refers to a sequential path of movement through parts of the body. It is a wave-like reaction as each body part goes in the same direction, one after the other. It is the opposite of 'opposition'.

Swings and momentum

Swinging movements, like a pendulum, depends on **gravity and momentum**. The downswing of a movement gives into gravity. Momentum is gained as the object (in dance, usually a body part) falls, causing it to swing up again. There is a moment of suspension at the end of a swing before gravity causes it to fall again.

Tension and relaxation

All movement exists between two opposite poles of tension or relaxation. At one pole, you are too tense to move, and the other you are too relaxed. The goal is to be somewhere in between. As relaxed as possible, yet still able to control your movement.

Transference of weight

The shifting of weight from one part of the body to another, for example, shifting your weight from your left leg to your right leg, or from your feet to your hands.

Use of breath

Use of breath in contemporary dance relates to rhythm, relaxation, and mind body connection.

Rather than using music or a steady external rhythm to set the rhythm of movement, in contemporary dance you may instead **move in rhythm with your own breathing**.

Beginner dancers often hold their breath when performing difficult movements. **Focusing on your breath as you move**, timing your movement with your breathing, helps you to relax and move in a more effortless, less tense, manner. By breathing deeply, you initiate the parasympathetic nervous system, which has a relaxing effect on the body.

Generally, you will **inhale on 'growing' movements, and exhale on 'shrinking' movements**. An example is inhaling as you raise your arms over your head, and exhaling as you lower them back to your sides.

Class format and approach

The Dragonfly Dance Contemporary Dance syllabus covers:

- Contemporary dance technique
- Contemporary style and artistry
- Rhythm and musicality
- Following and group work (eg following and mirroring the teacher, unison, canons etc)
- Improvisation
- Partnering
- Memory
- Spatial awareness
- Safe dance practice

Class format

For a 60 minute class

Technique	Spinal and upper body warmup Foot warmup Plie and leg stretching Swing Floor work Across the floor combinations (travelling and elevation)	35 minutes
Combination	Long combination that incorporates elements of the technique section	15 minutes
Cool down	Slow movements and deep breathes to slow heart rate and breathing rate Static stretches of major muscle groups Simple contemporary bow	5 minutes

Level progression & expectations

Focus for each level

Level	Focus
1 Absolute beginner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduction to basic contemporary dance vocabulary, understanding body awareness and alignment, and foundational movement concepts.• Basic combinations focus on coordination and rhythmic understanding• Students begin to explore the principles of contemporary dance• Introduction to basic improvisational and partnering techniques in a structured and supported way
2 Experienced beginner	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Building on foundational skills, dancers refine technique and explore more complex combinations• Greater application of the principles of contemporary dance• Introduction to additional partnering concepts (focussing on trust and coordination) and improvisation
3 Early intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Refinement of technique and expanding movement vocabulary• Dancers work on more complex, faster, and strenuous movement sequences, combining multiple body parts with greater coordination.• Attention shifts toward musicality, rhythm, and expressive qualities.• Developing confidence in improvisation and partnering
4 Experienced intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Building strength, precision, and fluidity in technique.• Dancers are encouraged to develop versatility in movement dynamics and experiment with more challenging choreography.• Focus expands to performance qualities, with attention to expression, space, and timing.
5 Early advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong technical proficiency and artistic development.• Dancers are expected to demonstrate versatility and control, executing complex movement phrases with precision.• There is a stronger focus on improvisation, personal expression, and creating a deeper emotional connection with the movement.
6 Advanced / Professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mastery of technique and artistry.• Dancers perform with a high level of technical skill and emotional expression.• They are expected to innovate with choreography, engage deeply with improvisation, and demonstrate command over dynamics, space, and musicality in performance.

