

Pathways to Productive Practice Student Handout

*Practice with PURPOSE. It is the QUALITY of practice,
not the QUANTITY, that makes a difference in musical growth.*

The Basics

- Create a designated practice space, ideally somewhere you will not be disturbed.
- Equipment: Sturdy chair, music stand, pencil, metronome, extra reeds, mutes, valve oil, slide oil, rosin, instrument swabs, and water.
- Additional practice aids: Tuner, iPhone, drone, recording device, and computer.
- Designate a daily practice time and stick with it. Show up, set up, warm up, and **own up** (to your potential).
- Eliminate distractions. (Practicing while watching television is not a good thing!)
- Establish goals for each practice session.

How to Structure the Practice Session

1. Warm-Up: Relax, stretch, and warm up the muscles slowly.
2. Fundamentals: Lip slurs, long tones, scales, thirds, and arpeggios.
3. Learning Stage: Practice with a metronome.
4. End the practice session with something you enjoy playing and/or improvise!
5. Evaluate your practice session. What did you accomplish?

Tips for a Productive Practice Session

- Begin at a tempo that will allow you to comfortably play any challenging technical passages.
- Practice with a metronome. Keep a metronome chart to measure progress.
- When you make a mistake, stop. Isolate the measure(s) and utilize one or more of the suggestions below.
- Avoid always starting at the beginning of a piece.
- Practice with a drone to train the ears to better play in tune.
- Isolate problem spots and mark them with a pencil. Make it a priority to polish at least one problem spot per practice session.
- Record yourself. Listen and analyze. (Note: It is important to listen for what you do well as well as for what needs to be improved.)
- There is a huge difference between spending time just playing the instrument and spending time *practicing* the instrument.
- Always make playing with a beautiful tone your first priority.

Strategies to Isolate and Conquer Technical Passages

First, mark problem measures/sections.

Slow It Down!

How slow is slow enough? When you can play every note without error. Going slower is a *faster* way to learn. Practice with a metronome and increase tempo gradually. As a rule, if you can play the excerpt flawlessly three times in a row, advance to the next metronomic marking.

Change the Rhythm

Changing the rhythm forces the mind and the eyes to focus on each note and to consciously group into combinations that are unlike those printed on the page. For more creative and challenging patterns, check out Elizabeth Green's book *Practicing Successfully*.

Play Only the Notes. Ignore the Rhythm.

Choose a note value, such as quarter notes or eighth notes, and play all pitches in a section with this note value.

Play the Notated Rhythms on a Single Pitch

The focus here is rhythmic precision.

Hold That Thought

Systematically adding a fermata on selected notes is a great way to isolate problem sections and focus on tone. For example, if you have four sixteenth notes, add a fermata on the first note, then replay and place the fermata on the second note, then the third, and so on.

Vary Articulation

Slur an entire section; lightly tongue an entire section; slur two, tongue two, tongue two, slur two, etc.

Add a Note

Play one note, then two, and continue adding notes one at a time until the entire passage is practiced in this manner. (This one really takes patience!)

Pathways to Productive Practice Student Handout (cont.)

Chunk It!

Play through the etude, solo, or ensemble music, making note of “chunks” or measures that are problematic. Isolate the problem chunks and apply one or more of the methods previously listed to bring the designated problem spots up to the standards of the rest of the piece. Connect the chunk to the next measure by including at least one note at the beginning and/or the end of the chunk.

Loop the Chunk

Repeat the chunk until it is clean, then move to the next chunk.

“Small actions repeated over time transform us.”

—Daniel Coyle

Additional Thoughts

Find Tone Models

Seek out performances of great players on your instrument. Listen to these performers on a daily basis so that you may have a tone model in your “mind’s ear.” This is particularly productive when done a few minutes before you begin your practice session. All the technique in the world is meaningless without a beautiful tone.

Keep a Practice Notebook

Jot down ideas, list practice goals, create a metronome chart to monitor progress. If you study privately, note suggestions from your teacher. Ditto with your ensemble conductor.

