

## **Common Practicing Problems**

1) **Playing a section over and over again in order to correct it.**

Repetitive practicing alone does not improve your playing. It is not how many times you play something that will correct mistakes, but rather, how you practice it. Repeating a section over and over again simply reinforces bad habits. Always remember that “Practice makes Permanent” not “Practice makes Perfect.”

2) **Playing through an entire work rather than focusing on a smaller sections.**

There is a time and a place for playing through the piece you are working on. Remember that playing through a five or ten minute pieces takes five or ten minutes. If you have only 60 minutes to practice in a day that can be 10% of your practicing time. Your practicing time will be much better spent isolating sections and focusing on what you want to improve in those sections. Then as those sections get better you can practice in larger chunks until you are ready to play through the whole piece. That’s not to say you should never play through a work – in order to get the musical sense of the piece you must do this of course. It’s just to say that it’s not necessary to do that everyday while you are learning a piece, especially if you are short on time.

3) **Saving the musical ideas for later.**

Often we focus immediately on technical aspects – rhythm and intonation, ignoring phrasing and tone until we know the notes. We are musicians because something in what we play speaks to us. Begin expressing that as soon as possible. Remarkably, when you have a clear concept of a musical phrase, technique can fall into place. Aspects of tempo, bowing, breath control and fingering can all improve when you have a clear musical sense of a line.

4) **Unfocused practicing.**

Letting your mind go somewhere else when you are playing – thinking about the paper you might have to do, or the movie you want to see, instead of actively concentrating on the music. Instead of treating practicing as an activity that is keeping you from something else you have to do, think of it as your “escape” from everything else going on in your life.

Below you will find some ideas to help you avoid some of these common practicing problems.

## **Some Ideas Towards Efficient Practicing**

**1) Always have a goal before you start practicing.**

Outline what you want to work on the next day each time you finish practicing. Make a list of what sections you want to concentrate on and what aspects of those sections you want to focus on. Then when you come to the music the next day, you are ready to practice. You won't run the risk of practicing without a goal and you have already established what you will focus on in that session.

**2) You do not always have to be at your instrument to practice.**

If you commute to school or work you can use that time to look at your music. This is a great way to internalize rhythms or hear a phrase in your head.

**3) Always be mentally present at your practicing.**

An hour of practicing where you are concentrating well can equal two hours of playing your instrument absently. Always ask yourself questions – where did I make my mistakes and why? Is it a fingering or breath issue? Is it a timing or tempo issue? You may not always have the answers but asking the questions will at least get you to use your time well by trying to solve these problems instead of just playing the same section over and over again.

**4) When you first learn a piece – take it slowly.**

Although this may seem frustrating, it is really just an exercise in patience. If you learn a piece quickly, you may learn wrong notes and awkward fingerings. The more accurately you learn the piece, the less time you'll have to spend correcting avoidable errors.

**5) Reinforce the way you want to play something.**

If you play something through once exactly as you want to hear it – make sure you can do it again before you leave that section. Play it again a few times. That way, when you play it the next day, hopefully you will have established how you want it to sound in your ear. If you leave a section after immediately playing it “right” once, then in a sense all the time you spent on that section that day is wasted, because you haven't reinforced your work.

**6) Start with the section you don't know, not what you know best.**

It's always tempting to play what you play best. But your practicing can be better served if you start with the section that is newest or most difficult for you. People tend to spend the most time during their practicing session on the first piece they work on. So if you pick the toughest section to work on when you are freshest and work on it consistently you will see great improvements in that part.

**7) Specifically regarding intonation: If you have a particularly difficult intonation section isolate the notes without any rhythm.**

Play all the notes as whole notes. This way, you are working on just intonation and have taken all other elements which use your concentration out of the passage.

**8) Specifically regarding rhythm: no musician is above counting aloud or clapping.**

If a passage has a particularly difficult rhythm, write in your beats. Practice clapping the rhythm, while counting a steady beat. If you can't get the rhythm in your current tempo—slow it down.

**9) Notice patterns in your music.**

This is particularly helpful in difficult passages. Is the passage moving up by thirds, is it moving up by half-steps, is the composer using fifths to modulate to a new key?

