

# Guitar

## The Basics

### Column #12 – How To Practice Effectively

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One of the most often stated problems many students of the guitar have, that they express to me is: How do I practice? What should I be doing? Apparently, far too many teachers are not addressing this aspect of learning, which is one of the most important elements in your playing, and which can impede or help your growth in becoming better on your instrument.

It is a subject I continually address throughout the tenure of every student who takes lessons with me. I encourage them to create a routine and a constructive approach to practicing so they can see actual growth in their abilities. Sometimes we don't see growth until after the fact. What an effective practice regimen can do is help you recognize that you are growing, that you are improving - sooner than you will without a pragmatic structure and execution of your study time.

One of the biggest complaints is, after some months of lessons, students have a whole lot of material sitting in front of them. They are overwhelmed with the sheer volume of it and quickly succumb to a hopelessness that they'll ever be able to figure anything out beyond just glean what is easy to understand, and letting all the rest of the stuff they need to know slide into oblivion as unobtainable. This essentially creates a "typical" guitar player, one who gleans the "low hanging fruit", the easy stuff, and bypasses the stuff they really want to understand how to play – exactly what they did not want to become!

So, then, just how do you put together a beneficial, useful and progressive practice routine?

The first thing you must do is ***create a separate space or room*** in which to practice and study. The benefits of this are immense. You have to have **uninterrupted, undistracted** time to practice so you can **focus** upon what you are learning. No cell phones, no televisions, no people coming in and out of the area. All these things will pull your attention away from what you are doing.

The second thing you must do is ***organize your material*** in a way that helps you cover at least four different things in each study session. So get a loose leaf notebook (two or three over time) and dividers for daily practices for four to five days a week over three or four weeks, so sixteen to twenty dividers. In each day's section put four things, one from each of four categories of study. This way, you'll be touching a whole host of material over the course of the three to four weeks. What four things? Well, here's a good guideline:

- **Chord study** – not a song, per se, but **chord progression exercises** to help you expand your knowledge of chords; three and four note chords, partials, Jazz voicings, chord melody playing, voice leading with chords, stuff like that – you must be prepared to employ every possible approach, which can lead to some truly unique sounding interpretations (in the good sense!); I usually start with chords to warm up my hands for the rest of the day's study
- **Scale study** – this particular topic must traverse multiple days: One scale or mode a week, a different key every day – all five positions above and below the "root" position – and with a metronome set at slow, medium and faster tempos; slow tempo playing requires more

precise note placement in relation to the beat and actually helps improve accuracy – but on the faster tempo exercise, do not play faster than you can properly include good technique – **NO SLOP ALLOWED**; spending time digging deep into just one scale all week long will begin to open your eyes to things you might never find otherwise – play through transitions between positions, too (that’s where you’ll discover all kinds of stuff you never knew existed)

- **Song study** – not just playing through a song, but actually tearing it apart to really learn the little things well; for cover tunes, this can be done through Tab, notation or ear learning; I recommend using your ears for at least half of this, listening to the recording that is your ‘model’ in learning that given song, to help develop your ability to hear the chordal aspects, modal aspects, timing aspects and how the guitar(s) interacts with the other instruments – if you don’t know how your instrument “fits into” the greater whole of the song, it will be more difficult to render a good interpretation of the song (and so be seen as a worse player than you may actually be; I’ve heard great players butcher songs because they don’t understand what they’re hearing in the recording they used to learn songs)
- **Arpeggio study** – one of the last thing most guitar players want to deal with because of a false notion that arpeggios are hard; they aren’t difficult, but they are time consuming to learn to play well, and to play multiple approaches and variant voicings beyond simple Major and minor interpretations

In lieu of Arpeggios, if you haven’t gotten there yet, you can substitute sight reading or just about anything else. Just be consistent in your approach.

To backtrack for a moment... Notice I said **STUDY** before the list. To study is to **spend time** on something to be able to fully understand what it is you are striving to learn and play. It means to **break things down** into bite size, chewable bits. That way you are not looking at a huge beast, but a small portion of what it is you are striving to learn or understand. It doesn’t matter what it is, a scale, a technique, or a song. You have to break it down into manageable parts that you can digest and which will not be difficult when separated from the greater whole. And you have to **slow down!** This is not a race; if you can’t play it fast, why are you trying to play it fast?

This is why the metronome is so important to good study habits. It keeps you honest. And as a tool it helps you get timing and articulation correct. So **slow down** until find the tempo where you can play it **smooth and even** with little to no tension. Yes, it sucks that you have to do this. But if you don’t do this, you’ll never understand the **mechanics** of what you want to do because you never examined them – which requires you to slow down and tear it all apart and see how it is put together, how it must be played.

For example, with a scale, you have five positions up the fret board. Work on one position a day – a week – if you’re just learning the scale. Then, when you have these five positions and patterns memorized, you can focus on working between two adjacent positions, then eventually adding a third, fourth and finally, the fifth. This will take you a month, two months, or longer, to accomplish. But if you work slow and steady and absorb the material, you will begin to understand it better; and a better understanding translates into far better execution down the road.

You have to give yourself the time **you need** to learn anything. You are not me, and I am not you. Where I may learn things quickly, because I am more advanced, you may need to take a lot more time to learn the same thing. Conversely, even with my experience and knowledge, I may take a while to learn something I’ve never done. I know it will take time, **more than I want**, to make

whatever it is sound right, as though I've played it for years and years. Even after learning whatever it is you care to mention, you'll still have to practice it all the time to stay in form, fully capable to play it well.

We must accept that time is our ally and let the process dictate our progress. To hurry is to short change ourselves, to sacrifice good technique for a cheap and dirty understanding filled with holes, which will ultimately frustrate us to no end until we go back and learn that stuff the right way – assuming we actually do this – and fill in all the holes that we never dealt with.

We know if we apply ourselves, we will overcome all obstacles and road blocks and succeed. So patience is critical. I speak from experience and from watching my students struggle and struggle with things. One day they come in and they are no longer struggling at all, but are playing with a confidence and knowledge that belies their actual limited abilities and experience. The change is as much a mental comprehension, the “AHA!” moment, as it is the ongoing repetition in playing the material.

Follow a concise and well conceived plan in your approach to playing and you will overcome all obstacles, all impediments. You will achieve the success you seek. But you gotta have a plan. Now you have the guide to help assemble that plan.