

# Intro to Calling - Workshop Notes

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## CALLING PHILOSOPHY

Calling style and approach is a very personal thing, and everything I say here is from my own preference, style and opinion - meant as a starting point or suggestion for how calling can work, in my experience. With that in mind...

Generally a caller has to strike the balance of being the “teacher” and the “MC” of a dance event. The teacher is facilitating dancing by conveying information, maintaining control of the room and keeping people safe; the MC is setting the tone and performing for the crowd.

I believe it’s more important to have fun than to get things correct. Therefore, being able to make mistakes is important. I curate mistakes into my walkthroughs if people don’t make them organically.

You are in charge of the whole room. The band and the dancers all look to you!

## DANCE ANATOMY

Example dance card:

Witches Reel

Tony Slinger

*4-couple longways set*

*32-bar reel*

A1 - First line, thread the needle

A2 - Second line, thread the needle

B1 - Top couple gallop down and back

B2 - Top couple cast out, all come under arch

A dance is a collection of **figures**, for example a left-hand star, a reel of three, a cast out, etc.

When writing out dances we write the figures next to the section of music which that figure will be

executed in. The music we dance to is organised into parts called **A, B, C, etc.** which are 8 bars long and usually repeat. For example, a “32-bar reel” is composed of an A-part lasting 8 bars, followed by that same A-part repeated, a B-part lasting 8 bars, and then that same B-part repeated. We write this “**A1 A2 B1 B2**”.

To fit into this music, most dances include a collection of figures which fit into a multiple of 8-bars: a 16-bar dance, 32-bar dance, etc. For most tune types, each bar contains *two* steps - i.e. an 8-bar figure takes 16 steps to complete.

Dances are danced in different **formations**: circle, longways set, square set, couple dances, ...

The tunes we dance to have different **types**: jigs, reels, waltzes, ...

Each type has a different *feel* of movement. Jig are bouncy, reels are driving, waltzes are slow and smooth.

The description of a dance usually includes all of the above information: its formation, how many people it requires to dance it, how long it is in musical bars, what the figures are, what tune type will work well for it.

If the written description of a dance doesn't suggest what tune type will work well for it, the band may be able to help you out. If in doubt, choose a jig - they work for most popular ceilidh dances danced in England.

## GENERAL TIPS

Teach dances you like! And teach dances you've danced! It's much easier to describe a dance you have “physical memory” of.

Take your time when doing the walkthrough - people learn at different speeds and think in different ways. Remember that you have the dance in your head, but it isn't in theirs yet. Err on the side of simplicity and brevity.

One of the hardest thing for newer callers is calling *ahead of the beat*. You have to call the next figure before it happens, so that the dancers have time to hear it, process it and then execute it when it's meant to happen. Try to call around one to two bars (two to four steps) ahead.

Aim to decrease the amount of instruction you are giving as the dance progresses and the dancers internalise the figures. Start by calling all the figures the first few times through the dance, and gradually drop the number of words you are using. E.g. instead of saying “top couples gallop down the set”, you could abbreviate it to just “top

couples” or “gallop!”. By five or six times through the dance, you might not need to say anything.

Calling is best practiced by doing! You will learn most quickly when you have a group of people in front of you.

## **PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

### **Programming and reading the room**

Start with simple dances and assess your audience. How quickly do they pick things up? Do they move in time? Are they listening to you? It’s easier to substitute more complex dances in for skilled crowds once they’re “warmed up” rather than trying to “claw back” an audience that is overwhelmed. Re-assess your programme as you go, and especially at any breaks.

The rule of thumb for programming is that each dance takes around 10 minutes to teach and dance.

### **Working with musicians**

As well as being in control of the dancers, you are also in control of the band. In practice, an experienced band shouldn’t need much input from you. They will need to know what music you want for the dance you’re teaching (either in advance of the event or just before you start the walkthrough). They will let you know what intro they will play before the dancers begin their first figure. It is up to you to speed up or slow down the music if the dancers are struggling at the current tempo, and to stop the music when the dance is finished.

Another rule of thumb for how long a dance should last: 8-12 times around, or a multiple of how many couples are in the set. E.g. if it is a 5-couple set where the top couple progresses each time, dance it 10 times so each couple gets to be the top couple twice. Take note of who the top couple is in one of your sets, and use their position as a measure of how many times round the dance you are.

In circular progressive dances where dancers or couples will come back round to their original partner/set, it can be really nice (and will create a big “woooo!” from the dancers) if they finish the dance with their original partner/set. In practice, this might not always work out (if the circle is too big, for example) and it’s not important if it doesn’t, but it’s a nice thing to try to achieve.

## RESOURCES

- The English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), based at Cecil Sharp House in Camden, runs occasional professional development days for callers. The ones I have been to are excellent! <https://www.efdss.org/whats-on>
- Cecil Sharp House is also a great place to go to dance, listen to other callers and learn new dances. They run regular ceilidhs and dance events from other traditions too.
- [Cat's Calling Academy](#) on Facebook is a great forum for tips and questions from UK-based callers.
- Louise Siddons has some amazing write-ups, thoughts on dance, and guides to calling for all types of events at her website <http://louisesiddons.com/index.html>
- Lisa Heywood has good online resources for callers too <https://lisaheywood.net>
- Colin Hume has a great bank of dances from the English ceilidh repertoire, organised by formation and difficulty <https://barndances.org.uk/>