

How to Take Your Examinations

A candidate's guide — from getting a trainer to the examining table

Referencing the AIDA and Dance Vision examinations handbooks and the NDCA Rules & Regulations (July 2026 edition).

Examinations exist for one reason: to raise the standard of the dancing, and to give you an honest, outside measure of where you actually stand. They lay out a graduated series of goals — each one built on the last — so that you always know the next thing to master. Passing one is worth being proud of. **But the process only feels complicated because two decisions usually get skipped. Make them first and the rest is a straight line.**

Decision one: **get a trainer**. Decision two: **decide what your examinations are for** — whether you are credentialing yourself to teach, or working toward sitting at the judging table as an NDCA adjudicator. Everything below follows from those two.

Step 1 · Get a trainer — before anything else

Do not schedule an examination you have not been trained for. This is the single most common reason candidates underperform. Much of the preparation you can do yourself once you know how to present the work — but you need a qualified trainer who has taken candidates through exams before, and who *agrees you are ready*. Their job is to see the faults you cannot see in yourself.

Choose a trainer who holds a credential at least one degree above the exam you are taking, and preferably in your style. The examining bodies publish member listings for exactly this — use them to find someone near you, or ask for a referral.

One rule to know going in: **you cannot be examined by the person who trained you in the six months before the exam**. Your trainer and your examiner must be different people. Plan for that from the start.

Step 2 · Decide what your examinations are for

There are two tracks, and they stack — one is the foundation for the other.

Track A — Teaching credentials

The professional degree ladder. This is the foundation for everything: it is how you credential yourself to teach professionally, how you prove your standard, and the prerequisite for ever judging. Most people start here, and for many this is the whole journey. The examining bodies for this track are AIDA and Dance Vision (and, in the London lineage, the ISTD).

Track B — NDCA adjudicator

If you want to judge NDCA competitions, the National Dance Council of America is the licensing body. This track is built directly on top of Track A — you cannot start it until you have earned teaching credentials first. Pursue it only when judging is genuinely your goal.

If you only want to teach, you live entirely in Track A. If you want to judge, you do Track A *and then* Track B. The sections below walk through each.

Track A • The teaching-credential ladder

The credentials come as a ladder of professional degrees, each one absorbing the one below it. The names and age gates below follow the *AIDA Examinations Handbook*; Dance Vision's DVIDA program follows the same shape under its own labels (see the note at the end of this track).

The degrees, in order

1. **Student Teacher.** The entry point (minimum age 16). Establishes that you can present syllabus figures and the basics of the theory. It grants no membership vote, but you may attend meetings and receive member discounts.
2. **Associate.** The first full professional degree (minimum age 17). This is the one that earns you letters after your name and full member rights. It covers all of the bronze figures in your style.
3. **Member.** The next level (minimum age 21), requiring at least two years teaching in a responsible position, with verifiable references. It incorporates all associate material plus the silver figures.
4. **Fellowship.** The top teaching credential. You must have held the Member degree in the same branch for at least three years. It covers bronze, silver, and gold, and because it carries so much weight it is administered by two examiners.

Styles you can take this ladder in: International Ballroom, International Latin, American Smooth, and American Rhythm, plus Theatrical Dance at the Associate and Member levels. There are also single-dance professional awards — Viennese Waltz, Argentine Tango, Salsa, Hustle, West Coast Swing, and more — which stand on their own and do not count toward a degree.

What every exam contains

Whatever the level, a professional exam has two parts, graded separately in each dance.

- **Practical Demonstration.** You dance the syllabus figures to music with a partner, as both Leader and Follower (Man and Lady); you give solo demonstrations of figures as directed; and at the higher levels you start an imaginary class in time to the music.
- **Theory & Technical Analysis.** You know the time signature and tempo of each dance; you define and demonstrate the technical headings — positions of the feet, alignment, amount of turn, rise and fall, footwork, contrary body movement (CBM) and CBMP, and sway; you describe the holds, walks, and (in Latin and Rhythm) the leads and hip action; you give the precedes and follows to your figures; and you explain how you would teach them.

How it is scored

Professional grades run: **Honors 95–100, Highly Commended 85–94, Commended 75–84, Pass 65–74, Fail under 65.** Each dance is scored in two sections — Practical Demonstration and Theory — and the *lower* of the two sets your grade for that dance. One hard line: dancing out of time to the music during the practical is a mandatory fail. To pass at any level, with any grade, is a real accomplishment; “Honors” is the icing.

Booking and logistics

1. **Apply at least 30 days before the exam date.** Late applications are not accepted, and you must give at least 14 days' notice to cancel or you forfeit your place.
2. **Bring your own partner.** It can be a professional or an amateur. You will dance both roles regardless.
3. **Mind the retake rule.** If you do not pass, there is a required 30-day wait before you can retake the same exam.

4. **Confirm dates and current requirements with the board's Examinations Coordinator.** They handle the arrangements and will walk you through anything specific to your session.

The Dance Vision note

Dance Vision certifies through the DVIDA syllabus — the standardized teaching system Wayne Eng built in 2001, recognized by the NDCA and taught in hundreds of studios. The degree names and exact figure lists differ, so work from the *Dance Vision examinations handbook* for the specifics of that track. The shape, though, is identical to the above: train first, sit a practical plus a theory, book ahead, and dance both roles. If you credential through Dance Vision, you are building on the same foundation.

