

HOW ARE DANCES CATEGORIZED?

Dance steps are sorted into various categories to reflect the style or difficulty of the dance.

Smooth and Latin

Dance steps fall into the main categories of “Modern” (also called Standard and “smooth”) and “Latin” (also sometimes called “rhythm”), as established by the International Society of Teachers of Dance (ISTD). This breakdown is accepted worldwide.

A smooth dance is one that progresses around the floor, more or less in closed position. This includes waltz, tango, foxtrot, quickstep, and Viennese waltz. Everything else generally is Latin.

This is obviously an arbitrary assignment. What makes the difference?

The manner of holding a partner is the first distinguishing generality. In smooth dances, the partners are in close contact, with the lead expected to come through use of the body. In Latin dances, “closed” hold is looser with little or no body contact. The leads come through a feeling of resistance in the arms and visual connection.

Forward steps in the smooth dances begin generally with a heel lead. Latin steps usually are taken first on the ball of the foot and they seldom use heel leads or have rise and fall. Latins make greater use of hips. In Latin dancing, think of your hips as part of your legs, giving them freer movement. In smooth, your hips work as part of your torso, allowing little independent hip action.

In Round Dancing, the Universal Round Dance Council, the international organization of round dance teachers and dancers, publishes a manual with the following assignment of rhythms:

Smooth: International foxtrot, quickstep, international tango, international waltz and Viennese waltz.

Rhythm: Argentine/American tango, bolero, cha cha, paso doble, rumba, samba, jive, mambo, merengue, slow two-step, west coast swing.

Other rhythms are seen in round dancing: Two-step, peabody and hustle, single swing and double swing, and those odd combinations of tempo and timing that can only be called “rhythm” dances. If you must categorize them, apply the distinguishing generalities.

American and International

We also refer to “American style” or “International style” to reflect the styling used in execution.

International style “smooth” dances are executed in “closed” position with the partners seldom breaking apart, while American style choreography uses exuberant bursts of arm work and “open” dance positions (partners dancing figures on their own). As the names imply, the American style developed in this country, influenced largely by the movies, and International style is the primary competitive form of ballroom danced throughout the world.

International style “Latin” figures are generally danced with straighter legs than the American version of the same step. Some dancers say American style “Latin” have more earthy body movement. You often hear that a figure breaks (begins) on the 2 beat, meaning the second beat of the measure. (The count would be 2,3,4&1.) This is a strict International requirement for rumba and cha cha; American dance steps generally start on the first beat of a measure.

International Latin dances include rumba, cha cha, samba, paso doble and jive.

American style rhythm dances include rumba, cha cha, bolero, mambo and swing.

In Round Dancing, we have melded the various styles, and dances can include International figures and American styling. Figures begin on the first beat of a measure of music, except in specially noted dances. For example, the cuesheet for “Four & One Cha” identifies it as an “advanced cha cha with international timing.”

Phasing

Steps can further be categorized by their degree of difficulty. The two international round dance organizations have published manuals attempting to describe various figures within rhythms and assign levels of difficulty to each.

Roundalab (RAL) developed the current Phase Rating System in the mid-1980s, assigning figures in each rhythm to phases I, II, III, IV, V and VI. Figures may be moved from one phase to another, based on recommendations, committee discussion and a vote of the membership at the national convention each year. A dance is given a phase rating based on how many figures it has from a certain phase. A phase V+2 dance, for example, will indicate the choreography is basically phase V with two figures from the next higher phase.

URDC’s manual assigns its own level of difficulty to each figure. The “level of difficulty” is determined by its Technical Advisory Committee and applies only to figures and does not attempt to rate dances.