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WHAT YOU REPEAT, YOU LEARN

Whatever you do repeatedly is what you are *practicing*, and is what you will eventually *learn*. Make sure you’re practicing and learning the right things.

If you repeat mistakes, bad habits, anxieties, and frustrations... you will *learn* them.

If you repeat accurate execution, good habits, ease, and confidence... you will learn *them*.

As they say in computer programming: “Garbage in, garbage out.” Meaning: If a computer program is written badly, or if the input data is bad, then the program will produce bad output.

Whatever you “program” into yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally, through repetition and practice, that’s what will come out when you play.

MAKE PRACTICE HAPPEN

- If you rarely make time for music, you’re actually “practicing” how to *not make music*. That’s what you’re learning. (See “What You Repeat, You Learn,” this page.)
- Schedule practice time into your life. Play *every day*, for as much time as you can manage comfortably. Don’t skip days and try to “catch up” later. Shorter daily practices are better than a long session once a week.
- If you “forget” to practice or don’t make time, tie practice to another regular activity (before dinner, after gym, etc.). Use rewards, penalties, or other “tricks” if it helps.
- Remove distractions. Find or create a quiet space where you can concentrate. No phone, no computer, no people.
- Use a chart to track your practice. This can motivate you and show you how you’re doing over time.
- Keep your instrument out and within reach. It makes practicing easier, and you may find yourself playing between practice sessions, as well.

PRACTICE GOOD “MENTAL HYGIENE”

- Thoughts, feelings, and images can be *learned* through repetition, just as physical skills can. So practice positive thoughts and feelings, positive self-talk, positive images.
- Notice any negative self-talk or mental commentary as you practice. *Let go* of harsh criticisms or judgments, scolding, predictions of failure, and other unhelpful chatter.
- *Don’t compare* yourself to other musicians, regardless of whether you believe they’re better or worse than you.
- Don’t put unreasonable expectations on yourself. Let yourself progress at your own pace.
- Positive thoughts and feelings come easier if your practice is going well, so set yourself up for success by following the tips in this guide. It also helps to keep a balance between being “serious” about music and having a spirit of fun and exploration. Don’t be too *heavy* about it all. Remember to *PLAY* music. Enjoy it.



KNOW WHAT YOU'RE WORKING ON

- Set musical goals. Where do you see yourself six months, a year, three years from now? Be specific. A teacher can help you choose your direction, ensure that your goals are clear and reasonable, and help you plan the best path toward reaching them.
- In your practice sessions, be focused. Always know what you're working on. Noodling around is fun (and worthwhile), but it's not the same as *practice*, which requires concentration, intention, and discipline. Spend most of your practice time working toward your goals.
- Divide practice time among the different things you're working on, and cycle through them. Give more time to areas that need more attention. (See "Making the Best Use of Time," pg 3.)

DEFINE EACH TASK CLEARLY

- Don't practice a task until you know *exactly* what it is. Understand *in detail* what "correct" is, so you can practice *that*. This includes fingering, pick/bow direction, posture/hand positioning, breathing. Figure out the details; get help if you need it.
- Show your body what to do *physically*, step by step. Slowly rehearse every position and move, every detail, so your body knows what's required and won't get confused. The body learns slowly, but it remembers well.
- Do what top athletes do: Visualize yourself doing the task. Imagine every aspect of an ideal performance, including technique, dynamics, phrasing. Do this with your eyes shut, in a quiet place where you can concentrate. *Program* the task into your mind and body.
- To use the techniques in this section, cut bigger musical tasks into smaller "bits," then define, visualize, and practice each bit on its own. (See "Break Big Tasks Into Smaller Tasks," next column.)

BREAK BIG TASKS INTO SMALLER TASKS

- For longer or more difficult material, break bigger tasks into smaller ones, then learn each "bit" on its own. Master each bit before moving on to the next. It's OK if it takes more than one session to do them all.
- Make sure each bit is small enough that you can understand every detail, mentally and physically. (See "Define Each Task Clearly," previous column.)
- After you master one bit, move to the next, then add them together. If combining them is difficult, practice the transition between the two as a "bit" of its own.

FIND THE RIGHT PRACTICE TEMPO

This is some of the best advice I can give you: Find the tempo at which you can execute the task you're working with no (or very few) mistakes. That tempo might be much slower than you'd expect.

People often practice faster than they can actually do the task. As a result, they make mistakes, get stressed out, and fail to improve. They don't realize that they're actually *practicing doing it badly*, so that's what they end up learning. (See "What You Repeat, You Learn," pg 1.)

Play slowly enough that the mistakes and other problems vanish – so things flow and you're in control. Find the tempo at which you can play the "hardest" part correctly, then play the whole thing at that speed.

Once you find that tempo, *stay there*, and keep repeating the material. When you've got it, resist the urge to go faster. Stay at that tempo for a while. *Program* yourself to play with accuracy, smoothness, and confidence.

Accuracy is more important than speed. It's harder to "erase" something you learned wrong than it is to learn it right in the first place. **SLOW DOWN** and get it *right*. If you do, the speed will naturally come on its own.



