

Home Practice Guide

It is important for musicians to understand how to practice their instruments to get the maximum result in the allotted time. How and what you practice are almost more important than how long you practice. While time is an important part of practicing, understanding how to plan and organize a practice session, diagnose problems, prescribe solutions and establish habits should be the main focus of any great musician. This guide will help you in accomplishing your goals in the most efficient way possible.

With every exercise, line of music or assignment, you must have the following:

- **Purpose (Goal)** - ask yourself "Why am I doing this exercise?"
- **Mental Image (Model)** - you must create an image of what you want to sound like in your mind. Without that image, you will never know if you are reaching your goal.
- **Diagnosis (Grade yourself)** - simply giving yourself your honest opinion about your performance. What were the positives and what were the negatives?
- **Prescription (Solution or Correction)** - you must determine what techniques have been used in class to solve your particular problems.
- **Establish a Habit (Correct Repetition)** - once you have corrected the problem, you must repeat the correction many times (20 or so) to make the correction a natural part of your playing.

Sports Analogy

Imagine yourself as a sports team. Only every time you play a piece of music correctly (up to your standards) you win, and every time you play a piece of music incorrectly (below your standards) you lose. One example might be this:

1 - 4

After playing a part of your music, you get it correct on the 5th time. This means your sports record is 1 win and 4 losses. This would be a very poor team. Essentially, you have played it correctly once and incorrectly four times.

5 - 4

After you get it correct, you then get it correct a total of 5 times in a row. Now your record is 5 wins and 4 losses. This is a winning record, but about average. Any top notch sports team would not be happy with this record.

15 - 5

After you get it correct 5 times in a row, you proceed to get it correct another ten times. You may actually make a mistake from time to time, but you are essentially playing it correct three times for every time you get it incorrect. This gives you a .750 winning percentage, much like a great sports team such as the Pistons (late 80's/early 90's) Lakers, Bulls (with Jordan), Red Wings (Stanley Cup years), Cowboys (early 90's) or Yankees.

These types of repetition, once done properly, will not be too time consuming, but they do take self-discipline and diligence. Having enough control over yourself to not move forward until you are certain you understand a concept is very important.

Bad Habits

When repeating items in this manner, it is vital that you are performing the item correctly. If you are not, you could end up establishing bad habits. In sports terms, you might actually be digging yourself into a hole such as a 4 wins 15 losses record. (Yikes!!) So, it is important that with every repetition, you continue to correct and focus on the diagnosis and prescription portion of your practice routine.

Session Organization

It is important that your practice sessions cover the right aspects of your playing. Try to think of your practice in terms of 4 different sections. The following aspects should be covered each practice session. There are many different exercises that could fit in to each section. Throughout the week, you can spread out the exercises so you do not do the same exact routine every time.

Tone Development - It is good to start the practice with exercises that help to develop your tone quality. This might involve breathing exercises, fundamental sounds, mouthpiece work, long tones or other tone building exercises. Some exercises for this portion might be:

Technical Studies - The next aspect will be your ability to “get around” on your instrument. In other words, how well can you move from one note to the next with great hand position and great tone quality? Notice that this is a build up process. Tone development is still a priority in this portion of the practice session. Some exercises for this section might be:

New Material – It is always a good idea to try to introduce or review new material in every lesson. You may have just gone over something new in band class or lessons that you need to review the same day you first tried it. You might also just want to read a new piece of music to help your sight-reading skills. Rhythm counting and note-naming are two great ways to improve and refine your music reading skills.

Musical Studies – This portion of the practice time is where most people spend all of their time. This is your chance to refine the finer points of material that you have been working on for class or lessons. Playing tests and band music are prime examples of music that should be worked on during this time. Detail work is your goal. Consistency with those details is important – again, use your sports analogy. What type of team do you want to be on your given material?

***Planning, self-discipline, diligence and consistency will pay off!!
Playing a musical instrument is more mental than physical.
Make sure you have “think time” in your practice sessions.***

Home Practice Guide - Parents

One of the most important aspects of playing a musical instrument is the ability to practice correctly. While time and regularity of practice is very important, the quality of the practice is the true determining factor in a musician's rate of improvement. In fact, 20 minutes of focused and correct practice is more effective than an hour of poor practice.