Details for each level

Level 1

Level focus	To introduce dancers to alignment and posture, foundational movements, simple changes of direction, basic patterning, movement quality, principles of contemporary dance, and physical conditioning.
Alignment and posture	Body parts stacked, natural curve in the spine, pelvis in neutral, weight distributed evenly on both feet. Knees aligned over toes when flexing knees.
Foundational movements through single body part isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spinal movements of flexion, lateral flexion and rotation (using the three cardinal planes of movement) but only moving in plane at a time • Basic foot movements (stretch and flex, basic articulation (not brushes) either front in parallel or side in turnout) • use of plie and lunges (demi plie in parallel, and turned out 1st and 2nd) • ability to use both parallel and turnout (without needing to transition between the two) • simple weight transference in sagittal and frontal planes • basic swing movements in each plane for arms and torso • basic floor work principles, including connection to the floor and moving in and out of the floor • simple arm patterns and positions, basic arm coordination with other movements based on natural movement (eg swing arms in opposition while travelling) or stationary movements (eg hold arms in a position while performing another movement) • Simple turns that involve multiple steps (rather than spins or pirouettes) to introduce dancers to the concept of turning • basic locomotor movements (walks, skips, runs, hops, triplets)
Changes of direction and facing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple changes of direction, such as moving forward, backwards and sideways • Simple facing, such as facing the front, back, or either side
Basic patterning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locomotor patterns (walking, skipping, running, using different directions – forward, back, side, diagonal, in a circle) • Non-locomotor patterns • Basic movement combinations • Directional changes • Simple rhythm patterns (eg use half and quarter notes in a simple 4 count repeating pattern) • Patterns involving levels • Shape and space patterns
Movement qualities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving with weight and momentum • Movement qualities such as sustained, swing, sharp, strong, light, explosive, staccato (short and detached), legato (smooth and connected)
Principles of contemporary dance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulation and succession • Fall and recovery • Opposition
Planes of movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cardinal planes (sagittal, frontal, and horizontal)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement of different body parts in these planes, including torso, arms, head, legs, feet
Conditioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility, strength, power, proprioception, and body awareness

Level 2

Level focus	To develop dancers' understanding of alignment, posture, and foundational movements. Introduce them to coordination between body parts, greater complexity in movement combinations, and the exploration of dynamics and artistry
Alignment and posture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce proper alignment - body parts stacked, maintaining natural curve in the spine, pelvis in neutral, even weight distribution, knee and foot alignment • Introduce dynamic alignment during movement, emphasising stability and fluidity.
Foundational movements with coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple body parts - combine movements of two body parts (eg arm and leg coordination) • Spinal movements - introduce more variations in spinal movements involving flexion, lateral flexion and rotation, and combining more than one plane in a single movement or position • Foot and leg movements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce low brushes, forward, side and back in parallel and turnout • Introduce low brushes off the floor (45 degrees) • Introduce transition from parallel to turnout within a phrase or exercise • More complex weight transference, incorporating diagonal weight shifts, cross body weight transfer, eg stepping across the midline), incorporate upward and downward movements while shifting weight • Introduce more varied swing movements • Introduce greater variation in connection to the floor and moving in and out of the floor • More complex and/or faster arm movements, and incorporate arm movements (circles, spirals) with other body parts (legs, torso, head) • Introduce more complex locomotor steps, such as leaps, other steps of elevation • Introduce turns on one leg • Introduce more complex locomotor combinations (combine more steps, reduce number of repeats of each type of step) locomotor movements (walks, skips, runs, hops, triplets)
Changes of direction and facing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce diagonal and circular pathways in movements • Explore moving and facing different directions, including quarter, half, and full turns

<p>Basic patterning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locomotor and non-locomotor patterns – more complex combinations, such as a sequence that combines different locomotor or non locomotor movements with direction changes • More complex movement combinations combining multiple movements into sequences with a focus on rhythm and phrasing • Directional changes – integrate simultaneous directional changes while maintaining flow (eg combining forward and sideways movement) • Work on more complex rhythm patterns, including half, quarter, and eighth notes in longer 8 count phrases
<p>Movement qualities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce concepts such as acceleration and deceleration • Practice with more varied movement qualities to enhance expression
<p>Planes of movement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More complex combinations of movement in different cardinal planes • Introduction to movements that traverse multiple planes simultaneously (eg movements such as tilt, twist, and arch)
<p>Principles of contemporary dance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued exploration of articulation and succession, fall and recovery, and opposition • Introduction to contraction, release, and spiral (sitting or standing)
<p>Conditioning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More challenging exercises that require greater flexibility, strength, power, proprioception, and body awareness.

