

How To Practice: A Guide to Successful Playing & Performing

Practice is hard. Knowing how to support your student at home can be challenging. I work with them in lessons on specific progressions to best support their at-home practice and progress. I write notes to outline what their practice should look like. Sometimes they forget specifics, get frustrated, or it's just too hard and they need some help. This guide is for those moments. Parents, this is to help you understand how to support them. Students, this is a reminder of what we talked about in lessons. Follow these steps and you'll be fine.

THE PROGRESSION OF LEARNING A SONG

Always start from the beginning of this list if you are having trouble practicing or learning a song. This should always be the progression of learning a song from the beginning but it's also important to check back in with these steps when you get stuck or don't know how to practice.

OVERALL RULES FOR PRACTICE SUCCESS

- Go SLOW! Playing too fast is one of the #1 mistakes we make when learning and practicing. Always go slower.
- Take a breath! Between each attempt, pause for a second, take a breath, and...
- Think first. If your mind isn't ready, how do you expect to play well?
- The Rule of 3. If you can't do it 3 times in a row correctly, you don't have it. Keep trying until you can while being sure you're taking a breath and thinking between each attempt.
- Nothing is perfect. We practice every day for a reason. Do your best, put in the time, follow the steps, and once you've gotten your practice time in, stop for the day and come back to it later or tomorrow. It won't ever be perfect and today may not be the day where it even seems to get better. Put weight and value on the quality of work you did, not always the outcome. Playing the song will come. The work you put in is the most important part. Trust me, with consistent practice and by following these steps and guidelines, you will learn quickly and with quality!

- You get better at what you do: The fastest and easiest way to learn something is by doing it correctly as many times as possible. That's what these steps are all about. What you do, you get better at. If you keep busting through too fast and making mistakes, you're getting better at making mistakes. We're all perfectly good at that. No need to practice it. If you set yourself up for success (go slow, prepare your mind and body, take it one step at a time, use music, etc.) you will play correctly almost every time and will quickly get better at playing it correctly!
- Practice mind and performance mind: When you are playing, be sure that you are either "practicing" or "performing".
 - **Practicing** means you are stopping to carefully and fully fix any mistakes or hard spots (steps below).
 - **Performing** means nothing stops you or gets in your way. If you make a mistake, keep going. If you get lost, jump to the next spot you can remember. Offer your very best to the "audience". (This is a mindset and has nothing to do with having an actual audience in front of you.)
 - We get in trouble when we try to be in both minds at the same time. They end up working against each other and you get very little done. Be in one or the other *intentionally*.

STEPS TO LEARNING THE MUSIC

1. Listen: It is imperative to have the correct and flowing melody in your head so you know what you are aiming for. (All recordings are on my website under "Practice Recordings.")
2. Work on small chunks: Always find small chunks to work on. This can mean one measure, two measures, 1 line, 2 lines, or maybe a whole section. We talk about how to divide songs up in lessons and I mark this in your music. If you're unsure what a good section is to work on, ask me and I will help! Always start small and work your way up.

The rest of this list is to be done for each section in turn. Pick a section and work **with music**: (*Tip: use a sticky note to block off the end of the section so you're not tempted to play more than you should.*)

3. Clap rhythm: Clap through the rhythm of the section. Speak the rhythm ("long short short" etc) as you go to help with awareness around correct rhythms. Do this as many times as it takes to be able to get through comfortably 3 times without mistakes. The Rule of 3!

4. Say fingers: Speak the fingers in the section. Do this as many times as it takes to be able to get through comfortably 3 times without mistakes.
5. Clap rhythm while saying fingers: Put them together. Clap the rhythm while speaking the fingers in time with your clapping. This can be challenging, remember to go slow, take breaths, think between tries, and go easy on yourself! Learning takes time! Be sure the section you're working on is small enough to be accomplished. Don't make it too hard on yourself.
6. Play SLOWLY: Try playing the section with correct rhythm and notes. If there are bowings and articulations getting in your way, take those out for now. Focus on getting perfect rhythm along with correct notes. Do this until it's comfortable.
7. Add bowings and articulations: Add back in bowings and articulations while still playing SLOWLY. Be careful to maintain perfect notes and rhythm while doing this. If those start to falter, go back a step or two. That's completely fine! Do this until you can play SLOWLY and correctly with all elements included.
8. Add speed: Only now SLOWLY start to play a little faster. Make sure that all previous steps stay correct, steady, and comfortable. If something falls out, go back a step or two and get it back.
9. PATIENCE: Learning anything takes time and learning an instrument takes more time than most things. If you're putting in the time and practicing well (i.e. following these steps), you're doing great. Be proud of yourself and trust that progress will come, because I PROMISE it will!

