

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

Introduction

When attending a Social Dance, the overall objective is to dance, socialize and have fun, so some additional learning of dances outside of class is needed. Generally being sufficiently familiar with a dance that a quick 2-second glance at a crib sheet, or a rapid 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 more difficult dances and only need quick recaps. This requires extra preparation away from the classroom. Proficient dancers may wish to memorise the dances, rather than rely on recaps but this isn't necessary for most types of social dance (although a few "Ball" programmes for more advanced dancers are not recapped).

However, you can only learn a dance from the shorthand instructions (cribs) 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)

A Note on Genders/sex

It is worth noting that historically (several centuries up to circa 1950s era), 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. This notation is still in use, despite it now being very common for two ladies to dance together, and less common but not unheard of for two men to dance together. It should also be noted that these days there are significantly more women who dance than men – and who wouldn't sit out a dance for lack of a male partner either.

At the time of writing, there are no plans from RSCDS HQ or other compilers of dance cribs to update 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-gender-binary 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.

A few non-RSCDS groups are starting to opt for gender-neutral phrases (e.g. Magpies/Larks or Magpies/Ravens) when teaching, although there are still regional variations of this with no "common consensus" on what the gender neutral terms will eventually be worldwide.

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 53 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 teaching 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 also available 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 53 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 first attempted the dance in class or at home, and achieved some proficiency in the individual figures or steps.

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 displays three different formats for the dance "The De'il Among the Tailors":

- Left: RSCDS Book 14 Official Instructions**: Shows the title "No. 7 - THE DEIL AMANG THE TAILORS (Reel)", a diagram of four couples (2, 1, 3, 4) in two rows, and a table with columns "Music" and "DESCRIPTION". The description includes: "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**: A table with the title "The Deil among the Tailors" and "3/4L · R32". It lists steps: "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". It includes a "MiniCribs [-]" link and a "Submit Comment" button.
- Lower Right: Diagrammatic Crib (taken from SCDDb)**: A diagram titled "THE DEIL AMANG THE TAILORS" with "8x32 R". It shows a sequence of steps: "1 2" above "S RA", "2x 1x" above "S LA", a double-headed arrow, "1 2" above "A", and "2 1 3" above a circle containing "6". It includes "Davies Collection, RSCDS Book 14.7", "3C/4C longwise set", a "Keith Rose's Diagrams [V]" link, a "Download" button, and a "Submit Comment" button.

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

To add to the confusion, there is more than one official way of presenting the cribs in words (Eric Ferguson, “Minicrib” and “E-Cribs”) and diagrams (“Pilling”, “Keith Rose Diagrams” etc.). Each has

a slightly different format. 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/>.

Dance programme MCs and Branch/Group webmasters will often publish a downloadable pdf or web-based version of a social dance programme to their website, which includes a full set of dance cribs, and you can sometimes pick up a paper copy at a dance (although not always as more branches go paperless). However, it’s worth noting the format used is often the MC’s/webmaster’s preferred format – not necessarily yours – and may differ between groups!

Some teachers also make their lesson plans available on the dance database for members to do additional learning outside the class.

General Format of Dance Cribs

Whether wordy or diagrammatic form, 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, triangular, square or other unusual 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 in 10-bar phrases (not commonly danced) and a few which are easier written in 2 or 4 bar phrases.

The number of couples needed for the dance is denoted “X/Y” or “X in Y”, where X is the number of couples involved in any one turn through the dance and Y is the total number of couples in the set, e.g. 3/4 means “3 couples in a 4-couple set”. Sometimes for square and triangular dances the “X” is omitted, since by definition all couples in the set are involved in the dance.

Set orientation is denoted “L” for longwise/lengthwise, “S or “Sq” for Square, T for Triangular, “RR” is for round the room or “circle” dances. Other combinations will be described (e.g. for “Domino 5”).

Common numbers of dancers and orientations required are shown in the table below:

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)
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)
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)
2RR, 2F2 RTR, 2 Facing 2	2 people facing 2 people (i.e. 1 couple faces another couple, common in “round the room” dances)
3RR, 3F3 RTR, 3 Facing 3	3 people facing 3 people round the room (e.g. The Dashing White Sergeant)
3/3L, 3/3T	3 couple dance. All 3 couples are involved in the dance each turn, the dance will be performed just 3 times through (common in Strathspeys, also Triangular Sets)
4/4L	All 4 couples are involved in the dance each turn in a longwise set, the dance will be performed just 4 times through.