Level 3

- Refinement of technique and expanding movement vocabulary
- Dancers work on more complex, faster, and strenuous movement sequences, combining multiple body parts with greater coordination.
- Attention shifts toward musicality, rhythm, and expressive qualities.
- Developing confidence in improvisation and partnering

Level focus	Develop dancers' understanding of alignment, posture, and foundational movements. Emphasise coordination between body parts, greater complexity and speed in movement combinations, and the exploration of dynamics and artistry, and increasing confidence in improvisation and partnering
Alignment and posture	<p>Reinforcement of Dynamic Alignment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to reinforce proper alignment while introducing more dynamic and transitional movements, emphasising how stability can enhance fluidity and control during dance. <p>Postural Variations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving beyond just maintaining 'correct' alignment to explore how varying the posture can impact the look, feel, and dynamics of movement to portray emotions and character
Foundational movements with coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination of three or more multiple body parts, including simultaneous or sequential movements • More complex spinal movements that explore how different parts of the spine can initiate and influence movement, and moving the spine in multiple planes • More complex and fast foot and leg techniques, with addition of torso and arm movements • Dynamic weight shifts: Further develop diagonal and cross-body weight transfers, integrating upward and downward movements into exercises that challenge balance and coordination. • Advanced swing movements: Explore more dynamic swing movements with added complexity, such as combining swings with directional changes or varying levels of energy. • Introduce more strenuous floor movements involving weight bearing on the shoulders, such as backward rolls, and faster and more frequent transitions in and out of the floor • Incorporate complex arm movements with coordination to other body parts, including sequences that explore spirals and circular paths, enhancing overall expression. • Introduce different ways of turning that involve initiation of the turn with different body parts and shift between levels • Locomotor steps involve more complexity, including directional changes, fewer linking steps, and more advanced movements
Changes of direction and facing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore more complex pathways including diagonal, circular, and spiral pathways in movement, incorporating multi-directional turns and shifts in focus. • Work on sequences that involve multiple turns and spins, encouraging dancers to maintain spatial awareness while navigating different directions.

Basic patterning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More complex movement combinations that combine locomotor and non locomotor movements with dynamic phrasing, longer phrases and fewer repeats and more advanced movements • Integrate simultaneous directional changes, where arms, legs, or torso move in different directions or contrast circular vs linear movement • Challenge dancers with more complex rhythm patterns, including syncopation and polyrhythms, encouraging them to explore musicality in movement.
Movement qualities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work more with contrasts in movement qualities, including sharpness versus softness, fast versus slow, and heavy versus light, to enhance expression and artistic interpretation. • Incorporate exercises that focus on controlled acceleration and deceleration, exploring how these dynamics affect the overall performance quality.
Principles of contemporary dance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue exploring articulation, succession, fall and recovery, opposition, contraction, and release, with an emphasis on applying these principles in improvisation and choreography. • Introduction to counterbalance, encouraging dancers to work with individually, or with partners or in groups to explore how weight can be shared and distributed. • Introduction to the Limon concept of the body as an orchestra
Planes of movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage dancers to create sequences that traverse multiple planes simultaneously, including tilts, twists, and arches, enhancing their spatial awareness and body coordination. • Engage dancers in exploring three-dimensional movement, emphasising how to travel through space while maintaining awareness of their surroundings.
Conditioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce more challenging exercises that target greater flexibility, strength, power, and body awareness, incorporating dance-specific conditioning routines that enhance overall performance capability.

Level 4 and upward

Level 4 to 6 still to be developed