STEPS TO MEMORY AND PERFORMANCE

10. Start memorizing: Only after all previous steps have been completed successfully and you feel the song is solid, comfortable, and learned at a moderate tempo, start working on memory.
11. Small chunks: Just as you did when learning, take small chunks one at a time. One small section, one line, or one larger section. We will have talked about this in lessons. In general, on the smaller side is better.

12. First with sheet music: Play the section with sheet music while paying careful attention to the notes and patterns. Even if you think you can play it in your head, stare at every note.
13. Try from memory: Then turn around and try playing that same passage from memory. How did it go? If it was perfect, try to do it 3 times perfectly in your head. If that works, move on to the next section. If not, go back to the music and repeat steps #12 and #13 until you've accomplished the Rule of 3 with that section.
14. Complete memory work: Repeat steps #12 and #13 until you've accomplished the Rule of 3 with the whole song.
15. Larger chunks or complete song: Work in the same way on larger chunks, maybe half the song at a time or the whole thing if you're ready. Play it all from memory and see what parts need work or if it's done!
16. Spot check: Play through the whole thing from memory. Take note of spots where you stumbled or had to stop. Go back to the music and repeat steps #12 and #13 on those spots until you can play through the whole piece from memory without stopping.
17. Endurance: Now you have to build endurance to be able to play the whole thing from memory under pressure. Start by playing it for yourself until you feel really solid. No stops, no mistakes, no slip ups. Take your time, it takes time for your body and mind to build the endurance to do this.
18. Performance practice: Play it for your family or friends. Have them sit and watch you while you perform the piece. When you are in a "performance" mindset nothing gets in your way, nothing is worth stopping for. Give your best performance no matter how many things go wrong.
19. Performance endurance and comfort: Continue working on the piece on your own (new problems will arise each day, keep patiently working) and keep performing it. You're building up the mental and physical endurance to perform under pressure, on stage, or for Zoe.
20. Test/Perform: Your last step is to test the song for Zoe or perform it in a recital. All your work should have prepared you to play under pressure on stage or for Zoe with no mistakes while maintaining focus and comfort and hopefully even having fun!

Congratulations!

You took the time, focus, effort, and care to master a song! Take time after you've completed a song to enjoy and appreciate the work you put into it. Make some kind of celebration (a prize at home, acknowledgement around the dinner table, a gold star) that will help you appreciate the work you've put in. What you just did is truly incredible!

I hope this guide helped you. If you have any questions, please contact me. I am here to make sure that you are learning to the best of your ability and having a great time doing it.

Remember, this is a highly detailed, step by step guide. Not every student will need every step for every song. But often, students will try to skip steps that they really need. Students, remember to slow down, take your time, and do the best work you can. Parents, help remind your students of this progression and most importantly the Overall Rules for Practice Success. Help them see what steps they need and remind them to take their time to support themselves and do it well.

And remember to enjoy the journey and appreciate every step you take toward your goals. Learning an instrument is hard and complicated but immeasurably rewarding in the end. Appreciate yourself for the work you put in and keep striving to do your new best every day.

I'll see you in lessons.

How to Practice

Cheat Sheet:

Before working on your song:

1. LISTEN

- Listen to band/original recording (Spotify, YouTube, etc)
- Listen to Zoe's practice recordings on Google Drive (access through [website](#))
- Listen through the song 2-5 times before working on the song in each practice

Then go ONE SECTION at a time SLOWLY through these 7 steps:

2. Clap rhythm

3. Sing fingers

4. Sing fingers in time while clapping rhythm

5. Play SLOWLY until comfortable, calm, and correct (take a breath between tries)

6. Add bowings and articulation (if applicable) and repeat Step 5

7. Repeat steps 2 - 6 for each section following the format below

Practice Sections Format:

Here's an example of what order to practice the sections of your piece in. I have written this out with classical and fiddle section markings. We always want to start SMALL and SLOW and build from there. Once you have learned two small sections, put them together, like this:

1. Section 1 (A): do steps 2 - 6 above
2. Section 2 (A1): do steps 2 - 6 above
3. Sections 1 + 2 (A + A1) together: do step 5

4. Section 3 (A again): do steps 2 - 6 above
5. Section 4 (A2): do steps 2 - 6 above
6. Sections 3 + 4 (A + A2): do step 5

7. Sections 1 + 2 + 3 + 4: do step 5

Continue this pattern of practice throughout your piece and you will learn it quickly and correctly the *first* time. Remember:

Practice slow and you will learn fast!