

# POINTE



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## Choreography 101: 10 Pro Tips for Beginners



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As dancers well know, developing a new skillset takes guts. For so many of us, training begins young and, to our friends' bafflement, only gets more intensive. ("Wait, what? You're going to dance class six days a week?") Yes.

Developing your choreography skills is not unlike the serious dancer's training in terms of the sheer pluck, determination and passion required. Even for seasoned dancers, it can feel like gutsy business to get started as a choreographer—yet it doesn't have to. But how does someone who knows how to move their body in *someone else's* choreography begin to develop choreography of their own? Three seasoned choreographers offer their insights on how to get going if you're new to dancemaking.

### 1. Start with what you're familiar with

Choreographer [Matthew Neenan](#), co-founder of [BalletX](#) in Philadelphia, suggests that aspiring choreographers “first make what you know.” Ask what you know about the art form and how you can convey this to your audience. For Neenan, this meant working with classical music and using balletic and Balanchine-inspired vocabulary. He cautions beginners against jumping too far into uncharted territory. “There’s always room to grow and expand.”

## 2. Think of your piece as a puzzle

[Gabrielle Lamb](#), founder and choreographer of New York City’s [Pigeonwing Dance](#), says, “I think of choreography like building, like if you build a stone wall. You have a pile of rocks, and you have to pick out the ones that fit well together and put together a puzzle.” When coming up with ideas, consider your options. Do you want dancers to start onstage, or off? To music, or in silence? Should they move in a circle, or in a line? As you make those decisions, think of the big picture—how can you start combining the various elements of your work in a way that will eventually produce a cohesive work?



Gabrielle Lamb works with the dancers of CelloPointe. Jaqlin Medlock, Courtesy Lamb

## 3. Try structured improvisation

One way to piece together your wall is to use structured improv prompts. It’s a strategy Lamb teaches because it helps you come up with movement via tasks or commands. She suggests using artist [Richard Serra’s Verblist](#) to create a phrase: pick two or three verbs and “cycle through them repeatedly using different parts of your body.” Bend and twist? Figure out how to bend and twist your arm, your torso, your head. Using methods like this one not only stretches your ingenuity but also relieves some of the anxiety that can accompany the creative process.

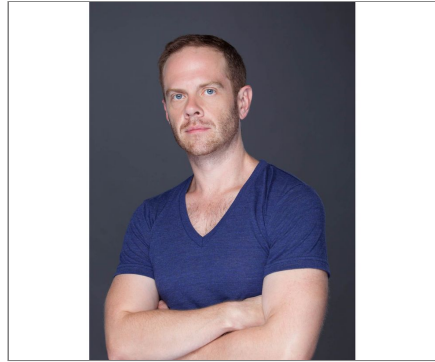
## 4. Look for inspiration

Open your eyes to the world around you—and its inherent, diverse glimmers of creative inspiration. To get you thinking of the possibilities, we asked Neenan, Lamb and Tara Lee, co-founder and choreographer of Atlanta’s Terminus Modern Ballet Theatre, about what stirs them artistically. For Neenan, it’s the modern dance greats: Alonzo King, Crystal Pite, Paul Taylor, Jiří Kylián, Nacho Duato and Ohad Naharin; for Lamb, poetry, science and metaphors; for Lee, existential questions about relationships and the human

ce. Find whatever makes you want to wildly chase your muse, and don't discount it if it's out-there.  
e is original.

## 5. Record yourself

Both Neenan and Lamb video themselves as they're coming up with movement sequences. Neenan shares that this allows you to "look at your work objectively." When he's on the hunt for a fresh idea, he re-watches old videos of himself dancing. "I'll watch something and realize, 'Oh, that little thing I did—I liked that. I didn't even mean to do it. So I need to let that into the piece.'"



Matthew Neenan

## 6. Allow yourself space to develop your own voice

As a novice, it can be daunting to put your personal flair into your work. "Don't be afraid," says Neenan. "We all have different voices and opinions on what we would love to see."

Lee says it's important to ask questions as you find your voice: "What kind of dance do you love to watch? What sparks your curiosity? What inspires you?" These types of queries are a great springboard for coming up with material. "Figure out what your language is by what feels good, what you enjoy watching—that's all really relevant. And just play."

## 7. Don't let creative roadblocks disrupt your process

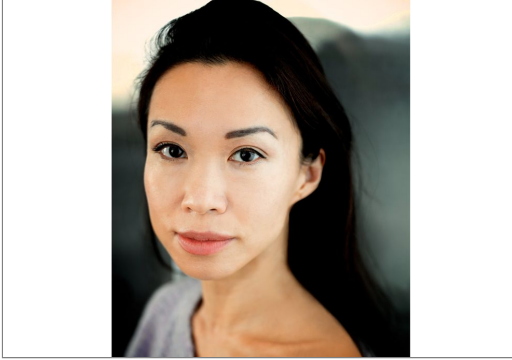
Choreographer's block is inevitable. For Lee, she has discovered that "the flow" should remain central in spite of any roadblocks. "The more I allow my energy to get stuck, the more the entire process loses its momentum," she says. She strives to keep stressed energy out of the studio, instead finding alternative routes to figuring out material, such as running ideas past dancers and other artists outside of rehearsal time.

## 8. Let go of your ego

It can be tempting to jump into your first piece full force. Maybe you want to use a composer and choreograph on your colleagues. There's nothing wrong with this, per se, but it may be to your advantage

with less advanced dancers first. Lamb recommends taking opportunities to create on lower-level because it “stretches your creative boundaries.”

To do this, you may have to let go of your ego—and accept the unexpected. Sometimes your piece can turn into something entirely different than you first envisioned. “That can be even more beautiful,” says Neenan. When you put your ego aside, the work becomes less about you, which can be a really good thing.



Tara Lee. Joseph Guay, Courtesy Terminus Modern Ballet Theatre

## 9. Try, try again...and yes, again

“Like dancing or any discipline, you want to spend as much time with it as possible, because that’s how you get good at it,” says Lamb. She points out that when we see works by famous choreographers, we forget that they’ve “been doing this for decades already.”

## 10. Don’t shy away from creating at home

Many of us have yet to step foot in the studio again, thanks to continued social distancing restrictions. But on the bright side, you probably have more time on your hands than usual. Perhaps now is as good a time as any to explore your interest in choreography. As Neenan and Lamb point out, less space can make things tricky, but it can also incite more inventiveness.

Whether you’re feeling a little stir-crazy, looking for a new creative outlet, or hoping to become more well-rounded as a dancer (or maybe all three), why not see what you can come up with? Lee says it well: “Go ahead and take this time to just be playful with your ideas.”