Practice Environment

In order for our students to get the most out of their practice session, we have a couple of suggestions. The first suggestions will involve the practice environment. Their environment should be:

- **Quiet & Calm** – Much like studying, practicing an instrument is mostly mental. Their practice area should resemble a library as close as possible... with the exception that they are playing their instruments.
- **Good Temperature** – Sometimes students practice in the garage to avoid disturbing other people in the house. This is okay as long as the temperature in the garage is 65 – 80 degrees. Bad temperatures can cause their instrument to not work, and can cause them to not enjoy practicing.
- **Chair and Stand** – It is important that their practice area allow them to sit in the exact same position they do during class time. A solid chair is important to help them use the correct posture. Their music should be in a place that they do not have to bend over to see it. Wire music stands are available for purchase at the band hall.
- **Use a Mirror** – It is important that students constantly check their embouchures to make sure they are being formed correctly. Small mirrors on their music stands are ideal. Bathroom mirrors work as well.

Practice Sounds

As parents, you may not be able to help your child with band homework like you can with math homework. However, there are a couple of things that you should be hearing on a regular basis.

Students should be practicing items we play in class and lessons in an effort to make their performance in class and lessons acceptable. When your child practices, you should hear:

What you should hear

- **A METRONOME BEEPING** – Students should be using a metronome 95% of the time when they practice. This helps them keep a steady tempo. As they mature, they will use the metronome less and less. However, they will never outgrow the need for a metronome as even professional musicians use metronomes in their practice sessions.
- **Clapping and Counting** – The combination of rhythmic counting and clapping to the beat is key to overall success. Counting out rhythms (often similar to sounding out words when learning to read) and then combining rhythms with self-generated tempo will help with the coordination of motor skills and conceptual learning.
- **Note-naming** – Students should be reading lines from the music and saying the note names out loud. This should also be done with a metronome, and eventually, while fingering or positioning the notes being said.
- **Fundamental Sounds** – Students should be working on their sound on just the mouthpiece, mouthpiece and barrel or headjoint. This sound might be a little annoying, but it is essential in their development of proper embouchure and tone quality. They should work for a steady sound that doesn't waver at all.

• **Long Tones** – The first sounds students make on their fully assembled instrument should be long and smooth sounds. Their tone quality is one of the most important aspects of learning their instrument during the beginning year.

What you shouldn't hear

• **Clowning Around** – Sometimes students get curious about their instrument and try new things. Although we want them to look ahead and read new music, they should never make obviously poor sounds on their instrument. Brass players should not be trying to play really high sounds, or really, really fast music.

• **All Music** – Students should enjoy practicing and should want to play songs as much as possible. However, at this point in their musical lives, they should also understand the importance of fundamentals. So you should not hear just songs when they practice. They should be doing many fundamental exercises along with note-naming and rhythm counting.

• **Silence** – Students should not just do rhythm counting or note-naming for their practice time. Sometimes students try to say they have been practicing these items for all of their practice time. This should not be the case. They should play their instrument for at least 2/3 of their practice sessions.

How can you help?

We have a few parents who have played musical instruments, but most parents don't feel comfortable helping band students with practicing. This is understandable. If you are a person who has been in a band program, please feel free to help your child practice. Try to make sure you are helping the students practice the correct way that we teach them. **All parents** can help our students practice by doing any or all of the following:

• **Help Their Environment** – Make sure they are practicing in a comfortable place as described. If this means you need to find something for baby brother or sister to do, this might be helpful. Sometimes they can be a distraction. Again, a music stand is a very important part of this. Whatever you do, please don't send them outside or away to practice. Do what you can to **not** make practicing negative.

• **Consistent Times** – Try to help your child have a regular practice time (preferably when you are home to hear them practice). If they get in the habit of practicing at the same time every day, this will aide in their practice routine.

• **Encourage Performances** – Set up a time every couple of days for your child to perform music for you, or for your family and friends. Encourage them to show off the things they are playing in class or in their private lessons. This will give them performance goals outside of class.

• **Ask Questions** – Have your child explain what his or her plan is for their practice session. Ask them about upcoming playing tests or class requirements.

• **Sit in on a Practice Session** – Listen to your child practice occasionally. Ask them to explain the processes that they go through for each part of their practice session. You can time them on timed not-naming games or mix up their rhythm cards to try to trick them up on rhythm counting.

***Do all that you can to make practicing a positive experience!!!
The amount and quality of daily home practice directly
impacts their playing level on their instruments***