

GUITAR PRACTICE TIPS

1. Development as a Guitarist

The key to development is inspiration. By staying inspired and motivated while doing your most to avoid getting burned out and discouraged, you will keep improving.

By questioning why we want to play guitar and allowing that interest to guide us on our path, we can find what it is that inspires us. Inspiration can come from remembering how important music is to all of us, seeing our own improvement: playing better, faster, more accurate, the sound of the guitar itself, or maybe we crave to be on stage performing in front of others. Perhaps it is how being a guitarist and musician makes us feel about ourselves by giving us an identity we can call our own or the way we feel it makes others view us. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers. Just think about it for a moment, and see what resonates within you. What is it that is really important to you? What is it that drives you? Why do you want to play guitar?

Thinking about this will help you make the right choices for yourself, to stay motivated and eventually get where you want to be. What and how should you practice? Should you go to a music school or should you form a band? Different actions produce different results. The right actions for you are the ones that will produce the best results while satisfying your particular desires, whatever they are.

This is also important to think about because sometimes we can get buried in the day-to-day things and forget about where we are headed. We bump along, basically following what we think we want, and what we think we must do to get it. And then one day we wake up and realize that we may have lost our motivation, or a good part of it anyway, and we are not sure why.

We lose our motivation when we get too far away from what it is that really excites us in the first place and we fall prey to discouragement when what we really want does not seem to be within our reach. Sometimes our goals and interest change so on occasion we have to re-assess our direction of study. It is not difficult to get back on track. It is just a matter of asking the right questions.

2. Practice Routine

What you practice determines your identity as a guitarist. There is no right or wrong here, but different approaches produce different results. When you learn a lot of songs, but never delve into any skill-intensive exercise-type practice, you will never develop a lot of technical skill as a guitarist. Playing music alone, without any concentrated exercises, will likely limit your level of technical proficiency. On the other hand, practicing a lot of skill-intensive exercises will produce fast technical improvement for a while, but eventually it will level off and if you keep going at it hard, it will burn you out. The answer lies in finding the right balance: the right amount of inspiration from the music itself, and the right amount of inspiration from our own improvement derived from skill-intensive practice. Of course, the right balance is a little different for each of us, and it may change over time.

However, some guitarists are turned on by speed and precision. We want to take our technical skills to the limit. For this, breaking things down and isolating them into repetitive exercises is the way to go. Over the years, there have been players who get into skill-building exercises and at first it fuels an intense motivation. Improvement is seen very fast but the development levels out at some point. Typically guitarists reach a plateau and cannot seem to break through. The bare skills created through exercises, without a musical application, are limiting and unfinished. You have potential but without form. You should always keep music as the destination.

What and how one practices will change over time, as one's playing level changes. So what anyone else may practice now may not be what you should be practicing. So the practice routine that is best for you is the one that suits your particular goals, your particular interests, your particular temperament, and your current playing level. This, of course, is a little more complicated than can be answered in a simple, blanket formula. One size does not fit all.

Here are the essential guidelines: Keep some variety in your practice in order to avoid getting into a rut and getting burned out. You also want to keep a balance between playing music and practicing skill-intensive exercises. Always try to add new approaches as you come across them, keeping what you like and discarding what you do not. A personal practice routine is something that evolves over time. It is good to take advice from people who have already been to the places you want to go but at the same time realize that you are different, and ultimately your destination will be slightly different than anyone else's.

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3. Practice Schedule

You can never practice enough. I would simply advise you to practice as much as you can and want to. Your body or the clock will tell you when to stop. Basically, the more you practice, the better you will get.

One of the main aspects of practice is to be consistent. Strive for at least a little practice every day. For beginners, maybe just start with a few minutes a day. Then as your stamina and technique increases, increase your practice time. Keep in mind that if you practice regularly you are going to improve.

4. Better Now Than Never

No, it is never too late to start doing something in life that you enjoy.

You do not have to start playing guitar at a young age to become a good player. It seems that adults can generally focus better and longer and they generally improve faster in terms of coordination. Adults also tend to have a much better sense of rhythm and timing. Maybe you have not been playing guitar, nonetheless you have been listening to a lot of music. You can find music that you like at a variety of levels of difficulty. So do not worry about how technically proficient you are going to get. That is not really the important issue anyway. Just remember that you want to learn how to play the guitar. That is enough for now.

