

Thoughts on Practicing

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This information is being provided in quasi-outline format so that you can expand or contract on the ideas as you wish. The material is based on personal experience and the ideas of others. In this article, we will look at ideas for 1 – a Practice space, 2 – Guitar tools, 3 – Creating a practice plan and 4 – Tips for actual practicing

Practice Space

First off, create the best practice space you can. A space where you want to spend time. Features that will help in creating a good space include the following:

1. Minimal distractions, privacy
 - a. Be able to close a door and have the space for yourself and your practice. Disable incoming calls on the phone if you can. Hopefully you can practice without bothering others or being bothered by others.
2. Good lighting
 - a. You must be able to see! The more light, the merrier. Windows are a nice touch.
3. Easy access to guitar – wall hanger or guitar stand if space allows
 - a. When you have time to play, you want to get to playing! The less steps you have to go through the better. Storing your guitar in a case means you have to open the case, take out the guitar and then put the guitar away and close the case when you're done. Make access to practicing as easy as possible.
4. Easy access to practice tools (i.e. metronome, capo, pencil, paper, etc.)
 - a. As much as possible have all your needs within arm's reach! Again, make access as easy as possible.
5. Footstool for young, or short students
 - a. Both feet need to be supported during practice so that the guitar does not slip down the leg.
6. Comfortable seating – armless chair or stool
 - a. Very important. You need to sit or stand straight and be comfortable when practicing!
7. Make your space enjoyable
 - a. Very important. You need to be comfortable when practicing! Enjoying your surroundings goes a long way towards being comfortable.
8. Internet access
 - a. The better the access speed, the better the experience. Go easy. Don't get too much information on your fingertips! Just get what you need and get back to your practice space.
 - b. For online lessons the best option is a dedicated network, rather than using a wi-fi account that is shared with cable TV, Ring doorbells, etc. For teaching my computer is hard wired in to a network using a CAT5 cable. The only other device on the network is a printer.

Guitar “Tools”

1. Metronome – incorporate this into your practice routine as much as you can
 - a. The metronome is a great teacher. The beat is the foundation of music. Working with the metronome helps you get comfortable playing with, and even against, the beat. More importantly in my view, it teaches you to listen. Your ear is your most important resource. Practicing with the metronome helps develop your ear.
2. Tuner – always keep your instrument in tune
 - a. Tuners are available in many shapes and sizes. Decent tuners are available for free for your computer, tablet, or phone. Guitar Tuna is a basic, decent such tuner. Snark make excellent tuners that attach to the headstock, are extremely accurate and reasonably priced (between \$12 and \$25 in 2023). There are more expensive options available. You get what you pay for.
3. Tablet or computer - Essential for listening and studying. There are thousands of guitar related resources available on the internet.
 - a. YouTube contains thousands of lessons – many of which are from excellent instructors. Thousands of jam tracks as well for those who wish to play along.
 - b. Several excellent instructors have their own web sites with lessons available.
 - c. Patreon, TrueFire, Fender, others – Several excellent instructors who are not free, but valuable. You get what you pay for.
 - d. Hal Leonard Library if you are using the Hal Leonard Method books.
4. Blue tooth speaker, Headphones –
 - a. Good quality blue tooth speakers and/or headphones to use with your computer or tablet are available for a reasonable amount of money.
5. A way to record yourself
 - a. It is important that you listen to yourself from time to time. Your ear is your most important tool. Listen and evaluate. Where are you doing well? Where can you improve? Even if the recording is just a voice memo on a cell phone it can still be valuable.
6. A music stand
 - a. Music stands are designed to hold your music for you. There are other ways to do this, but music stands are the best. A firm sturdy music stand is better for your practice space than a lightweight foldable stand (o.k. for use when travelling).
7. A timer
 - a. I suggest that breaking down your practice time into short, timed segments is best for staying on track with your practice plan. All cell phones have timers available, along with countless other devices. Including a good old kitchen timer.
8. Pencil and paper
 - a. Part of practicing is exploring ideas and thinking of questions. Keep a pencil and paper within arms reach to write notes during practice.
9. Capo – comes in handy
 - a. Many songs that you will encounter will use a capo. You will need to have a capo to play along with them. A capo allows you to change the key of any song to sound higher than standard tuning which can be helpful for many reasons.

Create a practice plan

1. Decide what you want to accomplish with the guitar. This can be a big topic. Give it deliberate thought. This will allow you to create a good practice plan for yourself.
 - a. Young students can learn very effectively through “Method Books”. The books create a path for learning. I highly recommend the Hal Leonard Method Books 1-3 for younger students.
 - b. Older students will likely be interested in specific genres of music to play. One may want to understand the underlying theory, or one may not.
 - c. Discuss what you want to accomplish with your instructor and others. Elicit feedback.
 - d. Accomplishment should be sought through repertoire. Deciding what style of music you want to play informs technique and other practice plan items. For instance, if you are mainly interested in Bluegrass, you will not need to learn “tapping” as used in modern rock and heavy metal.

