

How to Read Dance Instructions and Cribs: A Beginner's Guide

Introduction

When attending a Social Dance, walkthroughs of dances are not commonplace. The overall objective is to simply dance, socialize and have fun, so some additional learning of dances is needed to be sufficiently familiar with a dance that a quick 2-second glance at a crib sheet, or a rapid verbal recap by the MC is enough for most seasoned dancers.

Beginners (those in their first 1-2 years of dancing) will, at first, require walk-throughs and simpler dances. Intermediate dancers (3+ years' experience) are expected to be able to do simpler dances just from quick recaps and having practiced in class. This requires extra preparation away from the classroom. However, you can only learn a dance if you know what the descriptions or symbols mean.

In this guide, I introduce some of the different ways of writing dance instructions, and how to read these. I list the common abbreviations and their meanings, and give some examples from well-known dances.

The three types of written dance instruction are:

- Original Instructions (which teachers use to teach from, but are available for all dancers to purchase)
- "Wordy" cribs (used widely by dancers)
- Diagrammatic cribs (predominantly used by dancers with good visualization/pictographic skills)

"Original" Instructions

Dance instructions for publication are written and published in a long-hand and very detailed/wordy form, sometimes with accompanying diagrams. At the time of writing, there are 52 RSCDS books, plus any number of other collections which have been published by individual branches, groups and authors.

These books and collections are the preferred instructions for teachers to use (if they have them) for preparing classes and are normally written in RSCDS "official" parlance. These books are used in conjunction with the RSCDS "Manual of Scottish Country Dancing" (The Manual) which gives detailed descriptions of the figures, steps and handing required to teach the dance. "The Manual" is available for dancers in consolidated form in the publication "A Guide To Scottish Country Dancing", which also includes the instructions for a number of popular and ceilidh dances.

It is noted that the RSCDS "official parlance" has changed over the years, and therefore some older books or non-RSCDS books may not use quite the same language as more modern books. Something to be wary of if you are ever given a second-hand set of books!

Whilst useful for a teacher, many "original instructions" can be extremely wordy, and a full set of 52+ RSCDS books can be quite expensive – let alone all of the 1500+ dance publications currently listed on the "dance database". They are also not practicable for instant use on the dance floor of a busy social dance. This is where cribs come in.

Dance Cribs

The longhand dance instructions are consolidated into short form "aide memoires", called Cribs, for dancers to use at social dances, the dancer having achieved some proficiency in the individual figures or steps in class.

Cribs come in two forms – "words" and "diagrams". It is possible for a seasoned dancer to learn a dance from the cribs, provided they already know their figures and footwork intimately. However, many nuances such as transitions between figures, when to step up/down, and the correct handing to use are omitted from both word form and diagrammatic cribs.

An image of the three different formats is presented in Figure 1 below for the dance "The De'il Among the Tailors". As you can see, they are quite different.

The figure illustrates three different formats for dance notation for the dance 'The Deil Amang the Tailors'.

Left: RSCDS Book 14 Official Instructions

No. 7 - THE DEIL AMANG THE TAILORS
(Reel)

Diagram showing two rows of four couples (1, 2, 3, 4) in circles and squares.

MUSIC	DESCRIPTION
Bars	
1-2	First and second couples set to partners.
3-4	First and second couples dance four hands across half round. Fig.
5-8	Repeat bars 1-4 back to places, using left hands.
9-16	First couple lead down the middle and up again.
17-24	First and second couples allemande.
25-32	First, second and third couples dance six hands round and back. Repeat, having passed a couple.

Top Right: Word Crib

The Deil amang the Tailors 3/4L - R32

1-8	1s+2s set & dance RH across 1/2 way, set & dance LH across 1/2 way back to place
9-16	1s lead down the middle & back to top
17-24	1s+2s dance Allemande
25-32	2s+1s+3s circle 6H round & back

MiniCribs [-] [Submit Comment](#)

Lower Right: Diagrammatic Crib (taken from SCDDb)

THE DEIL AMANG THE TAILORS 8x32 R

1 2	2x 1x		1 2	2 1 3
S RA	S LA	↔	A	6

Davies Collection, RSCDS Book 14.7 3C/4C longwise set.

Keith Rose's Diagrams [V] [Download](#) [Submit Comment](#)

Figure 1: Illustration of Dance Notation Formats. Left: RSCDS Book 14 Official Instructions, Top Right: Word Crib, Lower Right: Diagrammatic Crib (taken from SCDDb)

Note that there is more than one established presentational format for the cribs in words (Eric Ferguson, "Minicrib" and "E-Cribs") and diagrams ("Pilling", "Keith Rose Diagrams" etc.). The most popular formats are Minicrib and Pilling. Not all dances have been transcribed into all crib formats, so some awareness of the differences is needed.