5. Ideas for setting up a Practice Routine

My practice routine changes depending on what I need to focus on at that particular time. Some ways I tend to practice are: I

- I write and record chord progressions.
- I play up and down through different scales in different keys.
- I tend to practice new material clean and then once it feels comfortable, change over to distortion.
- I will often practice in one particular genre then turnaround and play in a completely different style.
- I will play nothing but major-type scales then switch to minor scales followed by a few exotic scales.
- Practice with a metronome. This is like having a drummer in a box while working on your speed and accuracy.
- When working on new music, play up to the first trouble spot, then stop and focus on what it is that is giving you trouble. I tend to create exercises and variations that have some similar technique to the trouble and once I have ironed out some of the issues, go back and retry the section that was difficult. I then continue on with the music and repeat this procedure if there is another difficult part that comes up again.
- I also like to practice songs like I would perform them: no stopping allowed. You could call this "performance practicing." This is completely opposite than what I just discussed.
- Pull out a brand new piece of music and try to sight-read it all the way through.
- Something I tend to do a lot is practice soloing over rhythm tracks. There are several apps that will loop sections or chord progressions over and over allowing you to develop new ideas while cleaning up old ones. I cannot over emphasize how beneficial this practice tip can be.
- As much as I talk about diatonic study and understanding how scales work, sometimes I play nothing but elisions, which are note resolutions that go against typical, note expectations. This often sounds weird to the ear but I have come up with some very interesting riffs.
- If time allows, I try to play with a band. I definitely want all of my students to play in a band as much as possible. If you're not in a band already, get into one, or at least start jamming with your friends.

Pick one or two to the above approaches and build your practice routine around them. Then add other approaches, one at a time, and see what works out for you. As you evolve your own routine, trust your own instincts.

If you must, you can assign time amounts to each part of your practice.

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6. Practice through Inspiration and Proper Set Up

Musicians tend to do something only after we feel the urge to do something new. In other words, motivation always precedes action. By beginning to do something our motivation level builds however, the reverse can be true as well. When we feel halfhearted about something but decide to do it anyway, we quite often become more motivated, the get more into whatever it is we started. Even though motivation prompts us into action, more often than not, action creates motivation.

Sometimes you do not really feel like practicing because you do not have enough time to accomplish anything but force yourself to practice for just 15 minutes. Try not to worry about planning out the rest of your day right now or working on a marathon workout. Just sit down and play for 15 minutes in the next 15 minutes. Getting started is often the hardest part of doing anything. All of us procrastinate from time to time. Make it easy on yourself by reducing the task down.

One of the most important things to consider here is your setup. Make it easy to get started. Keep the guitar quickly accessible. Set up a guitar-friendly atmosphere. Have a music stand for your music in a well-lit area with your amp, pedals, iPod and metronome ready to go. It is worth the time and effort to arrange your practice area so you have everything necessary at your disposal. This is especially important if you only have a few minutes to practice.

7. Practicing, Performance, Stage Fright and the Difference

The purpose of practice is to hone your technique and iron out mistakes. You already know that the correct use of repetition is the key to effective practice. It concentrates your attention on the problem areas and trouble spots, allowing you to correct them in the fastest way possible. This makes for faster improvement, but it means you will be spending a good deal of your time playing things that you cannot play well. When you practice, you are working on things you cannot do well and repeating them until you can.

The purpose of performing, on the other hand, is to entertain. It is to display one's music. In any case, you want to come off looking your best. So ideally, you want to play those things that you have already mastered. You should not try to play new material or music you are unfamiliar with here. Better to simplify your playing and concentrate on things you do well, and pull them off without a hitch. So in this sense, practice and performance are opposites. They have opposite purposes.

There is also a third approach, which I'd call 'performance practicing' where you would practice doing a performance -- a dry run. Of course you get good at whatever you practice and performing is a skill like any other. So why not practice performing? Include 'performance practicing' in with the rest of your practice routine and learn how to ignore mistakes and recover from them gracefully, without giving them undue attention. Mistakes happen. They are not a big deal, unless you make them a big deal. Chances are most of your audience will not notice anyway and even if they do, they do not care as much as you. Don't let mistakes break your focus.

