

How to Practice a Musical Instrument

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We all know that if you want to learn to play an instrument, you have to practice. But it's important to know **how to practice effectively**. Your practice time will be twice as useful if you do it right - and that is the subject of this article.

I am a saxophone and clarinet teacher, so of course the advice here is directed especially at woodwind players. However, most of these ideas apply to all instruments.

The practice advice below is divided into three sections: Beginners (first and second year players); Middle School Age; and High School/Adult Players. Both students and parents should read it.

First, here are some basic principles that apply to all levels:

- **You are your own best teacher.** Only you can make yourself into a better and better player. You absolutely must understand this!
- Practicing should be fun. It's fun to be good at something, and it's fun to be constantly improving your skills.
- Practice with your brain turned on and you will learn twice as fast.
- Part of good practicing is developing your ability to concentrate. If you always try to focus to the best of your ability, **you will actually get better at focusing!**
- When you identify a problem spot in a piece, turn that spot into an exercise. Play it as slowly as necessary to eliminate the mistake, then gradually increase the tempo. A metronome can be useful for this.
- Practice being correct. When you are working on a difficult piece or section, don't try for a fast tempo until you are ready. If you try to play it too fast, you will make the same mistakes over and over, and **you will get better at making those mistakes**. You don't want that!
- Try to practice every day, or nearly every day. Find a time of day that works for you, and stick to it.
- Find a place to practice where you can concentrate - no TV, or anything else bothering or distracting you.
- Be patient with yourself. Learning to play an instrument is a long-term project.

If you are taking lessons, you should make your practicing cover these three things: 1) Review of your last lesson, applying what you learned; 2) Preparation for your next lesson (i.e., your assignment), and 3) Anything else that you feel is important to you - or fun for you.

How to Practice - Beginners

Here are some simple guidelines for a 30-minute practice session:

First, warm up with something easy (5-10 minutes)

Next, get down to business while you are fresh - learn something new - REALLY learn it. Take as much time as necessary.

When you are satisfied that you have achieved your goal for the day, don't stop just yet. Play fun stuff, easy stuff, old stuff, or do some sight reading, for 10 or 15 more minutes.

Here's a game I use with myself: When I'm learning something new, or fixing a problem, I tell myself that I have to get it right *four times in a row* before I can consider it learned.

Invent exercises.

Always think about your tone when you practice. Even when you are just playing scales, try to play with a good tone.

When you are reading music, **look ahead**. Don't just look at the notes you are playing - try to see one or two measures at a time.

Spend part of your practice time just making up your own music (improvising).

Some Crummy Excuses for Not Practicing

Here are a few excuses that I hear from time to time. It should be obvious why these are not good reasons to avoid practicing, but in case you need it spelled out, I've put a little advice after each crummy excuse:

- "But I play every day in school" (That's not practicing, and it's not enough to help you really improve.)
- "I already play better than anyone else in school" (You should try to be the best player that you can be. It's not about comparing yourself to others. Besides, if you goof off, pretty soon you won't be the best anymore.)
- "I've already learned my assignment" (So...give yourself a new assignment! Remember, **you are your own best teacher**.)
- "It's boring" (This indicates the need for a better attitude. Learning is fun, music is fun, and being good at something is fun.)
- "I don't have time" (Really? You can't find 20 minutes a few times a week? If you truly are too busy, though, just make sure that you make up for it the following week.)
- "I don't know how it goes" (Ask a parent, or an older sibling, or find a recording. If you somehow can't do that, then practice other things, and ask your teacher to demonstrate it at the next lesson.)
- "I'm taking lessons, so I don't need to practice" (That's not the way it works. Your teacher is not there to babysit one day a week of practicing. He or she is there to give you the tools so that **you can be your own best teacher**.)

If you are the one who practices when the other kids are being lazy, you will become a better player than they.

Try for 20-30 minutes per day, at least 5 days/week. If you want to become a really great player, more.

You should try some ideas from the "Middle School" section, too (see below).

How to Practice - Middle School Age

All of the above "beginner" advice applies to you too, but you are more mature, and you have a longer attention span. Here are some additional important things to include in your practicing:

- Scales and arpeggios: These are the basic building blocks of music, and will be a huge help to you in the long term. Memorize them!
- Long tones (for wind instruments): Hold a note as long as you can, medium loud, with the best sound that you can. Keep the volume and the pitch absolutely steady. Do this with notes in every register - high/middle/low. Do this for 5 minutes every day.
- Working on pieces as long-term projects: As you become a more advanced player, you will be working on pieces that may take several weeks (or more!) to learn.
- Sight reading: This is an important skill to develop. Open one of your exercise books to a random page, and see if you can read it correctly on the first try.
- Improvising: Using a scale as raw material, make up your own music. You can do this with major scales, minor scales, or blues scales. If you are studying jazz, you might want to use a play-along recording.

Set achievable goals for yourself - both one-day goals and long-term goals. Your teacher will help you with this.

Remember - When you solve a fingering or reading problem, it's not just to make that particular piece sound right. The next time that fingering comes up in a different piece, it won't be a problem. As you become a better and better player, you will solve more and more of these little problems - and you'll gradually play at a higher and higher level.

Always try to play with a good tone, even when practicing scales.

When you are practicing a piece, play with feeling and expression. Of course you should follow the dynamics and expression markings, but you can also add the kind of expression that can't be written down.

Stay relaxed, both mentally and physically. You'll think better and play better.

Try to practice at least 30 minutes per day, at least 5 days/week. Twice as much would be a good idea, when possible. If you are really serious, more!

You'll find some more ideas in the "High School/Adult" section, below.