Understanding 1) that a pattern exists and 2) what the pattern is, makes your practicing more efficient because you are no longer studying isolated notes. Instead you understand how those notes fit together.

**10) Record yourself.**

If you hear yourself on a recording it can often help you solve problems quickly. You can immediately hear if you are out of tune, or not in a comfortable tempo when you listen to a tape. Again you can use your commuting time to listen to these recordings and make notes on what you would like to improve.

Often people approach practicing as a chore, not as fun. As musicians, we often think the fun comes in performing, not practicing. Moving towards efficient practicing also means changing this attitude. Practicing can be fun – in fact, we spend many more hours of our musical life practicing than we do performing. Practicing is where you hone your art and develop the skills you need to become closer to perfecting that art. Of course practicing isn't always fun, but the more you can shape your attitude to enjoy your time with your instrument, whether you are practicing or performing, the more you will get out of the time you spend practicing.

Most importantly – know yourself. No practicing is more inefficient than the practicing you do if you are too tired or preoccupied with something else. When you come to your instrument, come to it with a clear mind. It is a chance for you to not think about everything else going on in your life and to focus simply on the music at hand. Practicing for four hours every day may not be right for you every day. That's not to say that some days you shouldn't be putting in more time – this always depends on how much music you have to learn, if you have a concert coming up, etc. However, making sure you get the most efficient use out of the time you have can take you a long way to making improvements in your playing.

## **Some Tips Specifically for Young Beginners**

Often young children who are very excited about practicing can be surprised to discover that in order to play an instrument, you must spend time practicing. Below are some ideas to keep your youngster motivated and on the right path to becoming a successful practitioner.

### **1) Parental Support**

Even if you are not musically inclined yourself, you can help your child to focus during their practicing time by reminding them of comments their teacher wrote in their notebook or in their music. Sitting in the same room with them as they practice can help them to feel less “isolated” during this time and can also cause them to be more conscientious in their work. If you can’t be there during their practicing session, make sure to talk to them about it when you get home. This will also help you address any issues your child is having with their teacher.

### **2) Build a regularly scheduled practicing time into their daily routine.**

It is especially important for a young child to identify a set time as their “practicing time” similarly to having a dinner time, homework time or even nap time. Routine at a young age doesn’t encourage boredom, but rather consistency.

If possible, try to make practicing the first thing your child does when getting home from school. Often, practicing is left for once homework is done and after dinner, when a child is most tired. The sooner a child learns that practicing should be done regularly, every day, the less they will feel that it is a chore and this will help them develop good habits for the future.

### **3) Practice in small time increments but multiple times in the day.**

If your child is having trouble focusing for more than 10 or 15 minutes at a time, try encouraging them to practice 10 minutes here and 10 minutes there. That they can work on more material but remain focused rather than losing concentration over twenty or thirty minutes.

### **4) Encourage your child to sing melodies and clap rhythms.**

Clapping a rhythm without worrying about what notes to play, and singing melodies without thinking about what fingers to use can help children (and adults) to focus on those elements alone. These are also concepts kids grasp easily as many will have had previous experience clapping and singing in school.

### **5) Practice reading notes away from the instrument.**

If your child can only practice for 10 or 15 minutes a day at this point, you can focus on reading music with them away from the instrument. The same way someone learns the alphabet and how to put words together, a person can learn what note goes where on the music staff. As they become more fluent in the musical language and notes are easier to read, their practicing will improve as well because note-reading won’t be a struggle.

### **6) Listen to lots of music!**

With the routine of practicing, sometimes young children can forget why they began learning an instrument in the first place. Buy some cds with music of their instrument and play them so your child remembers what they are aspiring to sound like on their instrument.

# Practicing Chart

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name of pieces you are working on:

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What areas of these pieces are you going to work on today?

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What is your goal in practicing these spots? Is it rhythm, intonation, phrasing, dynamics?

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Describe what techniques you will use to improve this spot:

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At the end of each practicing session write down what went well, what improved, and what you weren't happy with. Use these answers to fill out a sheet for tomorrow's practicing session.