Stage fright is rooted in being unprepared. The main proponent of stage fright is standing rigidly, with clenched muscles. The opposite of this is being loose and relaxed. So the solution here is to move around and to feel relaxed. Music is rhythm, and rhythm is motion. If your body is fluid and relaxed, your stage fright will disappear.

8. Learning Rhythm Compared to Learning Lead

Improvement is overlapping. Each skill flows into the next and the divisions of "lead" and "rhythm" is still guitar playing. So you can and should learn both simultaneously.

Playing lead is generally harder than playing rhythm and until the skills are developed enough to handle the increased difficulty, guitarists should focus on rhythm first, then later progress on to soloing. Each just requires slightly different skills and techniques.

What is important is that you tackle music that is roughly at, or just slightly above, your present level. All you have to do is take it one day after another and as the level of difficulty slowly rises, allow it continually challenge you at the right level. When it comes to learning songs, you will be learning mostly rhythm parts first but always look for easy solos to learn here and there as well.

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9. Building Speed and Synchronization

The guitar is an interesting instrument as well as a deceiving one. Things often appear difficult, when in fact with practice, they are not. On the other hand, things may actually be quite difficult to play, yet they don't appear especially so. Playing fast, picked runs with smooth synchronization is just one of those things that is harder than it looks. Synchronization refers to how well the left and right hands are working together. As you fret a note, do you pick it at precisely the same time? Good synchronization between the hands is key to playing fast and articulate, especially in runs where every note is picked. It is the hammers, pulls, slides, and string-bending approaches that give the guitar its nearly unlimited range variations and subtleties, making it one of the most interesting instruments of all.

First and foremost, practice at a wide range of speeds, not only fast. At higher speeds, you are actually playing in a less synchronized fashion. Synchronization is better at slow and moderate speeds. Therefore, practice more at slow and moderate speeds -- where you do have the best synchronization -- and precise timing will become entrenched into your playing technique. By playing slowly for a while, then bringing it up to speed, we refine the very nature of our playing. Because it takes so long, however, we may not see it except as a byproduct of playing music.

Anything that can make our practice time more efficient and speed up the rate of improvement is a good thing. Anything that can get us from here to there in less time is welcome. Repetition is the essence of practice. Repetition quickly anchors new skills and patterns into your memory. There are a number of practice tips that can help you accomplish this.

- First of all, recognize that when you repeat things you need to repeat them correctly. Practicing mistakes will not help. In fact, it is counterproductive. On the other hand, by making the correct motions over and over, you ingrain them as a habit. Then it automatically happens that way every time you tell your fingers to do it, and soon there is no doubt whatsoever in your mind. So take it as slow as necessary to do the right motions.
- The next aspect is choosing the right parts to repeat. Going back to the top of a song every time you make a mistake isn't a very effective practice strategy. Whenever you have a problem playing something, isolate the trouble and fix it.
- When you start repeating difficult things over and over again, at first things begin to improve but after a certain point your neural pathways become tired and overworked. At this point, the best thing to do is rest. Stop and play something else for a while. Then come back to it again later. There is a physical limit to how fast you can anchor a new skill or motion into your nervous system.

Practice comes down to just 'inputting' the tasks accurately, so you can play them reliably when you need them. Practice is about building accurate "muscular memory." This is the basis of speed. When we play faster, we are relying on our unconscious habits or skills, which we secured previously.

Ways to increase speed are:

- Begin slowly and evenly, gradually increasing the speed until it gets to be as fast, accurate, and comfortable.
- As your speed increases, concentrate on smoothing out the lines by making smaller, more relaxed motions. (The tendency is to tense up. You want to bring down the level of tension, while maintaining your speed.)
- Repeat each pattern a few times on one fret then continue up and back down the fretboard.
- Go on to another pattern but continually come back to the original pattern trying to play a little faster or staying at the top speed for a longer period of time.

Make the decisions of how many times to repeat, when to shift positions, where to shift to, maybe alter a note within the pattern, maybe change to a different set of strings, etc.: make those decisions as you practice. Efficient practice has everything to do with the correct use of repetition and variety. Do not practice mistakes. Focus on the trouble spots and correct them.

