

Efficient, Effective, Research-Based Practicing Techniques

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Balance of informal and deliberate practice:

The best musicians don't just play what's coming up on the next concert. The best musicians use informal practice such as improvising or playing just for fun. It reminds us why we are playing music--we play because we enjoy it! Learning hasn't stopped, though. Just as children do, we can learn through play. It helps with motivation as well.

-Try finding an easy piece of music you don't have to know, but that you love. Folk tunes, jazz standards, pop tunes..all our widely available for free. Or, just make something up. See what you can create.

Motivation and energy:

We have to be mindful of our energy, attention, and stress levels. Angry, hungry, or tired practice can actually do harm to our playing. Practice makes *permanent*, not perfect.

-Know the times of day where you are most able to focus on accomplish tasks happily. Schedule your practice times for these parts of the day. Feeling hungry? Go eat and practice when you are more focused. Don't hate yourself for failing! Take a break, accept, and get back in there when you're ready.

Social context:

Who we are around impacts our chances of success. Who we surround ourselves with will determine who we will become.

-Force yourself to be around successful, educated, supportive, and challenging people. Play duets with the best player you can find who will play with you. Be in the best bands you can get in to. The most beneficial groups I've been in have been the ones where I am the absolute worst player in there. It didn't stay that way and it never has to.

Broken-up vs. "cramming" :

In an 1984 Oxedine study, students who broke up their practice sessions into shorter time periods were more successful than those who practiced in one or two large chunks. Our brains only have so much energy to use on attention. We get better at this as we age but, (just like babies) we need novelty!

-Set timers for you practice sessions. Try taking a nap in between sessions to consolidate information and refresh the brain. Try to reach the same amount of practice time as you always do but spread out over many more sessions.

Part vs. whole:

It can be tough to know what and how to practice in a particular piece. In a 2002 Mishra study, multiple techniques for attacking a new piece were discovered and analyzed. Holistic techniques, or playing the whole piece avoiding stops and restarts, and additive technique such as rehearsing quickly expanding large sections of the piece were found to be most effective in learning a shorter piece. However, a combination of large and small section work is found to be best when working on relatively large pieces.

-The key here is variation. Use as many combinations of parts and wholes as you can. Make sure the transitions between sections flows just as well as the section does. Make sure to run through the whole thing often, but don't neglect the finer points. Make sure the end gets as much attention as the beginning. You can separate your sessions into "macro" and "micro" focused times. With excerpts, full run throughs and division of the larger sections will be more beneficial than working on the finer points. With concertos and full solo works, use a combination of both. Know what you're good and bad at!

Appropriate goal setting:

The most successful people in life have always been goal-oriented. They set realistic, yet challenging goals, they strive for them, and they evaluate if they have reached them. It keeps us on track and makes sure we aren't sitting idle.

-Keep a practice diary where you are setting goals for each practice session, week, month, term, year, and so on. Make sure you can accomplish these goals, but dream big. If you fail, evaluate if it was a poorly made goal, or poorly striven for goal.

Assessment:

We need ways to appropriately evaluate and reflect on our progress. This is why we have so many administrative positions in life. We need honest and educated progress reports in life.

-Record yourself! This could be one of the most important practice techniques I've ever learned. What you hear on the other side of the horn, (or even just outside of your own body) is always different from what you think it is. Make sure you have plenty of resource recordings so you know what you are supposed to sound like. Make sure you have a concept of good sound that you can strive for. Keep personal reflections and teacher evaluations in your practice journal/diary.

Mental practice:

Studies of Boca's area show us that visualizing a motor movement creates nearly the same reaction in the brain as actually performing this task does. Separating your music from your horn can help with musicality, expression, memorization, text understanding, and even motor coordination since you are separating the physical movements from the visualization of these movements. (e.g. your fingers, lungs, and embouchure don't have to be working while you visualize how to play a technical passage)

-Set aside a couple times a week to look over your music. Sing through it in your head and imagine playing it. Pretend you're playing and see what you hear and feel. What is the music saying now that you aren't worried about hitting that high X? What does that high X mean not that it's not just another high note? Multiple levels of this can be achieved by separating certain parts of the playing process. For example, one can remove the lips from the horn, and still finger along and blow air. This gets the air moving, the fingers playing, and it keeps the embouchure and tongue from messing with your chances of success.

How Should I Practice?

A research-based approach to practicing by Seth Arnold

Practice doesn't make perfect, it makes permanent. Perfect practice makes perfect!

Where should I practice? Most importantly, you should be away from any distractions. Make sure your family knows that you shouldn't be distracted when practicing at home. (Take care of chores etc. beforehand!) Use the biggest room available to you and if you can, use the practice room or (even better) practice in the band room! Playing in a large space will encourage you to play with a full sound. Don't have your phone on you unless it's being used as a tuner/metronome.

