

# Teaching Contra Dances

## Set Management

1. Does everyone have hands four? The easiest way to confuse people is to start a walkthrough with a significant number of dancers who have not taken hands four, the ones haven't crossed over, or groups of four are improper when they should be in Becket formation. This invariably means the walkthrough will have to be restarted.
2. Is there room to do the dance? Certain figures, such as a rollaway across or a pass the ocean, require extra room up and down the set. Other, such as star-to-star transitions or long wavy lines, benefit from compact sets. This also applies across the hall as well – dances that go down the hall will need room across as well as up and down. A perfectly good dance can be ruined by overcrowded or spread out sets. Keep in mind that dancers can be comfortably packed together in hands-four position, but usually will need more room when dancing. If unsure, go with more sets that are spread out than bunched sets that may be unsafe.
3. Are the sets relatively even in strength? A short or weak set will either struggle with a harder dance aimed at the stronger sets, or will need an easier dance that will be unsatisfying to the stronger sets. It's often not enough just to ask dancers to line up in even-length, even-strength sets – often the caller must take command and move dancers around. Moving a side set into the center is a good way to even them out.

## Walkthroughs

1. Know your dance! You should be familiar with the position and role of each dancer at every point in the dance. Special effects such as shadows and end effects should be well understood and incorporated into the walkthrough. Most importantly, identify the potential trouble spots in a dance and prepare a walkthrough that highlights these spots for the dancers.
2. Judge the overall level of dancing. Are dancers balancing on time, using flourishes well, and anticipating the next figure? Estimate the percentage of beginners/problem dancers that will need detailed instructions. For a dance of "average" difficulty, an audience with 10% or less beginners may need only one walkthrough. With 20% beginners a second walkthrough is likely, and at 30% beginners the dance may be too difficult. Keep in mind these percentages will change over the course of an evening.
3. For the trouble spots, know whether the figures are partner-based or neighbor-based. Figures done only with a partner or shadow will be done with the same people, and therefore dancers unfamiliar with them will benefit from more detailed teaching. However, a figure done with a neighbor is more easily learned during the dance, as the newer dancers will learn from the experienced ones as they travel through the set. Such figures still need to be taught with care, but generally with less detail.

4. Select the teaching technique that appears most appropriate;
  - a. One walkthrough, no detail – for straightforward dances with relatively experienced audiences
  - b. Two walkthroughs, some detail – usually this means one walkthrough with details on the trouble spots, plus a second walkthrough prompted at or near dance speed.
  - c. Change in Voice – getting dancers’ attention through subtle changes in your tone of voice or cadence in order to alert them to the trouble spot.
  - d. “I need your attention here” – a direct request for their attention, which should be used in moderation.
  - e. Floor demonstration, dancers only – a picture is worth a thousand words, so that first hey of the evening or contra corners may be best described with a demo. Pick the best possible group, especially one near the center of the hall. Such demos without the caller give the impression anyone can do it, and allow the caller to describe the action over the PA while it is going on.
  - f. Floor demonstration w/caller – used primarily for challenging or unusual sequences where most dancers cannot be expected to figure it out with a normal walkthrough. Also good when the caller wants to emphasize a style point on a basic move. Used sparingly, this technique is effective in not only teaching a dance, but also identifying the caller as a regular dancer.

As a general rule, if you need three walkthroughs or more than 3 minutes to teach a contra dance, it is likely you have picked too hard a dance for that group.

5. Personalize the dance any way you can. Give the dancers a reason to like it. It’s OK to outwardly show enthusiasm for the dance, as long as it is genuine. A catchy title, interesting storyline, local connection, or humorous aside can all help get dancers focus on it. At the very least, give the title and author (it is the only time choreographers get such recognition).