2. There is no “one size fits all” practice plan. Your individual plan should include some of the following general elements
 - a. Warm up – it may be beneficial to literally warm up your hands as your first item. This can include activities such as massaging or stretching prior to picking up the guitar.
 - b. Technique – learn and practice the techniques applicable to your repertoire.
 - c. Knowledge – read about and understand chord construction, arpeggios, scales and beyond. There are several excellent sources on the web such as Justin Guitar, Rick Beato, Tomo Fujita etc.
 - d. Ear Training – learn to hear intervals by practicing them on the guitar and by singing them. There is an expression in music that is true for most folks – “if you can’t sing it, you can’t play it”. For more advanced players include transcribing in either tab or musical notation to further enforce your ear training. The best tool you have available in music is your ears.
 - e. Rhythm training – work with the metronome and learn to play different rhythms. Work to develop an internal clock that counts in 2s, 3s, 4s. 4 over 4 is referred to as common time, as it is the most common time signature in western music. When listening to music, a good exercise is to count along with the song. Most pop songs will be in 4/4 time, some will be in 3/4 time. As you learn more advanced times, you can practice counting those as well. For instance, most slow blues is in 12/8 time, which equates to 4 groups of three (triplets) per measure.
 - f. Repertoire – Practice songs. These will change over time as you learn some, and then learn new ones.
 - g. Questions – write down questions that arise during practice. Use your curiosity to research and answer the questions after practice.
 - h. Free Time - Improvisation, Exploration – spend time just making music and experimenting. If it sounds good, its probably good, if it sounds bad, it is likely bad. It is critical that you spend at least 10% - 25% of your available practice time just playing and enjoying your music. In addition to your ears, curiosity is a very important musical tool.

There is a sample practice log sheet at the end of this lesson. Maintaining a written record can be very helpful for measuring and inspiring progress, and for keeping practice sessions on track.

Practice Tips

1. Now that you have a space and a plan in place it is time to get to work. Does practice make perfect? Definitely not.
 - a. Practice makes permanent. Keep this in mind as you practice. The more you play a specific passage, the more you will play it that way so.... Use the most important tool you have – your ears! Listen closely to be sure you are practicing the passage correctly. Check that your fingering is making the passage sound correct. Sometimes the wrong fingering can result in the wrong sound. Possibly record the passage to be sure it is sounding the way you want it to.
2. Never practice anything faster than you can play it.
 - a. Rome was not built overnight. Often, the passages that we work on take a good deal of time to learn. Practice slowly at first to develop muscle and musical memory. Listen to be sure that the passage sounds good before slowly increasing the speed to the correct tempo.
3. Sing what you are endeavoring to learn.
 - a. We learn through our speech centers. Even if you are not confident in your singing – sing what you are trying to learn. It will go a long way towards getting the passage under your fingers. “If you can’t sing it, you can’t play it”.
4. Practice in short sessions
 - a. If you are practicing more than half hour a day, take a short break from physically playing every fifteen minutes or so – especially if you are older . Maybe every 20-30 minutes if you are younger. Muscles need rest to refrain from injury and to improve muscle memory. Listen to your body.... It knows best.
5. Practice melodies on one string
 - a. ‘Seeing’ where the notes are on the fretboard is a challenge for most folks. Practicing melodies on one string allows you to see the intervals (step, step and a half, fifth, seventh, etc.). Many melodies stay within one octave. Figure out melodies by ear rather than depending on tab or musical notation.
 - b. Singing the names of the notes as you play them will help you learn the fretboard.
6. Practice melodies in multiple areas of the fretboard
 - a. Most notes can be played in multiple locations on the fretboard.
 - b. Find melodies to play in the same register on different string sets of the fretboard.
 - c. Play melodies in different registers (octaves).
7. Say or sing the note names as you play them
 - a. This will accelerate your knowledge of the fretboard.
8. Say or sing the degrees of the scale used in various chord shapes
 - a. Play the chord as an arpeggio and learn the scale degrees involved. For instance, a D chord played across the D,G,B & E strings at the 2nd and 3rd frets is Root, 5th, root, major 3rd.

Practice Log Sheet

Practice Goal _____ minutes per day

Week of __/__/__

| ITEM | Description | Minutes | | | | | | |
|---------------|-------------|---------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| | | Sun | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu | Fri | Sat |
| SCALES: | | | | | | | | |
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| | | | | | | | | |
| ARPEGGIOS | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | |
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| SONGS | | | | | | | | |
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| IMPROVISATION | | | | | | | | |
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| THEORY | | | | | | | | |
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| Questions/Notes from practice: |
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