

by Katia Bachko

# books & barres



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JASON RYAN

*How to integrate written assignments into technique classes for meaningful results*

**D**ance and academics may seem like oil and water to your incoming freshmen, but many college professors say that academic assignments and research papers are necessary in dance technique classes. Some dance departments even require all professors, even those who teach technique classes, to include written assignments in their curricula. Whether your students are on their way to becoming dance professionals or lifelong dance aficionados, including academic work can enrich your technique classes. But transforming these assignments into genuine learning opportunities for your students can be a substantial challenge.

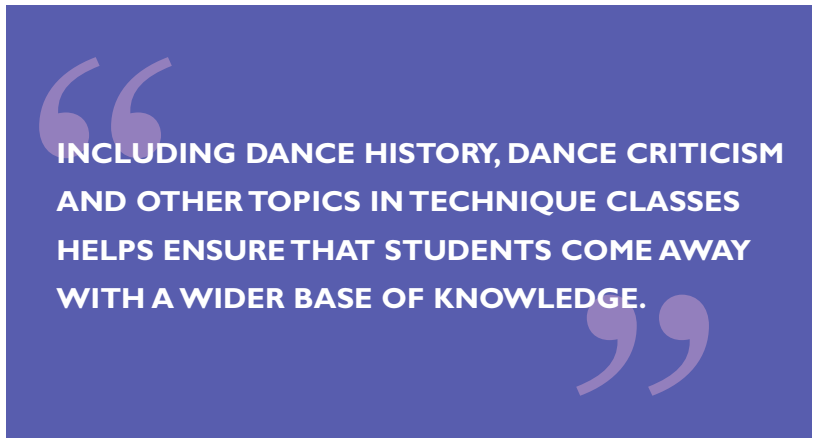
## higher ed

### Writing to Reinforce Learning

Susan Gingrasso, a professor of dance at the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, says that using written assignments in technique classes helps students who have different learning styles absorb the material more fully. Since technique classes are best suited for kinesthetic and visual learners, other students may require verbal explanation in addition to physical demonstration to grasp the concepts presented. For instance, when discussing proper alignment in class, ask students to create a checklist of things to remember as homework. In addition to providing series of metaphors for how correct alignment should feel, you can also ask students to write down their own bodily sensations. These will serve as concrete reminders of proper form, especially for your more verbal students.

Written assignments can also be effective assessment tools. Mastering dance technique requires memorizing steps and internalizing principles like pacing or rhythm. Judging your students' progress through observation alone may not always be enough. In many technique classes, students are judged by a final class or performance that represents the sum of their knowledge from the semester. But an error in this circumstance does not necessarily mean that a student lacks the knowledge to execute a step correctly. In the same way, a lucky student may accidentally execute a step correctly. By including a written assignment in your evaluation, you can gain a clear sense of what students have learned.

"In technique classes, we require other levels of assessment so that students are



**INCLUDING DANCE HISTORY, DANCE CRITICISM AND OTHER TOPICS IN TECHNIQUE CLASSES HELPS ENSURE THAT STUDENTS COME AWAY WITH A WIDER BASE OF KNOWLEDGE.**

Ahearn, an assistant professor of dance at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland. For Ahearn the approach means that students are not evaluated solely on their physical abilities, but also on what they've mentally absorbed during the semester. Ahearn says that when it comes to grading at the end of the semester, she considers many factors: "Sixty percent is based on technical ability, work habits, attendance, improvement and participation in class. The rest is split up on various projects: 20 percent practical movement assignments, 20 percent written assignments." At Goucher, the dance students are expected to take their written assignments as seriously as they do in their academic classes. "The written work should be thoroughly researched and eloquently written," Ahearn says.

Gingrasso tries to base grading on more than what she can see in students' technique. "I want to know more than what they are able to do physically," she says. "I also want to know if they understand what they're doing." Gingrasso says that written assignments reveal not only what students know but also to what extent they've processed the information. It is important to see if they can apply it to other situations and if they can actually use the information," she says.