Cribs to individual dances are available online on the comprehensive Scottish Country Dance Database (also referred to as "my strathspey" or "the dance database") <https://my.strathspey.org/dd/index/>.

General Format of Dance Cribs

In all crib formats, the dance title, number of bars for once through the dance, the number of couples (e.g. 3 couples in a 4 couple set), whether it is a Jig, Reel or Strathspey, and whether it is longwise, square or other shape are all always indicated (see Figure 2 and Figure 3 for examples).

The majority of dances are split into 8 bar sections when written down either in the original instructions, the cribs, or the diagrams. However, there are a few dances which are more easily written in 2 or 4 bar phrases.

Set orientation is denoted "L" for longwise/lengthwise, "Sq" for Square. "RR" is for "round the room" dances. Other combinations will be described (e.g. for "Domino 5").

The total number of bars of music for once through the dance is also normally given, e.g. "R32" means "32 bar Reel"

Common numbers of dancers and orientations required are shown in Table 1.

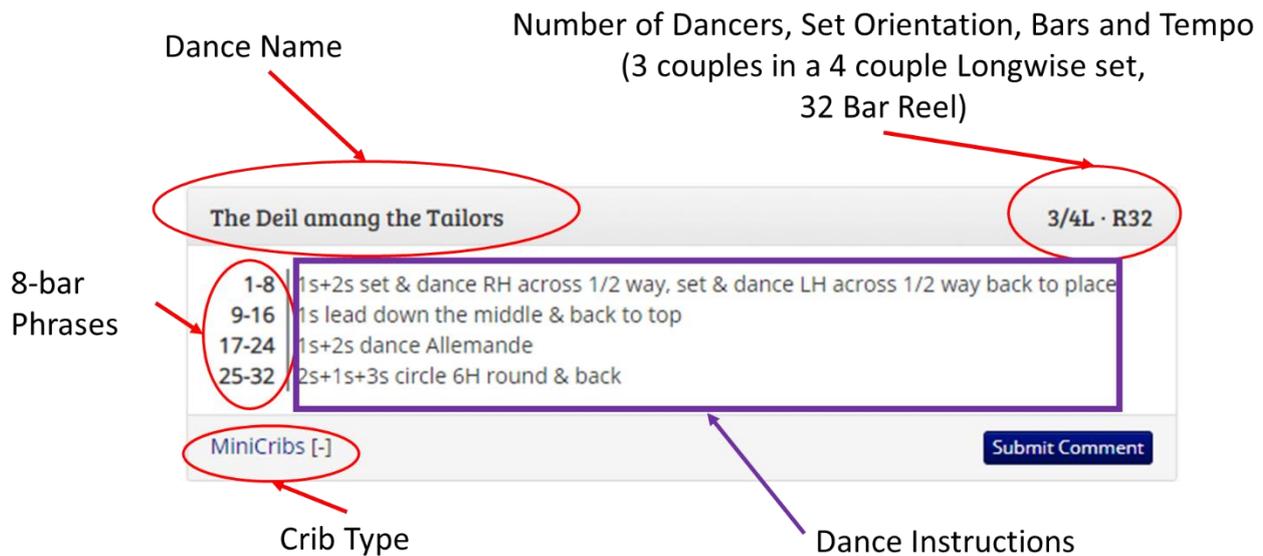
Table 1: Common Numbers of Dancers and Set Orientation Notations

3/4L or 3in4L	3 couples involved in one turn of the dance, 4 couples required in total (dance will be performed 8 times through, with each couple dancing once from first place and once from 2 nd place). Longwise Set
2/4L	2 couples in a 4-couple set (note: 1s and 3s will usually start, then on the 2 nd time through the dance only the 1s will start from 2 nd place – the 3s having reached 4 th place. The dance will alternate this pattern until all couples have danced from 1 st and 2 nd place, or 8 times through) Longwise Set
2/3L	2 couples in a 3-couple set (dance will be performed 6 times through, with each couple dancing once from first place and once from 2 nd place) Longwise Set
2RR, 2F2 RTR, 2 Facing 2	2 people facing 2 people Round The Room (i.e. 1 couple faces another couple)
3RR, 3F3 RTR, 3 Facing 3	3 people facing 3 people Round the Room (e.g. The Dashing White Sergeant)
3/3T	3 couple dance. All 3 couples are involved in the dance each turn, the dance will be performed just 3 times through. Triangular Set
4/4L	All 4 couples are involved in the dance each turn, the dance will be performed just 4 times through. Longwise Set
4/4Sq, Square	4 couples arranged in a Square formation. The dance may be a 4x32 bar dance with each couple taking a turn in 1 st place, or may be a longer dance with no progression.
5/5L	5 couple dance. All 5 couples are involved in the dance. Longwise Set
etc.	

