

How to practice

5 habits to help make your music practice more efficient and effective

*“If I don’t practice the way I should,
then I won’t play the way I know I can”*

Ivan Lendl
Champion tennis player

Habit 1:

Get All The Notes Right All The Time

*To make more effective progress it is essential
to get the notes 100% correct at all times*

Our brains learn patterns. When we learn to play a piece of music our brains are actually learning the patterns within them. Each time we play any section with 100% correct notes, the pattern is reinforced. Each time any notes are wrong, it isn't. In fact, the more times we play something wrong, the more our brain learns the wrong pattern! *Better not to play at all than to play incorrectly*, at least that way you aren't reinforcing the wrong notes!

Educational psychologists currently believe that a pattern is learned after it has been repeated 7 times correctly. If a pattern is learned incorrectly first it takes an average of 35 repetitions to unlearn and learn the correct way! So, if you want to make faster progress let this be your encouragement for getting it right first time, and every time!

How to get it right every time

It is very simple to play 100% correctly every time. Here is the secret

Play slowly and stop if there is something of which you aren't sure

That's it. Play slowly. It is always so tempting to play through a new section a couple of times then immediately try to speed up. 90% of the time you make mistakes because you are going too quickly too early. Take your time. Aim for absolute perfection of notes every single time you play a phrase. If you are a keyboard player, play slowly and *separate hands* until you are really sure you are ready to play hands together.

- **Stop** if you find there is something you can't play, or a note or fingering you don't know.
- **Work it out** - don't guess.
- **Mark it** on the music. Yes, this will interrupt the flow of the rhythm a few times as you stop to figure out what you are doing... but it means your brain is learning the correct pattern of notes and the interruptions to the flow stop once the pattern is learned. You can even stop before a

complex section and take it at a slower speed. *As long as the notes are 100% correct at all times*

If you make sure you have 100% correct notes all the time you will begin making faster progress almost overnight.

But I could play it at home

Do you often find you could play something at home, but when you arrive at your lesson it keeps going wrong? Getting notes 100% correct can also help with curing this problem.

Think about your practice. Does it follow this pattern?

Play something. Get it wrong. Play it again. Get it wrong. Play again, a few less mistakes this time. Play again. Same mistakes as last time. Play again a few less mistakes.. Eventually you play thorough with no mistakes and think, excellent, got it, and move on to the next section.

Look back at the previous paragraph. Six times wrong. Once correct. And you wonder why things go wrong in your lesson? If that was each session for five days you'd think you had practiced 30 times... but you would have played the piece wrong 25 times and correctly 5 times! Something to think about?

For faster progress, when you think *got it*, play through that section another five times. At least! Since you are playing it correctly it won't take long and the small time investment here pays off hugely in terms of progress and the speed at which you learn pieces.

When you've 'got it', you are beginning to practice it

Habit 2:

Slow practice

Playing slowly helps you learn pieces much faster, even pieces that will eventually be played very fast!



Slow practice is something most people do when learning a new piece or scale. As soon as they think they've got it, they start playing faster. This is often where mistakes creep in and are practiced, and once a mistake is practiced into a piece it is very hard to unlearn. Slow (correct) Practice is always effective practice. It is often a good idea to [use a metronome](#) when practicing slowly to make sure you are not speeding up when playing.

Fast technique slow?

One problem with slow practice is techniques for slow and fast playing are different on most instruments. If the final tempo of a piece you are learning is presto, for instance, you may need some very different techniques when playing it presto to those used when practicing slowly. Slow practice is extremely important though because it enables you to get the notes 100% correct every time, which of course makes progress much faster. It's no good, however, having totally correct notes if you can only play them at half speed! There are several keys to solving this problem

The same but different

Find a piece or passage with similar tempo requirement and similar challenges which you have learned before. Play through this and focus on your muscle

movements. What is your body doing when playing? How are your muscles moving? How much weight is there on your hand, fingers etc.

Once you are aware of the muscular and technical requirements play through your new piece slowly applying the same hand or finger positions, tonguing techniques and muscular movement and weight to your instrument. This can be quite challenging for some to start with, but it is worth persevering. This is one way to ensure you are using techniques suitable for a faster tempo, even if playing slowly using these techniques sounds a little funny.

Break it down

Another technique is to break the piece down enough to enable you to play even the new parts at approaching the final tempo. An example of this is separate hands practice on the piano. Although it is often very challenging to play new pieces hands together early on, it is usually possible to play them much nearer the final tempo separate hands. Concentrate on muscular movement, weight etc., and transfer this knowledge to your slow practice. Using this method makes it much easier to check your techniques at tempo as well.

This method may be used with any instrument. You just need to find a way of breaking things down. E.g., string players can move their fingers across the strings without bowing. They could also practice just the bowing on open strings. Similarly woodwind and brass players may finger the notes and practice the tonguing separately on a single note.

