

Developing a Great Practice Routine

by Dennis Winge

Invariably, when I ask students if I can be a fly on the wall and let them practice while I just observe during a lesson, they won't practice anywhere near 100% efficiency, and it's not their fault. They simply don't know how to practice efficiently. There are many, many options in how to practice something, but here are some general guidelines to help you organize your practice routine:

1. **Log your activities.** Let's say you're trying to memorize a scale. Write down what keys you played it in, what positions, and what tempo you can play it at. If a few days go by before you are able to look at the same material again, you can immediately see where you left off, and hopefully know what the next step is. In this example, you can either do different keys you haven't done yet, or the same key in a different position, or the same key / same position, but a faster tempo. If you don't log your activities, this would all be approximations or guesswork.

2. **Vary the topics** over the course of a week. All the latest research on learning summarized in the book "Make it Stick" by Peter C Brown, Mark A. McDaniel, and Henry L. Roediger III, says that when you stay with one topic and you study it the same way over and over, you get lulled into a false sense of understanding. For example, when students study for a test by reading the same textbook over and over, by the second or third time, they really think they know the material because they recognize the same words in the same order. It would be much more efficient for them to make cue cards, or test themselves by using potential quiz questions, etc.

It works even better if they are able to study with concentration for a while on one topic, then move to a different topic, and then back to the first to see how much they remember about it. Another version of this may look like this: If you have an hour to practice, you can choose three items you'd like to work on and immerse yourself fully into each one of these for 20 minutes. The next day, you could choose one of these three items to start with, and see how much you remember without looking at any notes before moving on to something else.

3. **Toggle between physical and mental tasks.** On some days you may be feeling more mentally alert, but physically tired, or vice-versa. If that's the case, then it's perfectly acceptable to adjust your practice routine to only the mental or the physical tasks that you feel ready for. However, you wouldn't want to continue a trend like that for an entire week; ideally you would try to balance it. If you have done mostly mental tasks most of the week, you will want to have at least a couple of days to concentrate on the physical aspect of playing, or vice-versa.

4. **Preplan.** If you have been logging in your activities, then pre-planning will be easy. Pre-planning is simply asking yourself, "What exactly am I going to do during the time that I have allotted for practicing today? What is the best use of my time?" and then writing down the answers before you start. Plan your work, then work your plan.

If, while practicing, you get an idea, or somehow get sidetracked during the time you've set, you can make a written note of the distraction, and come back to it later. This happens to me all the time, and I resist the temptation to chase the new idea, leaving the old one behind, which can be tempting, especially if the new one seems more fun to explore than implementing the old one. Sometimes, I even take a few minutes to explain the new idea in full into a voice recorder, so I can remember it later and save time by not having to write it down.

5. **Use a timer.** I implied this one in the last few points. The amount of time you set a timer for per item can be up to you, but I personally use 20 minutes. I feel that 20 minutes is long enough to immerse myself with wholehearted concentration, and yet not too long, especially if it's something difficult. A standard kitchen timer that you can get in any supermarket is a great investment. Look for one with a magnet that will stick to the top of your music stand.

Sometimes the buzzer goes off, and I really want to spend more time on something. If I have the time, I do. But if I only have a limited time, and it wasn't in my plan, I don't. Wanting to continue something and not doing so on a particular day will motivate you even more to get back to it and practice on a different day, so it can be a good thing. There are other times when, if the task at hand is very difficult, then the 20 minutes feels like a long time, and I feel relieved when the buzzer goes off.

6. **Look for ways to implement** what you're practicing that mimic real-life musical contexts. This is a big one. In my earlier example of memorizing a scale, perhaps you search YouTube for a major backing track in the key that you're in and play to it. Alternatively, you could try composing a song melody or a lick only with the scale that you're working on. Another idea is to play with a metronome, especially if it's on 2 and 4, which mimics the backbeat of most western music. The goal is to try and create momentum in your practicing, which gives you a feel of "I got this" or at least "I will get this."

7. **Be Creative.** When looking for ways to implement, make up rules for yourself to enhance the fun of the game. Children do this naturally and continuously when playing. They make up the rules so they can have fun with whatever game they are playing. If the rules get too complicated, they eliminate one or more of them, but mostly they add rules to make the game more fun. You can make your practice time into a game by setting up restrictions for yourself, like only playing something at a certain tempo, or on a certain string set, or in a certain key, or in a certain position, etc. Practicing then becomes like playing lots of games that you love to play but are also challenging.

8. **Integrate.** In short, integrating is when you can put the new thing you're learning together with old things. For example, let's say you've just memorized the scale we're talking about, and you already know how to alternate pick. You can put the new scale together with the alternate picking and see how fast you can play it cleanly. Of course, this will enhance your alternate picking, and it also enhances your knowledge of where the scale is on the fretboard. Another example of integrating could be theoretical. Let's

say you're working on harmonized scales. You would play a progression using some of the chords in the harmonized scale in whatever key you are memorizing your scale in. Make a loop of it, either using software or on a looper, or simply record yourself playing that progression, and then play your scale over it. There are an infinite number of possibilities for integration.

9. **Work Ethic/Mindset.** Don't bring your phone or any other distractions near you when you go practice. This is one reason I have a mechanical metronome and use it rather than the one on my phone whenever possible. When I say work ethic, I don't always necessarily mean willpower, I also mean motivation. In his book, "The Winning Spirit," Joe Montana and Tom Mitchell list the following as key number five of their eight keys to practicing with a purpose. "Don't say, 'I have to practice.' Say, 'I want to practice; I want to work hard; I am here because this is something I want to do.'"

10. **Goof off.** Having said that about work ethic and mindset, it's also important to allow yourself fun time on the instrument; time to explore, time to jam, and time to not be self-disciplined at all. Some people might do too much in this category already, but allowing goof-off time to be a conscious decision is actually a move of self-discipline.

Of course, there is a smaller percentage of people who are very self-disciplined and could really benefit using the goof-off time just to have fun. When you allow your mind to roam freely, it activates the subconscious mind, which makes connections between things in a way that the conscious mind cannot. Therefore, it is always a good idea to allow free time. My personal opinion is that it could be up to 50% of your total time at the instrument, although you have to find what works for you.

11. Look for ways to **practice away from the instrument.** If you've never done this, you are really missing out on a lot of fun. There are countless ways to practice when you are not at your instrument. It could be testing yourself and reciting back a particular aspect of music theory. For example, can you spell an F sharp major 7 chord? The notes are *f# a# c# and e#*. That could easily be something you practice while you're on a bus or any other time where the mind is free to think.

Another one could be practicing a specific rhythm, either on your lap, or silently in your head. It could be ear training, like hearing a tune on the radio and trying to analyze the intervals of its melody or the chord progression. And finally, you could even visualize the fretboard. How about that scale you've been trying to memorize? Can you play it in your mind's eye?

These are the elements of a great practice routine. Some of these ideas may seem small, but if they help you learn something even 20% faster than you currently are capable of with your current practice routine, then over a 5-year period, you have gained an entire year of practicing! I suspect that the number will be much greater than 20%; it may even be close to 100%, meaning that it will take you one year to learn what could have taken you two years to learn otherwise. That's how powerful having an efficient, productive and fun practice routine can be.