The Tempos (speed of the dance/music) are abbreviated as follows:

Table 2: Common Tempo Notations

J	Jig
R	Reel
S	Strathspey
M	Medley (Usually Strathspey/Reel or Reel/Strathspey, sometimes Strathspey/Jig, rarely Reel/Jig)
H	Hornpipe
W	Waltz

“Wordy Cribs” (See Figure 2)**Figure 2: Parts of a “Wordy” Dance Crib**

“Wordy cribs” indicate the bar numbers down the left hand side and the instruction adjacent, as shown in Figure 2. Usually these instructions can simply be read from left to right but often abbreviations are used for brevity. Common abbreviations are listed below. Note this is not an exhaustive list.

Table 3: Common Abbreviations in “Wordy” Cribs

Notation	Meaning
M	Man
L	Lady
W	Woman
1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd , etc., 1c, 2c, 3c, etc.	Which couple is being referenced based on the starting position that time though the dance.
P	Partner
RH	Right Hand
LH	Left Hand
BH	Both Hands
2H	Two Hands (Both Hands)
6H	Six Hands Round (Circle of 6 People)
EH	Easy (obvious or free) hand
½	Half-way
1 ¼, 1 ½	One and a Quarter times round, One and a Half times round, etc.
NHJ	Nearer Hands Joined (i.e. “Dance”)
RHJ	Right Hands Joined (i.e. “Lead”)
LHJ	Left Hands Joined
Line4	Line of Four
LSh	Left Shoulder
RSh	Right Shoulder
cnr	corner
cnr ptnr cnr ptnr	Corner-Partner-Corner Partner (official figure: “Turn corners and partner”)
pl	Place
BiL	Balance In Line
RHA / LHA	Right Hands Across / Left Hands Across
RL	Rights and Lefts
X _R / X _L	Cross Giving Right Hands / Cross Giving Left Hands
1/2Reel4	Half Reel of Four
Reels3{6}	Reel of Three in 6 bars

Notation	Meaning
clw	Clockwise
cclw	Counter Clockwise (anticlockwise)
While	A meanwhile figure. One couple is doing something different to another couple, all moving at the same time.

Some crib formats will also use popular (but not “official”) dancefloor terms to shorten long RSCDS descriptions. You can see from the examples in Table 4 why they have been shortened.

Table 4: Some Common/Popular Figure Names and Official RSCDS Descriptions

Common/Popular Name	RSCDS Figure Name/Description
Teapots	“right hands across in a three with the supporting couples at one end, pass your partner right shoulder and left hands across in a three with the supporting couples at the other end to finish in the sidelines on your own side”.
Hello-Goodbye Setting	“Set to Corners and Partner”
Half turn and Twirl	“Half turn partner by the right hand and cast from the centre of the dance to place” or: “Half turn partner by the right hand but stay in the middle of the dance, then, solo, push back your right shoulder to cast into the place behind you.”
Corner-Partner-Corner Partner	“Turn Corners and Partner”
Diamond Pousette	Strathspey Pousette

Diagrammatic Crib (Including “Pilling” Style Crib)

Many dancers believe they will never be able to read pilling or diagrammatic cribs due to the unfamiliar layout. This isn’t true. However, it does require a little more effort in advance to learn all the shapes and symbols.

Diagrammatic cribs are laid out slightly differently to the word cribs, as shown in Figure 3 – although, in fact, the same information is shown in both (compare Figure 3 to Figure 2).