DEALING WITH MISTAKES

If you keep making mistakes, it means one of two things is probably happening (and maybe both):

- You're playing at a tempo that's too fast for you to play accurately. Play slowly enough that you can do the task correctly. (See *"Find the Right Practice Tempo,"* pg 2.)
- You don't know the specifics of the task clearly enough to do it accurately. Either you're missing some piece of information, or you have a mistaken idea of what you're supposed to do. It's usually a question of technique, such as fingering, shifting hand positions, etc. Break the task down into its component parts, and make sure you know exactly what's required. (See *"Define Each Task Clearly,"* pg 2.)

It's important that you don't repeat the same mistakes again and again, because you may eventually learn them. Once that happens, they're very hard to unlearn.

It's also important to have a neutral mental attitude about mistakes. Be objective – focus on what's causing the problem and how to fix it. Don't be harsh toward yourself or get caught up in mind games.

PRACTICE IS STRONGER THAN "TALENT"

Many people believe that musical mastery depends on a magic ingredient called "talent," that we're each born with all the talent we'll ever have, and that some of us have more talent and some less (or none at all).

I disagree. The most important factor in becoming proficient at music is *practice* – dedicated, focused practice over time. Regardless of talent, the best musicians are the ones who have devoted the most time and effort and creativity to their practice regime.

Trust in the power of practice to make your musical goals and dreams come true.

ATTENTION HACKS

- It often helps to break a full practice session into shorter, 5-15 minute segments, and move from task to task. You might cycle through your tasks more than once during the whole session. Don't work on any one task longer than you can concentrate on it.
- When you're making progress with a new skill, you may reach a point where you start losing ground or making more mistakes. At that point, switch gears: work on a different task or take a short break. When you return to the task, you may find your skill has noticeably improved, as if your mind was working on the task during the break.
- When you're practicing rote tasks like scales, licks, and other fixed patterns, try doing them while focusing on something else. Look out the window, watch a movie, listen to the news. Such tasks can become truly automatic if you learn to do them without mental effort.

USING A METRONOME

A metronome can be a useful tool for diagnosing and fixing problems with time-keeping. Here are some tips for getting good results:

- Don't "follow" the metronome, *keep pace* with it. Learn to keep time on your own, not follow something else. If you're listening for or reacting to it, you're already behind. Learn to feel time internally, independently.
- Notice if you have a tendency to rush or drag, and correct as you go. Most people rush when the music is slow or easy, and drag when it's fast or difficult.
- As you improve, set the metronome to mark every other beat (i.e. cut the bpm in half, but read at the original speed). At faster tempos, try marking only beat 1 of each measure, or even every two measures. See if you can keep steady time during the "gaps."



WORKING WITH A TEACHER

- Take the time to find the right teacher *for you*. Don't go with the first person you see just because it's easier. Each teacher has their own personality, style, and background. Meet with several, then choose.
- If you want to study blues guitar, don't choose a classical guitar teacher – or vice versa.
- Work with your teacher to choose specific goals. Have ideas for what you'd like to learn: favorite pieces of music, styles, skills, techniques. This helps your teacher know what inspires you, and what material to give you.
- Trust your teacher: do the work they give you, and follow their instruction and advice.
- Ask for what you need. If you're confused or frustrated, or need more help or review, speak up.
- Practice daily – don't wait until the day before (or the day of) a lesson and try to "cram" to catch up.
- Avoid mind games and ego battles. A teacher isn't your spouse, parent, boss, or therapist. They're a coach and mentor who can help you achieve your musical goals.
- No teacher is a magician. They can't "make" you a better musician. You have to do the work. Be patient, learn the material they give you, and keep *practicing*.

REMEMBER TO P L A Y MUSIC

Practicing music can be hard work, and it's easy to get too heavy and serious about it. Try to find ways to make your practice more fun, and less of a chore. When you can, set aside time to explore, goof around, play easy things, get together with friends and jam, make up new things of your own.

Listen to what you play. Enjoy the beauty of each note, feel the pulse and the rhythm, the emotion and spirit. Music is a source and expression of life and joy.

MISCELLANEOUS TIPS

- As you progress over time, it's easy to forget material you learned earlier, especially older repertoire. Try to keep these earlier pieces from fading away. You may not need to play them every day, but you should return to them occasionally so you don't lose them.
- Many people, once they gain a certain level of skill, stop improving because instead of working on new skills, they spend all their practice time running through things they already know. Yes, you want to keep earlier skills and repertoire (*see above*), but you also want to learn *new* things and keep advancing. Don't just repeat your "greatest hits."
- Be creative with your practice routine – it doesn't have to be the same every day. You might use different warmup exercises sometimes, or review older material every few days (*see top item, above*), or work on theory a couple times a week, etc. *However*, if there's new material you're memorizing or skills you're learning, be sure to work on those things every day.
- If you feel pain when you play, try to make physical adjustments to be more comfortable. If pain persists, take a break, don't risk injuring yourself. If you have a teacher, ask for help in figuring out what the issue is.

FURTHER READING

"Effortless Mastery: Liberating the Master Musician Within" by Kenny Werner
(Jamey Abersold Jazz, 1996)

"The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music From the Heart" by Madline Bruser
(Bell Tower, 1997)

"The Inner Game of Music"
By Barry Green & W. Timothy Gallwey
(Doubleday, 1986)