You need to practice slowly, but there can be pitfalls so be aware. Make sure you are using the correct techniques for the final tempo. For maximum effectiveness when practicing slowly, use a metronome. More about using metronomes at www.essential-music-practice.com/metronome.html. More on slow practice at <http://www.essential-music-practice.com/slow-practice.html>

**Slow, careful practice is always effective...
Especially when practicing something you *think* you already know**

Habit 3:

Clear Practice Targets

To make a practice session successful you need clear practice targets for each piece and scale in the session.



Having clear practice targets means much more progress in each practice session. The best time to establish your practice targets for each session is at the beginning of the week, either with your teacher or as soon as you get home from your lesson. Spending some time organising your practice in this way also means work from your teacher doesn't slip through the net as you go through your teacher's notes and plan your practice while the lesson is still fresh in your mind.

Know exactly what you want to achieve in a session

When planning your targets for a session know exactly what you want to achieve. Don't just say, "I'll work on the Mozart this session" have an exact target to achieve such as "Play through the first 32 bars of the Mozart five times in a row with no mistakes with the metronome at 100bpm." Having a clear target like this helps you know when you have achieved what you set out to do and can either move on to the next target for that session, or finish your practice.

Break it down, build it up

Determine your targets for the week (usually what your teacher wants you to be able to do next lesson) and break these down into the number of sessions you have available each week. There are some practice charts that will help you with this planning on at www.essential-music-practice.com/downloads

www.essential-music-practice.com

Know your targets for each session. When you achieve each target, move to the next until all are achieved. Sometimes you will end up practicing for a shorter time, sometimes longer. As you get used to setting your targets you will find it easier to judge the time it is likely to take to achieve them. As your practice techniques improve you will achieve more targets in less time!

When breaking your work for the week down, remember to leave time to build it up again! If you need to learn bars 1 - 32 of a piece use the first days to practice the individual sections and the couple of days before your lesson to put everything together. When practicing in sections it is always a good idea to either play the last few notes of the previous phrase or overlap your sections.

for example

Section 1: Bars 1 - 8

Section 2: Bars 5 - 12

Section 3: Bars 9 - 16

Section 4: Bars 13 - 20 etc.

It is sometimes a good idea to have the discipline of this overlapping sections method to start with and gradually just divide 1 - 9, 9 - 16, 17 - 24 etc. playing the last few notes of the section before.

**Whatever you decide, make sure you have
*clear practice targets to achieve during each session.***

Habit 4:

Plan Practice By Event

Planning your practice is essential to making efficient progress.

Day	Session 1	Session 2
Day of lesson (Monday)	<i>After arriving home and having a sandwich</i>	
Day after lesson (Tuesday)	<i>As soon as I arrive home</i>	
5 days before lesson (Wednesday)	<i>As soon as I arrive home</i>	After dinner if I have no other work
4 days before lesson (Thursday)	<i>Arrive home from sports practice, have a shower and snack - start straight away!</i>	
3 days before lesson (Friday)	<i>No practice</i>	
2 days before lesson (Saturday)	<i>30 minutes after I wake up</i>	As soon as football has finished on T.V. N.B. 2 scales to be complete before credits finish!
Day before lesson (Sunday)	<i>After breakfast</i>	Extra review if I need it...and if I have nothing else to do!

Plan your practice for maximum progress

Planning practice with a particular start/end time doesn't really help you. It makes you frustrated if you are late starting, it makes you concentrate on the clock instead of your goals, it means that no matter how much progress you are making towards your goal you will feel you should be stopping. It is just an extension of the 30 minute myth. What if you are watching a sports match that overruns? Do you miss the exciting ending? Do you watch it and think, *oh well, I missed the start of my practice, there's no point now?* Even if you do go and start your practice will your playing have your full concentration? I don't think so!

Planing your practice by event solves these problems. Plan to start practicing 30 minutes after you come home from school or work, or 20 minutes after your homework is finished. If there is a certain TV program you like, start your practice as soon as it is over. Challenge yourself to get a couple of scales done

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by the time the credits finish. If you get up at variable times during the weekend or holidays plan your practice for 30 minutes after you get up or you finish breakfast. By planning practice around events in your life instead of strict times you find it much easier to stick to your practice plan.

Practice by event

Planning practice with a particular start/end time doesn't really help us. It is easy to become frustrated if we are late starting, it encourages concentrating on the clock instead of practice targets, it means that no matter how much progress is being made towards a goal we feel we should be stopping at the end of the session. And if we don't stop most of the work done after the , finish time is useless anyway since our brain has already switched off. It's really just an extension of the 30 minute myth I talk about in my book [Practice Makes Perfect](#). What if you are watching a sports match that overruns? Do you miss the exciting ending? Do you watch it and think ,oh well, I missed the start of my practice, there's no point now. Even if you do go and start your practice will your playing have your full concentration? I don't think so!