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
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	Walk (more common for warm up or slow ceilidh dances)

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

"Wordy Cribs" (See Figure 2)

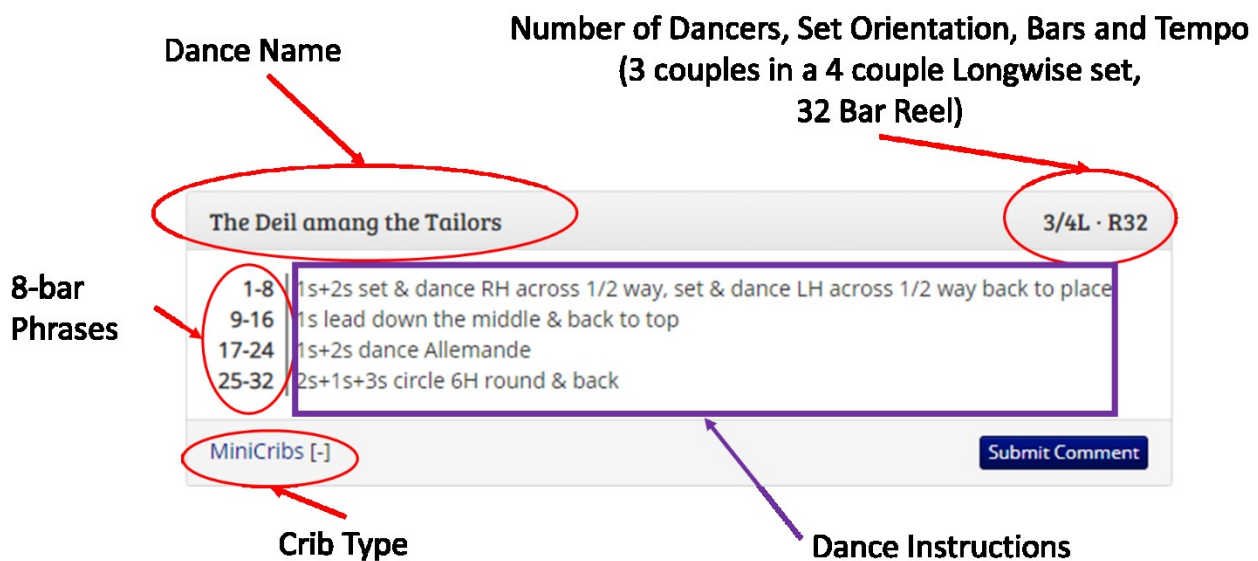


Figure 2: Parts of a "Wordy" Dance Crib

"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/Magpie

Notation	Meaning
L	Lady/Lark
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 ptrn cnr ptrn	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
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 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 Cribs (Including “Pilling” Style Cribs)

Many dancers believe they will never be able to read pilling or diagrammatic cribs. **This isn’t true.** However, it does require a little more effort in advance to learn all the shapes and symbols. The best resource for this is the key at the front of the “Green Book”, published by the RSCDS.

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).

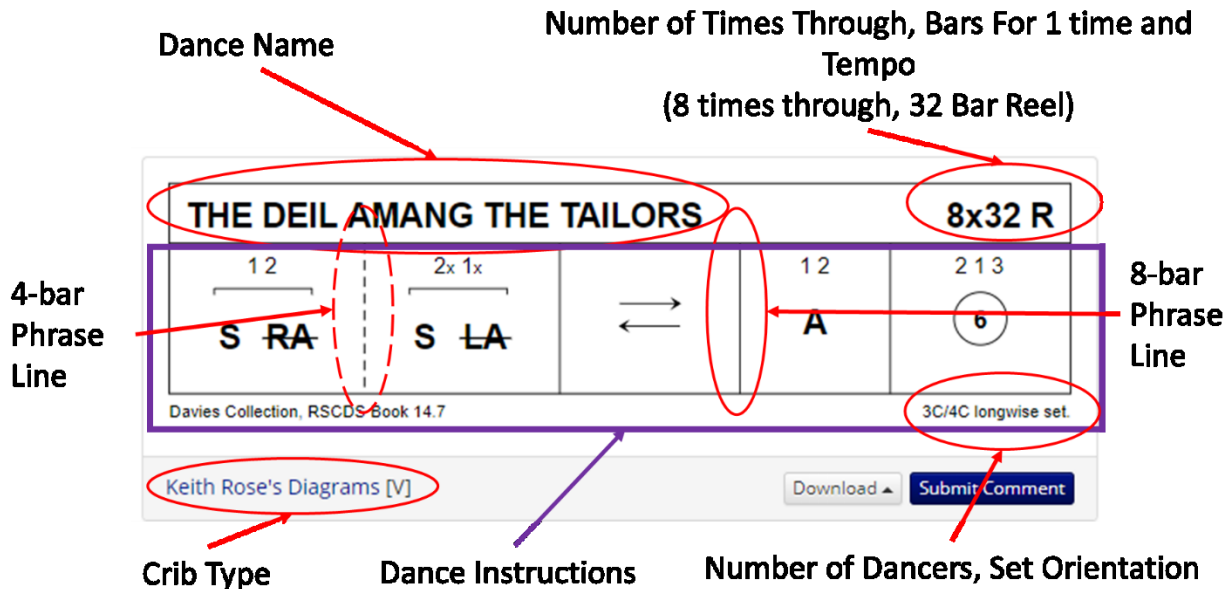


Figure 3: Parts of a Diagrammatic Dance Crib

Diagrammatic cribs are read left to right and top to bottom, with a solid vertical line separating 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. Some, such as “RA” (Right Hands Across), are intuitive. Others are not. 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 shows 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 “whilst 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 Diagrammatic Crib Symbols

Main Symbols	Meaning
A	Allemande (2 or 3 couple denoted by numbers above)

↑↓	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
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	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
N	Right Hand
R	Nearer Hand
X	Crossed Hands
↑	Whilst Advancing
S	Whilst Setting