Track B · Becoming an NDCA adjudicator

If your goal is to judge, the National Dance Council of America licenses adjudicators. The requirements below are drawn from the *NDCA Rules & Regulations (July 2026 edition)*; the operational steps come from the NDCA's adjudicator office. Confirm the current requirements against the latest edition before applying — the rulebook is revised regularly.

The gateway: your teaching credentials

You may only apply for an NDCA Adjudicator's License if you have taken your examinations through an **NDCA-affiliated association** and hold a current membership card with it. AIDA and Dance Vision (DVIDA) are both affiliated associations — each holds a seat on the NDCA Adjudicator Examining Board — as is the ISTD lineage. In short: you earn the right to judge by first proving, through Track A, that you can teach.

If you qualified abroad, you may be granted special clearance for up to one year on the Ballroom Department's recommendation, but you must still pass an NDCA Adjudicator's Examination in the style you wish to judge. Non-resident officials must also hold a current World Dance Council license.

What your credential level lets you judge

The rulebook ties what you can judge directly to how far up the teaching ladder you have climbed:

- **Associate degree or higher** — you may judge all categories except Championships.
- **Full Member or Fellow** — you may judge Championship events.

Every adjudicator, at every level, must hold an **NDCA Adjudicator's License** and be certified and qualified in the specific type and style they are engaged to judge.

Judging championships: the four-style requirement

Sanctioned Championships may only be judged by adjudicators the NDCA has accepted as **Championship Adjudicators**, and that status requires championship-level credentials in **all four styles — Ballroom, Latin, Smooth, and Rhythm**. This applies to every division at a championship event, so partial-style credentials will not carry you onto a championship panel.

If you still compete

Two limits matter for anyone who is also an active competitor:

- **Active Professional competitors** may judge only Amateur and Pro/Am categories — not Professional events — until they have retired from competitive dancing.
- **Active Pro/Am professional competitors** may judge Pro/Am events but must excuse themselves from any heat in which their own student is dancing.

The examination, step by step

1. **Earn the prerequisite teaching credentials (Track A)** through an NDCA-affiliated association, and keep your membership current.
2. **Register as an adjudicator with the NDCA** and submit your examination test papers to the Credentials Committee / Adjudicator Examining Board for review.
3. **Complete the NDCA Adjudicator Training and pass the NDCA Adjudicator's Examination** — a written portion on judges' conduct, the rules, and protocols, plus a theory review across the styles. It may be taken

one style at a time, and your examiner must come from a different affiliated association than the one that credentialed you.

4. **Receive your NDCA Adjudicator's License**, certified for the types and styles you passed. Add styles — or step up from non-championship to championship judging — by completing the higher credentials above.

Confirm the current requirements and process directly with the NDCA, as they are periodically revised.

And beyond — chairing the panel

If you later want to run the panel as a Chairman of Adjudicators, the NDCA adds its own ladder (CH1 → CH2 → CH3). CH1 needs Associate-level judging in all four styles plus an Invigilator qualification, a Scrutineer license, and two years of judging; CH2 needs Membership or Fellowship in all four styles and lets you chair championships; CH3 is national or international recognition built on five years of championship experience. Worth knowing the ceiling, even if it is years away.

Preparing well — the difference between a pass and Honors

The following is distilled from generations of examiners, and it holds at every level.

- **Dance it before you theorize it.** Get each figure confident and correct on your own two feet — as both roles, in front of a mirror — before you drill the words. Careless footwork in a solo demonstration invites more hard questions than anything else.
- **Be brief and correct.** Speak first, then move. Do not recite the technique like a parrot, and do not pad it with extra words; the correct placing of the feet says more than the sentence does.
- **Half an hour a day beats cramming.** Work with a partner and take turns holding the book — it is easy to see someone else's mistakes and easy to miss your own.
- **Build an amalgamation in each dance.** String your figures together using the listed precedes and follows, sized to fit the room you will be examined in.
- **Know more precedes and follows than the minimum.** You are far less likely to have a memory lapse — and some examiners have favorites.
- **Carry yourself well.** Your manner, your diction, and clean solo demonstrations can rightly outweigh a few technical slips. A mistake corrected immediately, without prompting, is not penalized.

At a glance

The teaching ladder (AIDA)

Degree	Gate	Covers
Student Teacher	Age 16+	Entry — syllabus figures and basic theory
Associate	Age 17+	First full degree; all bronze figures
Member	Age 21+, 2 yrs teaching	Bronze + silver
Fellowship	3 yrs as Member	Bronze + silver + gold; two examiners

The adjudicator requirements (NDCA)

You hold...	...and you may judge
Adjudicator's License (required of all)	Nothing without it — earned via exams through an NDCA-affiliated association + membership, then the NDCA Adjudicator's Exam
Associate degree or higher	All categories except Championships
Full Member or Fellow	Championship events
Championship Adjudicator status	Championships — requires championship-level credentials in ALL four styles: Ballroom, Latin, Smooth, Rhythm
Still competing?	Active pros: Amateur & Pro/Am only, until retired. Pro/Am pros: sit out your own student's heats

A last word

The exam is not a hurdle to clear — it is the fastest way to find out what you actually know. A candidate who fails and walks away with a clear picture of what to fix is better off than one who barely scrapes a pass and learns nothing. So do it in the right order: get a trainer, decide whether you are teaching or judging, and give the preparation the months it deserves. The standard is the same on both sides of the table — that is the whole point of it.

Questions about training, exam sessions, or which path fits you — reach out.