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Download a practice planning sheet to get yourself into a regular practice habit using the link below

<http://www.essential-music-practice.com/download-planning-practice.html>

Form a habit

If you plan your practice around the same events each week you will form a practice habit. Within a few weeks you will automatically know it is time for practice after a certain event has taken place.

Do you have a very flexible schedule with different things happening each week at different times? You can fill out a practice chart at the beginning of each week instead of working from one all the time. If this is the case try and keep at least one or two sessions fixed to allow good practice habits to form because we all know how hard a habit is to break once we have it!

Once you have a practice plan... stick to it. When you arrive home from your lesson each week spend 5 minutes planning your targets for each session.

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Don't plan for sessions you know you can't make! If you have a session on your overall plan and you know in advance you won't be able to make that one because it is your friend's birthday... don't plan for any practice! The overall plan by event is flexible. There will be times you cannot follow it exactly. It is simply there as a base to work from.

Remember to give yourself clear practice targets for each session during the week. Again... life happens. These may have to be very flexible some weeks. The important thing is to have a plan to start with. As Benjamin Franklin said

"By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."

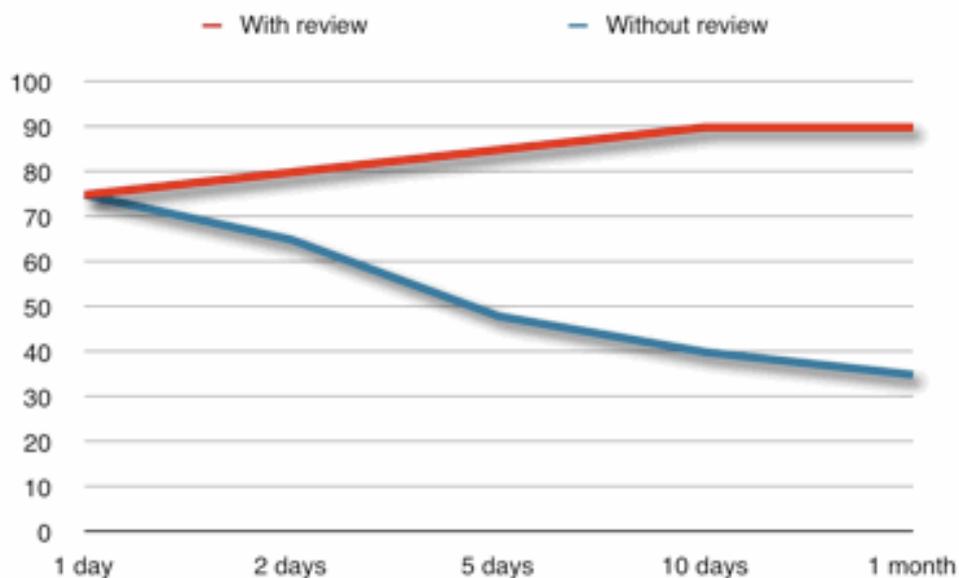
Those few minutes of planning each week will save you countless hours of needless practice within a few months and you will actually be making more progress in less time. Now that is worth planning for!

Plan your practice. Practice your plan

Habit 5: Regular Review

Regular practice review is essential for efficient musical progress

Regular practice review at the beginning and end of your practice sessions ensures much faster progress. Many experiments have shown that reviewing activities 7 times over 10 days helps your brain learn much faster. This applies to everything you learn, not just playing an instrument! There is plenty of evidence to suggest people who learn musical instruments also excel in other areas of education and life. Maybe it isn't just the playing – maybe it is because those who play a musical instrument recognise the importance of regular review and apply it to other areas of their life!



The graph shows % of recall over the period of 1 month with and without review

When I ask students about review at the start and end of their practice they often tell me that they don't want to, 'waste time' going over things they have already practiced. Actually they would save a huge amount of time by incorporating regular review into their practice sessions.

Make it a habit

Make it a habit to review everything you have practiced during a session at the end of the session once your other targets for that session are achieved. Think of this as an important time saving device for the future... with regular review

you do less practice for more progress. Now that is surely worth it. Review again at the start of your next session as well for maximum benefit and efficient practice.

Don't rush it

Make sure you don't rush your review. Play everything through once, a little slower than you achieved during your practice to ensure all notes are 100% correct.

The most important review you will ever do

The most important review you will ever do is to practice the day of your lesson. No, not a panic practice five minutes before you have to leave because you didn't do enough practice during the week. The most important review you do is the one you do when you arrive home from your lesson. Having a review session following a lesson helps fix everything from the lesson clearly in your mind. Your understanding of techniques is heightened and your muscle memory develops much quicker. Practicing following your lesson also gives you a chance to see what you can already play and **plan your practice** for the coming week.

Plan a review session following your lesson. You won't regret it!