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10. Physical Difficulties with the Guitar

When you first start playing guitar it seems like you have to press the strings down really hard against the fretboard to keep them from buzzing, but as you play more and more, you do not have to press as hard. The buzzing begins to go away and the guitar becomes easier and easier to play. At first, the muscles that control your fingers are uncoordinated and are fighting one another. Over time, the muscles that are in opposition learn to relax and cooperate. Eventually you do not need to press so hard to get the desired result. This is because your muscles have learned to work together and more efficiently. Playing guitar does not require a lot of pressure, but it does require pressure applied correctly.

Play very slowly, using the minimum required movements: just what is necessary to move the correct finger and no more. You see, when you really get right down to it, moving one finger here or there is quite a simple matter. The difficulty arises in getting all the other fingers to relax, so you don't have to force them to stay put by clenching them in place with the opposing muscle groups. When you practice like this: quietly, softly, easily, and slowly: for long enough, you'll find that it will require almost no strength, or muscular effort. Make this into a habit and it will greatly diminish the strain on your tendons and allow you to play longer without the negative effects of excess tension.

Carry this idea of "force reduction" into all other aspects of your playing. Do not increase tension as you push to increase your speed. You have to be patient and let the speed come to you, rather than going to it. It may take you a little longer than others, but you can only do the best that you can with what you have.

Also, practice in a seated position as opposed to standing, as this will be easier on your fretting hand. If you still want to practice in a standing position, make sure your strap is holding the guitar higher than usual. The lower it hangs, the more difficult your left hand stretch will be, and therefore, the more strain it will cause.

11. Playing Plateaus or "Ruts"

Stagnant growth in our playing happens to all of us from time to time. Sometimes we notice fast improvement and sometimes we may stall, or plateau, for a while. The answer depends on what you have been doing to get to this point. Basically, you need a change. Remember, when you first began everything was new. You were developing new playing habits and improvement was rapid, but after playing a given set of exercises each starts to sink into your muscular memory. When this happens, you must find a new avenue for practice.

A plateau means that you've gotten all you can out of the approach you are currently following. You need a change. If your plateau is due to too much exercise-type practicing, you need to get back to music and re-discover your inspirations. Let up on the exercises you have been hammering on and find something new.

12. Having Creativity and Talent

Creativity is not something that one either "has" or "does not have." Everyone is creative to a certain degree. Some people seem more creative than others and some show their creativity in different ways, however no one knows just how creative we might be, given the right circumstances and the right approaches. There are things that we can do to bring out and nurture the creativity each of us has. The first step is to realize that there really are no rules. We need to start trusting our ideas, to stop judging them right away, and to stop worrying if they are good enough. Be sure to use your motivation, enthusiasm, and interests combined with the instruction you have received on your instrument to nurture your creativity and attention.

Skills are learned. Some of us may have better or faster response times, or be a little quicker at learning certain types of things than others but in reality, the level of skill we achieve as guitarists has far more to do with our motivation, our interest level, our enthusiasm, and temperament than talent. It is practice that gives a guitarist good technique. A guitarist with an eye for perfection and detail will develop more of a sharpened and precise technique while on the other hand, a guitarist who lacks concentration may have a unique creativity, or presence, or feel, but music is not just about skill but also about creative expression.

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13. Understanding How to Move Forward

It is natural for anyone who really wants a high degree of technical facility on the guitar to not see it happening fast enough.

First of all, recognize that you are where you are. No more, no less. You have all the skills, abilities, and insights which you have developed through your past practicing and playing. Accept this because you cannot change it. It is your precise culmination of everything that has happened. However, realize that you have the power to shape your future. Know that which is within your imagination is within your grasp. Your goal is attainable.

Guitar playing is a process, not a destination. Growth on the instrument is measured in the success of a daily habit. Growth is when an action through practice moves you in your chosen direction and closer to your next goal. By seeing success and not failure, we help ourselves along the path of accomplishment and success.

Be sure to acknowledge that you do not want the accomplishment without the effort or the reward without the investment. The only way to develop a skill like guitar playing is with the right inspiration, motivation, and focused determination. By keeping these objectives in mind, you will arrive at your desired destination, eventually.