### Learning from Observation

One of the most common written assignments in college-level technique classes is the performance review or response. These assignments ask students to attend a dance concert and respond to it, either verbally or instinctively. It is important for dancers of all levels to watch dance performances in order to be familiar



with the breadth of the artform and to stay inspired. Joyce Morgenroth, an associate professor of dance at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, asks all her students to attend three performances per semester and submit a two-page "insightful response." During the next class, she dedicates time to discussing the concert so students can share their thoughts and also practice speaking about dance after they've gathered their thoughts through writing.

The key to assigning students performance response writing assignments is to give them guidance linking what they see onstage with their own work in the studio. When ballet dancers attend a modern performance, ask them to ponder how elements of ballet are present in a piece or how a step from recent classwork was integrated into the choreography. By focusing their attention on elements that are both familiar and current in their own work, students will be more careful observers and will often provide more substantial feedback in their response papers.

### Using Writing to Expand the Curriculum

Many dance departments have limited resources and are not able to offer a full

## GOT ACCESSORIES? WE DO!



**MOST RECITAL ACCESSORIES IN STOCK FOR IMMEDIATE DELIVERY.**  
**Teachers: Write or fax with proof of profession for our free catalog.**



DANCEWEAR \* COSTUMES \* ACCESSORIES

106 S. 11th St., Dept. DT, Philadelphia, PA 19107 \* [www.baumsdancewear.com](http://www.baumsdancewear.com)

Toll-Free Phone: **1-800-8-DANCIN**

24-Hour Fax: **1-215-592-4194**

E-mail: [info@baumsdancewear.com](mailto:info@baumsdancewear.com)



## FUN AND FANCY COOKIE TREATS

Visit our web site and see  
**21 NEW** colorful cookies for  
 music and dance. Ideal for  
 incentives, awards, gifts and  
 fund raising.  
 Special gift packaging available  
 for business programs.

**Toll Free: 1-866-892-4000**  
**9 am-1 pm, Mon-Fri ET**

[www.FanfarePresents.com](http://www.FanfarePresents.com)

## DANCE EQUIPMENT

- **DANCE FLOORS**  
Portable & permanent  
for studio, stage & home.
- **MIRRORS**  
Portable & wallmount  
shatter proof mirrors
- **BALLET BARRES**  
Portable & wallmount  
for studio & home.
- **GYM MATS**  
Tumbling & motor  
skill shape mats.

To Order Call: 800 626-9258 • FAX 408 265-7290

**DANCE EQUIPMENT INTERNATIONAL**

2103 Lincoln Avenue, Suite C • San Jose, CA 95125

Visit our website at [www.DanceEquipment.com](http://www.DanceEquipment.com)

## higher ed

range of dance-related classes that include courses in dance history, dance criticism. The goal of educating students about vocabulary, history and other topics may fall to technical teachers. Including these elements in technique classes help ensure that students come away with a wider base of knowledge. Dance history and criticism lend themselves to a plethora of writing assignments. For instance, ask your students to research a choreographer whose work emphasizes a quality that they find intriguing—say, Merce Cunningham's approach to unconventional music and movement.

You can also use research papers as a way to immerse dancers in history. Ahearn asks students to research the premiere performance of a ballet and to write about the work from the perspective of a figure in history at that time, such as a choreographer, dancer or scholar. Ahearn says students learn not only about the ballet, but "the time period and the people who surrounded the work."

Another valuable written exercise for dance students is a mock grant application. Whether or not students are planning to pursue a career in dance, learning to write a grant can give them perspective into the lives of professional artists as well as the role of arts administrators. Such an assignment can expose students to the philanthropic organizations that sponsor dance companies, as well as the challenges of company directors. (See August 2003's *Dance Teacher* Dance Directory for a list of grant-providing institutions.)

The written word is also uniquely suited to self-analysis. Ask your students to write a personal assessment paper, in which they look at their own anatomical strengths and limitations in order to set goals in classwork. Writing down this information will help them choose a focus and give you a greater sense of students' understanding of their own abilities.

Whatever written assignments you give your students, be sure to set a clear purpose. It's easy to ask students to write a research paper or response to a performance, but the teacher who can incorporate the writing assignment in movement work in the studio makes it truly valuable. **DT**