

The Truth About Trying to Get Better at Guitar Without a Good Teacher

by Dennis Winge

It's obvious why many people who want to improve their guitar playing don't do so with a teacher. Taking lessons requires money, you have to travel to and from the location of the lessons, and you are expected to practice on your own. There is so much information available now either for free on the internet, in form of videos and articles, or at very low-cost, such as DVDs and books. It would seem logical to simply gather this information and put it to work so that you can make great music without the time or monetary expense.

As a professional guitarist who has taken lessons on-and-off for 40 years or so, and now has two guitar teachers (one on-line and one in-person), I can tell you sincerely that to try and learn guitar on your own is way harder and completely inefficient. Even though I play lots of gigs and I am a successful full-time musician and teacher, I always wonder how much further along I could have been if I had taken lessons continuously instead of in spurts.

Here are a few reasons why it's not a good idea to try and learn without a teacher:

1. **It takes way longer.** On your own, it's nearly impossible to assess:

A. **Quality** of the information. Let's face it, a lot of the information you get for free on the Internet is not necessarily the highest quality. My dad used to say, "amateurs teach amateurs to be amateurs."

B. **Relevance.** Even if the information is high-quality, how do you know whether it's immediately relevant for you based on what your musical goals are? There lots of great techniques, but your favorite guitarists and my favorite guitarists may have very few of them in common.

C. **Order.** Even if the information is high-quality and relevant, how do you know it's appropriate for you to be looking at that particular thing at this particular time? For example, what if there are more basic foundational skills that you need to acquire before you can really master the material being shown? And what if mastering a few fundamentals can not only make learning that cool thing you saw way easier, but make lots of other things easier as well? I have seen this situation over and over in my 20 years of teaching.

D. **Feedback.** Obviously, a book or video is unable to give you specific feedback on your playing or answer questions you may have. It is also unable to help you apply what you learn. A good teacher will focus on "implementation" (how to use what you just learned in lots of different musical contexts), and "integration" (how to connect the new skill you just acquired with all the other skills you have.)

E. **Motivation.** Everyone responds differently to being held accountable. Some people thrive on it and others rebel against it. Either way, just knowing that there is someone who genuinely cares about your progress helps motivate you to practice. With a good teacher you can celebrate small victories, see short-term and long-term progress.

2. **You may have to undo bad habits.** It's extremely rare for a self-taught guitarist to not have developed some bad habits. When you have bad habits, one of 3 things happen.

A. **You change some of the habits and get some results.** When experienced guitarists come to me because they are frustrated with their lack of progress in a particular area, I frequently have to decide which battles to pick. If they have multiple bad habits, I choose to get them to focus on the one that will most directly liberate them to achieve what they want. It would be more ideal, however, if I could go to the 'root' of the problem(s), but the more experience the guitarist has, the less likely they will be able to implement more than one major change in the way they have been doing things at a time. So they correct one item, and see results. Then they correct the next one, and see results. But this takes time and patience on the part of the student.

B. **You risk extreme frustration with a complete makeover.** Guitarists aren't always willing to completely re-haul certain aspects of their techniques (or even mental approaches to playing certain things). It can be humiliating for them to feel like a beginner again. Sometimes students feel that they are inadequate or 'stupid' because they can't do something that I make look easy. Almost invariably it has nothing to do with their level of intelligence. It's simply that in order to learn something well, it means they have to undo having learned it poorly, which takes twice the effort and time.

C. **You walk away defeated.** The third scenario is that guitarists just give up and go back to the way they have been doing things for years and years. Even though they were frustrated, they would rather stay stuck long-term than endure short-term work. This is sad, because they'll never know how much fun they will have missed out on. A few months' work to correct a habit in exchange for a lifetime of both musical enjoyment and a sense of personal satisfaction is a very worthwhile one that they'll simply never know.

What if none of these scenarios needs to happen for you? What if you simply learn the right way right from the beginning?

So, think of all the years that learning with a good teacher can save you. Think of all the years you can spend making great music instead of thinking it's too hard, or that you don't have 'natural talent' (which is a myth anyway.) Think of being able to do everything you've always wanted to musically, plus way more! Don't take it from me that this is possible, take it from my students by watching and reading the testimonials on the website below. Those students were just like you, with the same reservations about taking lessons you have. The only difference is that they made a decision, and, like me, their only regret was not taking action sooner.

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