

# GEORGINA BUTLER

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Dance Resources BY GEORGINA BUTLER

## 'TURNOUT'





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## What is turnout?

The term 'turnout' describes a positioning of the legs in which each leg is rotated in the opposite direction from the other (1).

This means that, when observing someone from the front, the legs (and, consequently, the knees and feet) face away from the centre of the body.

Turnout involves the external rotation of the femur (thighbone) along its axis in relation to a stable pelvis - supported by a strong core - so that true turnout is initiated by an outward motion deep within the hip joint (2).

Biomechanically functional turnout is turnout which is achieved from the hip and can be maintained while dancing dynamically. This is very different to merely forcing the external rotation of the lower leg and foot while standing in static, poorly-aligned poses.

Turnout is a feature of many forms of dancing because outward rotation within the hip joint allows for greater extension of the leg, particularly when raising it to the side and back.

More specifically, turnout is essential to classical ballet technique as it is the foundation on which all ballet movement is built.

Understanding how to access and sustain realistic turnout will help dancers decrease the possibility of injury as a result of poor alignment and misunderstanding of what turnout really is (3).



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## Origins of turnout

### Ballet beginnings

Historically, turnout evolved as part of the overall emergence of classical ballet as an art form (4).

King of France Louis XIV founded the former dance institution The Académie Royale de Danse in France in 1661. His passionate commitment helped to drive ballet's transition from a pleasant social or courtly event to a distinct theatrical performance art, complete with codified rules, etiquette and conventions.

Louis XIV directed his personal ballet master, Pierre Beauchamps, to devise a way of making dance understood on paper.

They believed codification would help ballet, which was swiftly developing as an integral part of French culture, become an object of wider European emulation.

### Codification

The combined efforts of Pierre Beauchamps and two other prominent ballet masters, Raoul Auger Feuillet and Pierre Rameau, resulted in the categorisation, codification, recognition and subsequent notation of ballet as an art form.

The process of formalisation began with the five positions of the body.

These were known as true or noble positions and required that the feet be turned out at 45 degrees from the hip.

### Positions of the feet

- **First position** - an elegant resting position, with the heels together.



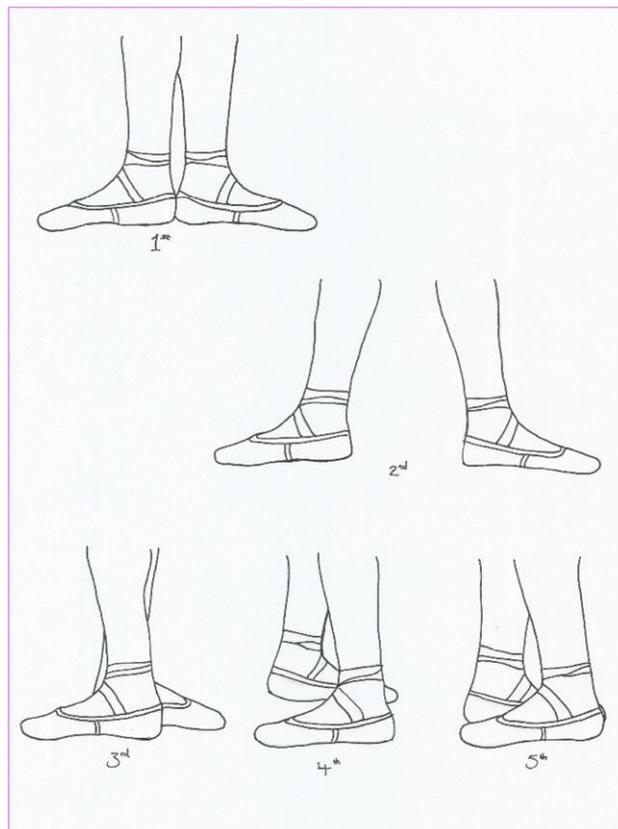
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The remaining four positions prepared the body to move:

- **Second position** - the feet pushed horizontally apart, with a space the length of the dancer's own foot between them. Second position was devised so the dancer could travel side to side without turning away from the King (the most important member of the audience).
- **Third position** - the legs and feet pulled back together as in first position but slightly crossed. Third position lent itself to a dancer moving forward or backwards, one foot following the other in a straight line.
- **Fourth position** - with the feet separated by one foot, back to front. Fourth position was as if the dancer took a careful step straight forward but stopped midway, poised with weight on both feet (turned out).
- **Fifth position** - with the heel of one foot placed against the toe of the other, pulling the limbs into perfect vertical alignment. Fifth position was a summation of all the earlier positions. It prepared the dancer to move from side to side or front to back, while never straying from clearly defined paths of movement.





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Initially, the preference for outward rotation was influenced by:

- The ease of movement observed when turned out positions were used in fencing
- The need for dancers to be able to move in all directions without turning their back to the King
- The fact that courtly dancers wanted to show off the intricate designs on the heels of their shoes

## The proscenium arch stage

Before King Louis XIV began championing ballet as an art form, dancers had simply been performing in palaces, ballrooms and parks for the enjoyment of the aristocracy. During his reign, ballets began to be performed in venues more akin to the theatres we now associate them with.

