

Approaches

- Just play the melody and ornament your mistakes.
- Start by just doing fills.
- Make up games and sequences, for example: play every other note ascending, with stuff in between. Or experiment with playing every string on the same fret and sliding as necessary. Or pick two notes at random and try to connect them.
- Give yourself constraints. Decide that for the length of a song, you'll never play a note on the downbeat. Or pick three notes from the scale and only play those. If you're still having a hard time deciding what to do, make the constraints tighter. Maybe pick one note and only play that!
- The jazz approach: know what notes are in the current chord and make those the skeleton of what you're doing. I personally find this harder because it adds an extra layer of mental abstraction.
- There are lots of ways to ornament. Make the rhythm more surprising. Add vibrato. Play a note louder or quieter. Slide into a note. Bend into a note. Even very simple improv melodies can sound good with some ornamentation.
- Very simple improv melodies also sound good *without* ornamentation! Less is more, especially in the blues. Sequences of fast notes are cool, but think of it as another kind of ornamentation rather than doing it all the time.

It's important to know whether your block is imagination or execution. Here's a way to find out. If you can whistle, try whistling improv. If you can't whistle, try humming it.

- If you find that relatively easy, then you need ear training so that you can do the same thing on guitar
- Alternately, if whistling improv is hard, then it's good to practice that some; your problem is not being sure what to do (as opposed to execution)

Remember that you're never more than one fret away from a note that will sound good.

Ascending or descending chromatic sequences are your friend.

Always separate your creative and analytical brains. Never let the latter interfere with the former! It's generally a bad idea to be critical of your playing while you're playing (you can do it if you can learn to hold it lightly enough, but it's definitely not something to do at a time when you feel blocked). If you have a hard time shutting your critical mind off, record your improv.

Inform your critical mind that it will have a chance to do its thing later, so it doesn't have to do it now. (Note: if you go back and listen to a recording, it will sound worse to you than it does in the moment. Accept that in advance so that it won't be upsetting when you hear it!)

If there isn't something you want to play, leave some silence. Silence is great!

Try only ever thinking about one next note at a time. Play just that note, and then start thinking about the next one. Once you feel at home in that, extend that to two notes at a time, then three, then a phrase at a time, and eventually extend from there.

The opposite advice is also good. Joe Bonamassa: if you're thinking about the note you're currently playing, you're too late.

Really for any of these maxims, maybe the opposite advice is better for you.

Improv (and playing music in general) is first and foremost *play*. It's not about impressing anyone.

From another angle, playing improv is like going for a walk in the woods with a friend. You're wandering down both new and familiar paths, and enjoying the beauty you encounter. Trying to impress people with how you walk in the woods is a category error.

You should always be pushing yourself to grow as an improviser. Except that that's completely the wrong way to think about it! If you feel pushed, you're pushing too hard. You should always be very very gently and lovingly and playfully nudging yourself to grow.

It's useful to learn new techniques, but it's even more useful to then throw them away. Always be simplifying.

Oblique Strategies (<https://stoney.sb.org/eno/oblique.html>) are great for breaking out of stuckness. Don't browse! Commit in advance to following the first one that comes up, or at absolute most, one of the first three.

Played a wrong note? Now play the notes that make it not have been a wrong note after all.

A beautiful thing about playing electric guitar (as Julian Lage points out) is that you can play as quietly as you like, and let the amp do the work of making that as loud as it needs to be. Playing quietly is great. Playing quietly, it's easier to capture nuance and intention, and you don't have to rush so much.