

Composing Etudes

An 'Etude' is piece of music that focuses on a specific technical topic and is designed to provide practice material for perfecting a particular musical skill. Etudes are usually short and may be technically challenging.

In other words, Etudes are exercises that do not sound like exercises, but sound more like actual music. Their advantage lies in the fact that you can practice any skill by learning/rehearsing a piece of music rather than a dry exercise.

It's fun to learn Etudes written by other people, but nothing beats writing *your own* Etudes.

There are MANY ways to compose Etudes, and what we are going to see here is *just an example* of how to go at it. The Etudes you compose today will help you in 3 different ways:

- They will sharpen your composition/improvisation skills as you will have to make musical decisions when you write them, and you will become faster and more confident in making those choices.
- Once composed, the Etudes can become a valuable technical exercise, a great warm up, or even a part of your next solo.
- Writing Etudes is fun, and it helps build your OWN style of music.

NOTE: all the 'rules' that we give below are starting points. Most of the time, you want to work within the rules as they will force you to make interesting choices and will help you avoid the obvious or usual or cliché' sounds.

Every now and then, though, you will feel that you *have* to break the 'rules' because the music demands it. In this case (and only in this case), you have my permission to break the rules ;-)

Chord Notes Etudes

1. Choose a time signature (pick 4/4 if you do not know what to choose)
2. Choose a rhythmic division (8th notes, 16th notes, 8th notes triplets, etc.)
3. Choose a chord progression, and set it to one chord per bar (the chord progression can be in key or not)
4. Write a melody line using only notes of the same length (that you chose at point 2) and using only notes of the chords you chose at point 3 (on the first bar, you use only notes of the first chord in the progression, on the 2nd bar, you use only notes of the second chord in the progression.)

The challenge here is to avoid playing only arpeggios up and down.

For instance, let's pick 4/4 as time signature, 8th notes as rhythmic division, and our chord progression is C G Am F, and then it will repeat.

Chord progression: C G Am F

Time signature: 4/4

Rhythmic division: 8th notes

Fret numbers (Bass clef):

- Bar 1 (C): 12-13-15-12-13-12-14-12
- Bar 2 (G): 12-12-10-15-12-10-12-12
- Bar 3 (Am): 13-9-10-14-13-10-14-13
- Bar 4 (F): 12-20-17-18-17-13-13-14

Observe how the end of the Etude connects seamlessly with the beginning (so it can be repeated easily). Also note how in this Etude we are not just playing arpeggios up and down. Instead, we are creating some patterns like the arpeggio sequence in the first half of the 1st bar and the second half of the 2nd bar, then again in the first half of the 3rd bar.

Another example, with time signature 9/8 (equivalent to 3/4 with triplets), chord progression Am G Dm E Am. This Etude does not repeat, but ends at the 5th bar:

Chord progression: Am G Dm E Am

Time signature: 9/8

Rhythmic division: 8th notes

Fret numbers (Bass clef):

- Bar 1 (Am): 17-12-13-12-13-14-14-13
- Bar 2 (G): 15-10-12-10-12-12-12-12
- Bar 3 (Dm): 10-10-13-17-13-15-15-14
- Bar 4 (E): 13-12-12-16-12-12-19-17-16-17
- Bar 5 (Am): 17

Write a couple of those simple Etudes before moving to the next section.

Passing-Neighbors Notes Etudes

Since using only chord notes sounds boring after a while, here we will start using a few non-chord notes.

1. **Diatonic Neighbor Notes** Starting from a note of the chord, we play the note up or down a degree in the scale, and then we immediately play the chord note again that we started from.

So if we are playing an Am chord (and we are in the key of Am) and we play the notes A B A, then B is a neighbor note because it's a step away from A.

If we play A F A, the F is NOT a neighbor note (it's too distant from A), and if we play A C, the C is NOT a neighbor note because we are not returning to the same chord note (A).