Begin At The End

Avoid always practicing from the beginning. This often results in the end being less polished than the first half of the piece. Begin practice with the last phrase or last few measures of the piece, then work backwards, adding a phrase or section at a time until you are at the beginning.

Record a Portion of Your Practice Session

Listen critically and evaluate areas needing further practice. Assess not only your technical proficiency, but also listen for tone quality, dynamic contrast, clarity of style and articulation, and most important, phrase shape and expression. Are you making music? Take great joy in what you are doing well. A video recording will allow you to assess posture and hand position. Look for anything that creates tension in your playing.

Pathways to Productive Practice Student Handout (cont.)

Memorize and Close Your Eyes

Notice that great performers often close their eyes during a performance. Memorizing a section of your music so that you may focus entirely on the *sound* and not be distracted by anything visual is a wonderful way to become a more expressive musician.

Sing Your Music

“If you can sing it, you can play it.” This is an age-old adage that holds true for all musicians. Sing with expression.

Music and Neuroscience

Building the technique necessary to master musical performance is dependent upon training neural pathways in the brain. When we perform a task, the brain makes a synaptic connection. This connection is strengthened through repetition. Repetition allows the neural pathway to be coated with a substance called myelin. The more repetitions, the stronger the connection. Sounds simple, no? The catch is that the brain cannot differentiate between playing a series of musical notes correctly and playing with errors. The solution: Practice slowly from the beginning so that no mistakes are “programmed” into the brain. Initial slow practice will yield exponentially positive results. Thus the GIGO principle: “Good In, Good Out.”

“You’ll never make a mistake if you never make a mistake.”

—Julius Baker, flutist

Mix It Up

Pablo Casals continued to practice all his life because he *enjoyed* practicing. He did not view practice as a chore. Establishing a practice routine is a good thing, but it also helps to be creative. Why always begin scales from the bottom? Take a melody and improvise with different styles: make it a waltz, play it in a rock style. Don’t just play the notes, play from the heart. Make the music your own.

“The first successful antidote to monotony is variety.”

—Elizabeth A. H. Green

Rule of Ten

When encountering a section that is not quite under the fingers, experienced performers often employ the “rule of ten.” Take the written tempo about 10 clicks slower and gradually increase the speed. Ideally, practice until you can play *past* the required speed comfortably. This will make the required tempo seem easy.

Pathways to Productive Practice Student Handout (cont.)

Positive Practice Mindset

Program yourself to look forward to practicing by setting short-term goals and surpassing them. Rather than trying to learn an entire solo, instead focus on the opening section. Then reward yourself by playing something you have mastered at the end of the practice session. Once you discover the magic of conquering a musical challenge, you will be hooked for life. Climb that musical mountain. The view from the top is amazing!

A story: Pablo Casals, world-famous cellist, was asked by a friend why, at the age of ninety-three, after all he had achieved, he was still practicing. Casals answered, “Because I think I’m making progress!” On the day Casals died, at the age of ninety-six, he had already put in several hours practicing scales.

Length of Practice

It is the *quality*, not *quantity*, of practice that matters. Rather than measuring success by the number of hours practiced, measure progress by setting daily practice goals. The reward is the joy of high achievement.

“The secret to performance satisfaction is the deeply human need to direct our own lives—to learn and create new things—to do better for ourselves & our world.”
—Daniel Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*

Perform For Others

Create opportunities to play for family and/or for friends. Solicit the opinion of your teachers. Seek advice from those whose musical mastery is on a level beyond your capabilities. Become a collector of musical advice: “How is my sound? What can I do to improve it?” Mature, experienced musicians can offer invaluable suggestions regarding such elements as tone, intonation, style, articulation, phrasing, dynamic control, and technical proficiency. If at all possible, study with a good private teacher.

Own It!

Practice time is yours alone. Whether you simply go through the motions or make each session a positive step toward achieving a goal is entirely up to you. Author Angela Duckworth uses the term “grit” to describe that ineffable difference between excellence and mediocrity. Those who succeed are not necessarily the most intelligent, the most talented, or the most naturally gifted. Those who succeed are those who are relentlessly determined to attain excellence—whatever it takes.

*“We are what we repeatedly do.
Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”*
—Will Durant