Order of Practice

This is taken from my practice diary [Lesson Notes and Practice Targets](#).

Having a regular practice plan helps keep each practice session on target. Here is the plan I suggest my students follow.

Warm up: Long notes, staccato notes

Review 1: Review completed targets from last practice session.

Scales: Some review, some working towards new targets

Sight-reading/Improvisation: Alternate each session.

Pieces: Work towards your session targets for pieces

Aural work: Work on aural skills if applicable

Play through: Play through a piece previously completed and filed.

Review 2: Review all targets completed during session. Play slightly slower to ensure correct notes.

This plan gives a chance for you to warm up *before* practising scales or reviewing pieces. Many students find this makes learning scales much easier because they are already warmed up and into practice mode by the time they practice scales, instead of using them as a warm up.

If you prefer, make a plan of your own to follow. Whether you follow the plan above, one of your own, or a plan made by your teacher, the important thing is to *have a plan!*

Good luck with your playing and remember – *Enjoy your practice!*

***"If someone wants to play music,
you don't need a ruler or a whip to get them to practise."***

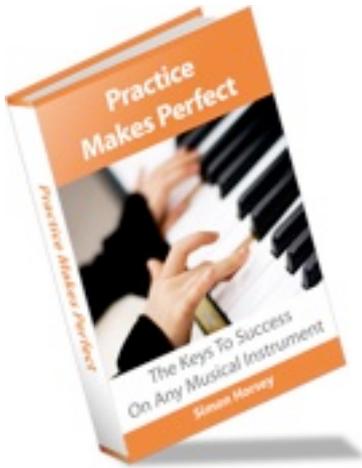
*Herbie Hancock
Jazz Pianist*

If you enjoyed this book and/or found it helpful please consider [liking it on Facebook](#) or [Tweeting](#) about it. Thank you. And feel free to pass it on!

What next?

Improve your practice even further

Read my full book [Practice Makes Perfect](#). As musicians we are always told that 'music practice is the key to success on any instrument'...but nobody ever tells us how to practice. We are told that 'Practice makes perfect'...but nobody ever tells us how! In fact, practice doesn't make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect! Practice Makes Perfect will revolutionize your practice. Learn how how to practice more efficiently and effectively by applying the easy to use techniques in this book and start making more progress in less time, whatever instrument you play. More progress doesn't come from working harder; it comes from working smarter and knowing how to practice.



Practice Makes Perfect is also available:

[In print at Lulu.com](#)

[As an iBook in the Apple iBookstore](#)

[As a Kindle book from Amazon.com](#)

[As a Kindle book from Amazon.co.uk](#)

Get more from your lesson each week.

[Lesson Notes and Practice Targets](#) is a practice diary designed to make the most of both music lesson and practice time. Ringbound for easy use on a music stand and with space for 36 weeks of lesson notes and practice targets plus simple, quick student practice planning and evaluation, Lesson Notes and Practice Targets gives the student, teacher and parent the tools they need to ensure effective progress on all instruments. And it's a convenient size for taking to and from lessons! This version of Lesson Notes and Practice Targets is 152 pages and designed to be used for a year. There is also a version with 12 weeks for a term of lessons. As an added bonus the book also contains some great tips and advice to help you get more from your practice. Get your school or studio logo on the cover FREE when you order 25 copies or more!.



Lesson Notes and Practice Targets is also available from:

Lulu.com and Amazon.com

And if you are learning without a teacher you need...

[Practice Targets and Evaluations](#). Practice Targets and Evaluations is a music practice book for those studying an instrument without a teacher. People studying without a teacher often feel they aren't making as much progress as they would like to, even if they are following a course. This book helps focus practice each week, giving clear targets to achieve and a timeline for evaluating your progress. Practice Targets and Evaluations is good for a 50 week period (we all need a couple of weeks off sometime!) and is spiral bound to make it easy to use on a piano or music stand. If you are learning a musical instrument without a teacher this is the book you need.



Practice Targets and Evaluations is available from

Lulu.com and Amazon.com

About the author



[Simon Horsey](#) has been teaching class and instrumental music for 15 years. His instruments are piano, saxophone and clarinet. Simon started giving presentations on how to practise more effectively when he noticed that students are often told to practise, but never taught how to do so effectively. This book and the [Essential Music Practice](#) website are the result of his presentations on practice and an effort to spread the message of efficient and effective practice to others.

If you would like Simon to come and give his full presentation on how to practise effectively, please [click here to contact him](#). Simon also writes a free monthly newsletter giving practice tips. [Click here to subscribe and download archive copies](#).

Simon is also currently developing www.essential-music-theory.com

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Thanks to [SBI](#) for making the Essential Music Practice website, and this book possible with their amazing resources for building sites, writing ebooks, conquering Google rankings...everything!

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Now...

Go do some practice!