In the example below, all the notes marked by N are diatonic neighbor notes. (Diatonic = 'following the scale')

Musical notation for a Diatonic Neighbor Notes Etude. The piece is in the key of Am (A minor) and 8/8 time. The notation is written on a treble clef staff with a common time signature (C). The notes are: A (17th fret), B (12th fret), A (13th fret), B (12th fret), A (13th fret), B (15th fret), A (13th fret), B (14th fret), A (12th fret), B (14th fret), A (12th fret), B (14th fret), A (14th fret), B (12th fret), A (14th fret). The notes B, A, B, A, B, A, B, A, B, A, B, A are marked with 'N' above them. The fret numbers are written below the staff: 17, 12, 13, 12, 13, 15, 13, 14, 12, 14, 12, 14, 14, 12, 14.

1. **Chromatic Neighbor Notes** Starting from a note of the chord, play the note *one fret* above or below, and then play the same chord note again. So, if our chord is Am, and we play A G# A, then G# is a Chromatic Neighbor.

Notes marked with CN are chromatic neighbor notes (N are diatonic neighbors).

Musical notation for a Chromatic Neighbor Notes Etude. The piece is in the key of Am (A minor) and 8/8 time. The notation is written on a treble clef staff with a common time signature (C). The notes are: A (17th fret), G# (16th fret), A (17th fret), B (12th fret), A (13th fret), B (12th fret), A (13th fret), G# (16th fret), A (12th fret), B (13th fret), A (12th fret), G# (16th fret), A (13th fret), B (14th fret), A (14th fret), B (15th fret), A (14th fret). The notes G#, A, G#, A, G#, A, G#, A are marked with 'CN' above them. The notes B, A, B, A, B, A, B, A are marked with 'N' above them. The fret numbers are written below the staff: 17, 16, 17, 12, 13, 12, 13, 12, 16, 12, 13, 14, 14, 14, 15, 14.

1. **Passing Notes** Play a 'straight' scale (i.e. do not change direction) starting from a chord note and ending on another chord note. All the notes in between are passing notes.

So, if the chord is Am and we play A B C, then B is a passing note. If we play A G F E, then G and F are passing notes.

On the other hand, if we play A G F G F E, those are NOT passing notes, since we 'changed direction'.

Notes marked with P are passing notes.

Am

8

P P P P

17 12 15 13 12 14 13 12 14 14 15 14 12 15 14 14

A B

Write a few Etudes using Neighbors and Passing notes. Here's a short example:

Am G

8

N N P P N N P P

9 10 8 12 10 12 13 12 10 13 12 10 12 12 10 15 13 15 17 15 13 17 15 15

A B

Dm E

3

P P P P N P P

13 10 10 13 12 10 12 10 9 12 10 9 9 7 12 13 12 10 13 12 12 9 12 10

A B

You can make them as short or as long as you want. You can also attach different sections together to create a longer Etude. For instance:

Am Dm

section 1

8

8-12-10-8 10-5-6-7-6-5-10-5-6-7-7-8

9 10 9 9 10 10 5 6 7 6 5 10 5 6 7 7 8

12 10 9 10

3 G #E7

8

7-10-8-7 4-5-7-5-4-7-5-4-7-4-5-7

7 8 7 7 8 7 10 8 7 4 5 7 5 4 7 5 4 7 4 5 7

10 9 7 7 9 7 8

5 Am Dm

section 2

8

5-5-5-8-7-8 8-12-10-12 10-10-10-13-12-13-10 10-10-9-7-5

5 5 5 8 7 8 8 12 10 12 10 10 10 13 12 13 10 10 10 9 7 5

5 9 10

7 G E7

8

3-3-7-5-7 7-10-8-10 9-9-7-12-10-12-7 10-9-10-9-7

3 3 7 5 7 7 10 8 10 9 9 7 12 10 12 7 10 9 10 9 7

4 3 7 8

9 **C⁷**

section 3

8

10 9 8 9 11 8 12 8 15 12 18 15 17 13 15 13 8 10 10 12

11 **B^b**

8

13 12 10 12 11 10 11 13 10 18 13 19 16 17 19 16 13 16 13 14 17 15 14

Now it's time to write your own Etudes. Start small, start simple, and see where you can go from there. The value is NOT just in the finished Etudes you can write, but in the PROCESS of writing them.

Have fun!