When should I practice? Ideally, you shouldn't be tired, hungry, thirsty, or stressed out about something. Pick a time of the day where you are energetic and positive. Don't do all of your practicing at one time. Splitting it up into smaller sessions is not only easier, but a 1984 Oxedine study showed that students who broke their practice sessions up were more successful than those who practiced the same amount of time all at once.

What should I practice? Follow your goals and what's been assigned to you. Nothing's been assigned? Practice what we've been working on in class. Isolate the areas that you struggle with. Pros put parenthesis around these sections in rehearsals so they know what to practice later. Need a goal or something to work on? Try one of these: concert music, technical studies, tone, air, tone generator, articulations (staccato, tenuto, legato, slurs), long tones, soft/loud playing, crescendos/decrescendos, high/low range, lip slurs or break slurs, finger dexterity, interval exercises, scales, arpeggios, new notes, alternate fingerings, vibrato, extended techniques (glissandos, flutter tongue, multiphonics, harmonics, etc.) I think you get it. If you are interested in what any of these are, let me know and I can provide you with resources to work on them :)

How should I practice? Mr. Arnold has assigned you measures 1-21 in some piece. Don't just run through it and be done! Make sure your rhythm and notes are right first. Do this by slowing it down and isolating the rhythm and the notes (sizzle and finger, clap and count, playing the rhythm on one pitch etc.) and repeat the more difficult bits until they happen correctly nearly every time (not just once or twice). Then, play larger chunks that include those smaller bits you just worked on. Make sure it's up to tempo,

then move on to dynamics, articulations, and style. Be picky with yourself! One of the best ways to improve is to record your playing and listen back to it. (*continued on back*) There are tons of ways you can practice music. You can get better just by playing on your **tone generator**. Get a tuner out and try to play the correct pitch on your mini instrument for long notes. See if you can get the correct pitch right away and hold it steady. You can also practice **without your instrument!** (Although you cannot do this for the entirety of your required practicing time). Simply going over your sheet music (while looking at it) and fingering along has also been shown to increase students' likelihood of success. You can also practice **rhythm counting** by clapping and counting through rhythm exercises (that I can provide) or that are in the back of your book. Another great way to improve your playing is by listening to the pieces we are playing in class or listening to professional musicians on your instrument. Use YouTube, Pandora, or Spotify for this. Although the listening doesn't count towards your practice time, it will have lasting effects.

Still struggling to practice that one tough bit? Run through these steps.

1. Make sure you know all of the notes and the fingerings. Isolate the change between two notes if you have to. Be picky!
2. Make sure your rhythm is good. Clap and count, sizzle, sizzle and finger, play on one pitch, get these two steps down at whatever speed is doable.
3. Start with small chunks and speed up your repetitions. Playing something correctly just once is not enough!
4. Add small chunks together and play larger parts at a time. Don't go faster than your brain/fingers/air can handle!
5. Speed it up as you can.
6. (Sometimes starting slow doesn't work for everyone. You can also play very small chunks at a quicker speed and then add single notes on either side very slowly. This is great for particularly difficult parts.)
7. Combine parts and practice the transitions between them.
8. Play the largest chunk that you've been working on. Is anything still going wrong? Isolate that again. It'll happen!
9. Play the large chunk again and start over when you mess up.
10. If you can do something correctly five times in a row, it is likely to happen correctly at the performance or in class. This is called "playing fivesies."
11. Take a nap, eat something, put the horn down, take a break, etc. Good job.

Assessing Your Practice Habits

I regularly perform for my colleagues and teachers.	T/F
I practice at times when I am focused, energetic, and content.	T/F
I set appropriate goals for every practice session.	T/F
I set long term goals for varying amounts of time down the road.	T/F
I work on a combination of small and large parts of my music everyday.	T/F
I use a wide variety of practice strategies.	T/F
I keep my practice sessions novel (improvisation, just for fun, new music etc.)	T/F
I routinely play just for fun.	
T/F	
I improvise.	T/F
I listen and have access to many sources of beautiful playing on my instrument.	T/F
I surround myself with dedicated and supportive friends.	
T/F	
I practice for many shorter sessions a day, as opposed to one or two large chunks.	T/F
From time to time, I take a nap.	T/F
I look at my music away from my instrument.	T/F
I keep a practice journal full of personal goals and reflections.	
T/F	
I play with others.	T/F
I avoid detrimental practicing techniques, such as playing the same thing 100 times in a row.	T/F
I know where to look if I run out of things to practice.	
T/F	