These new venues featured the proscenium arch stage.

In the proscenium arch stage setting, performers are elevated and framed by a "window", requiring consideration of only one perspective. This means that everyone in the audience views the onstage action from the same angle (as opposed to when audience members were positioned around the performers, as they had traditionally been).

The proscenium arch stage created a separation between the performers and audience and ensured that there was a distinct "front".

Using turned out positions meant dancers could easily and smoothly move in all directions while remaining at an aesthetically pleasing angle for their audience.

Furthermore, dancers had to share the stage with the main players (the singers) in operatic productions so - as turnout enabled easy sideways locomotion - dancers were able to occupy less space on the stage while still moving in a coordinated and visually-pleasing fashion.



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## Mechanics of movement

Today, the five turned out positions codified by Pierre Beauchamps remain the basis of classical ballet training and performance.

Turnout persists not only as a result of ballet's historical and cultural background but also due to the mechanics of movement. Being turned out really does ensure the best stance of readiness for further movement in any direction and allows for greater extension of the leg, particularly when raised to the back and side.

## Pushing the limits

Notably, turnout was initially devised in a rather restrained manner. It was explicitly limited to no more than 45 degrees to avoid any possibility of the dancer veering toward the exaggeration of acrobatic performers.

Italian dancer and ballet master Carlo Blasis (1797 – 1878) then later insisted on a 90 degree turnout from the hips. He discussed the positions in his textbook, *The Code of Terpsichore* (Terpsichore being the Greek goddess of dance), which laid the foundations for twentieth century classical ballet.

## Turnout today

In contrast to the restraint of the past, today's ballet aesthetic supports an idealised desire to attain a much more extreme 180 degree line of turnout.

Anatomically, this ideal 180 degree line of turnout is a summation of external rotation at the hip, knee and ankle. Importantly, as this is an ideal it will not always be possible because everyone's range of turnout differs.

It is not necessary to attain the extreme 180 degree aesthetic to reap the benefits of turnout and forcing turnout in order to falsely get the aesthetic could result in injury.

All the functional benefits of turnout (such as pulling the Y ligament of the hipbone taut for greater stability, distributing weight for efficient transport through space and accomplishing a variety of leg movements) are still achievable when turnout range remains below the 180 degree extreme (5).



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## How to turn out

Dance educationalist Kathryn Daniels (2) advises dancers to:

- Think about turning out from the hip joint and the tops of your legs (not the knee or ankle).
- Stabilize your pelvis in neutral alignment (by using the deep core muscles) to maximise the rotation possible at the hip joint.
- Treat turnout as a verb not a noun – be “doing” turnout not just holding a position. Visualise and act out turnout as a constant activation of the turnout muscles, integrating the turnout action into every movement.

## Turnout awareness exercise: Standing

- Stand in a wide parallel second position, bend your knees, and press one hip to the side.
- Run your hand down the side of your upper thigh to feel the greater trochanter (an irregularly shaped bony feature at the top of the femur bone in the thigh, located just below and to the outside of the hip joint) protruding like a doorknob.

Find the trochanter on both legs.

- Place a thumb on the greater trochanter. Flexing the thigh on the same side, reach under the pelvis to locate the sitz bone and place another finger on it. Repeat on the other leg.
- Keeping your fingers on the trochanters and sitz bones, place one foot on the ground on demi-pointe in a parallel first position. Rotate your thigh in and out several times. Notice that the trochanter moves toward the sitz bone with rotation. Feel the muscles that run between the two fingers tightening.



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- Stand in a parallel first with your feet together.

With fingers on the trochanters and sitz bones, rock your weight onto your heels to turn your legs out from the hip joints. Notice the trochanters and sitz bones coming closer together and feel the muscles between your fingers engage.

Repeat, with attention on maintaining a neutral alignment of the pelvis. Continue into a *relevé*, again feeling the deep rotator muscles engage to stabilize the pelvis and maintain rotation.

## Turnout awareness exercise: Lying on your side

- Lying on your side, find the greater trochanter and sitz bone on the top leg. Take a parallel *coupé* and externally rotate the thigh, feeling the trochanter move toward the sitz bone. Rotate in and out, noticing the changing relationship of the bony landmarks and the muscle activation.
- To work on rotation in *passé* and *développé*, slowly bring your leg to *passé*, continuing to pull the trochanter toward the sitz bone.

Lift the thigh and extend the knee to a *développé* to the side, focusing on the trochanter-sitz bone relationship. Periodically stop and, holding the knee motionless, turn the thigh slightly in and out to reinforce the sensation of the trochanter dropping under toward the sitz bones.

Then stand and repeat the same movement, focusing on the bony relationships as the leg extends and noticing any loss of rotation.



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## The trouble with turnout

Every dancer has turnout trials and tribulations. Always remember that turnout is individual, so you must work within your own anatomical range.

Quirky YouTube video: "The Trouble with Turnout"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQzY8yg-srw>





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