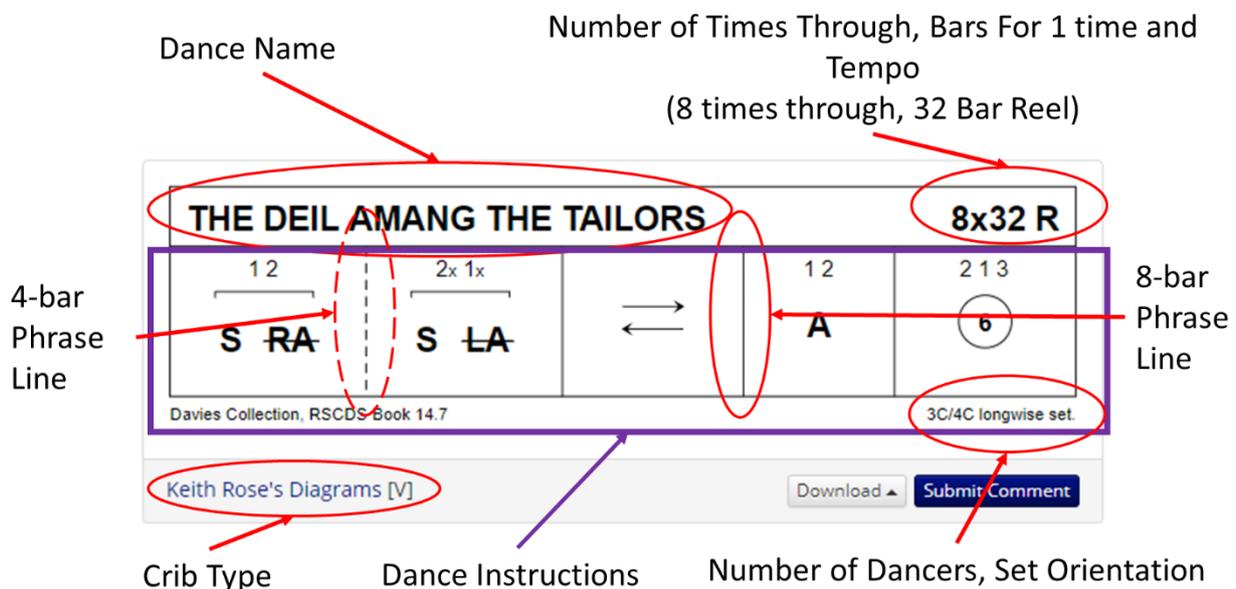


Figure 3: Parts of a Diagrammatic Dance Crib

Diagrammatic cribs are read left to right and one row at a time. A solid vertical line separates groups of 8 bars. Vertical dashed lines are used to represent groups of 4 bars where needed – i.e. where the figure shown is not 8 bars long. Vertical dotted lines are sometimes used to denote 2-bar phrases.

Symbols are used, rather than words. Table 5 gives a key to common symbols used in diagrammatic cribs.

A horizontal line or strikethrough is used to represent a “half” figure. For example “RA” means “half right hands across”.

Occasionally, numbers and “x” will appear above a figure. This indicates the couples involved in that figure, in the order at the start of the figure, with “x” denoting which dancers have “crossed to the opposite side”, or are “on the opposite side to their starting position”. If a horizontal bracket is shown between the numbers and the figures, this means the couples shown do ALL the figures encompassed by the bracket (see Figure 3).

Suffixes denote handing, number of turns or special moves such as arrows for “advancing” or using setting step. Table 6 gives the common suffixes used. Note this list is not exhaustive.

Occasionally, a figure is too complex for the diagrammatic cribs to easily represent. In these instances, “tracks” (lines with arrows) are often used, which show the track the dancer will make around the floor. In this case, Men are denoted as Circles, Ladies/Women are denoted as squares.

Table 5: Key to Primary Diagrammatic Crib Symbols

Main Symbols	Meaning
A	Allemande (2 or 3 couple indicated by numbers above the A)
↑ ↓	Advance and Retire (bar marker will show whether this is a 2-bar or a 4-bar phrase)
B	Balance In Line (with whom is obvious from previous figure finishing position, or shown with numbers)
D	Do-si-do (back to back)
DT	Double Triangles
HS	Highland Schottische Setting
LA	Left Hands Across (full)
LA	Left Hands Across (half)
P	Pousette (time signature of dance denotes whether strathspey or quicktime)
P	Half Pousette (time signature of dance denotes whether strathspey or quicktime)
PROM	Promenade
R	Repeat Previous 4 or 8 bars (as indicated)
RA	Right Hands Across (full)
RA	Right Hands Across (half)
RL	Rights and Lefts
RL	Half Rights and Lefts
S	Set
T	Turn
X	Cross

Table 6: Suffixes used in Diagrammatic Cribs

Suffix	Meaning
1 ½	One and A Half

1 ¼	One and A Quarter
1 ¾	One and Three Quarters
B	Both Hands
L	Left Hand
R	Right Hand
N	Nearer Hand
↑	Whilst Advancing
S	Whilst Setting

A Note on Gender in Dance Instructions

Historically (pre- mid 20th Century) a strict male-female pairing was the only socially acceptable combination, with men on the “man’s side” and females on the “ladies” or “woman’s side”. At the time, there were about equal numbers of men and women who danced and this was feasible. These days there are significantly more women who dance than men. The historic notation is still in use, despite it now being very common for two ladies to dance together, and not unheard of for two men to dance together.

At the time of writing, there are no plans from RSCDS HQ or other compilers of dance cribs to change the written notation from “men/ladies” or “men/women”. The general understanding among dancers is that this notation refers to the side of the dance the dancer begins on, and not the gender or sex of the individual dancer themselves. Persons identifying as non-binary or gender fluid are definitely welcome to join in the dancing – we are all to happy to see people wanting to learn and dance. However, please don’t be offended by the historic notation.