

Guitar Practice Guide



A Practice Guide For Guitarists and other Musicians

By Gareth Evans

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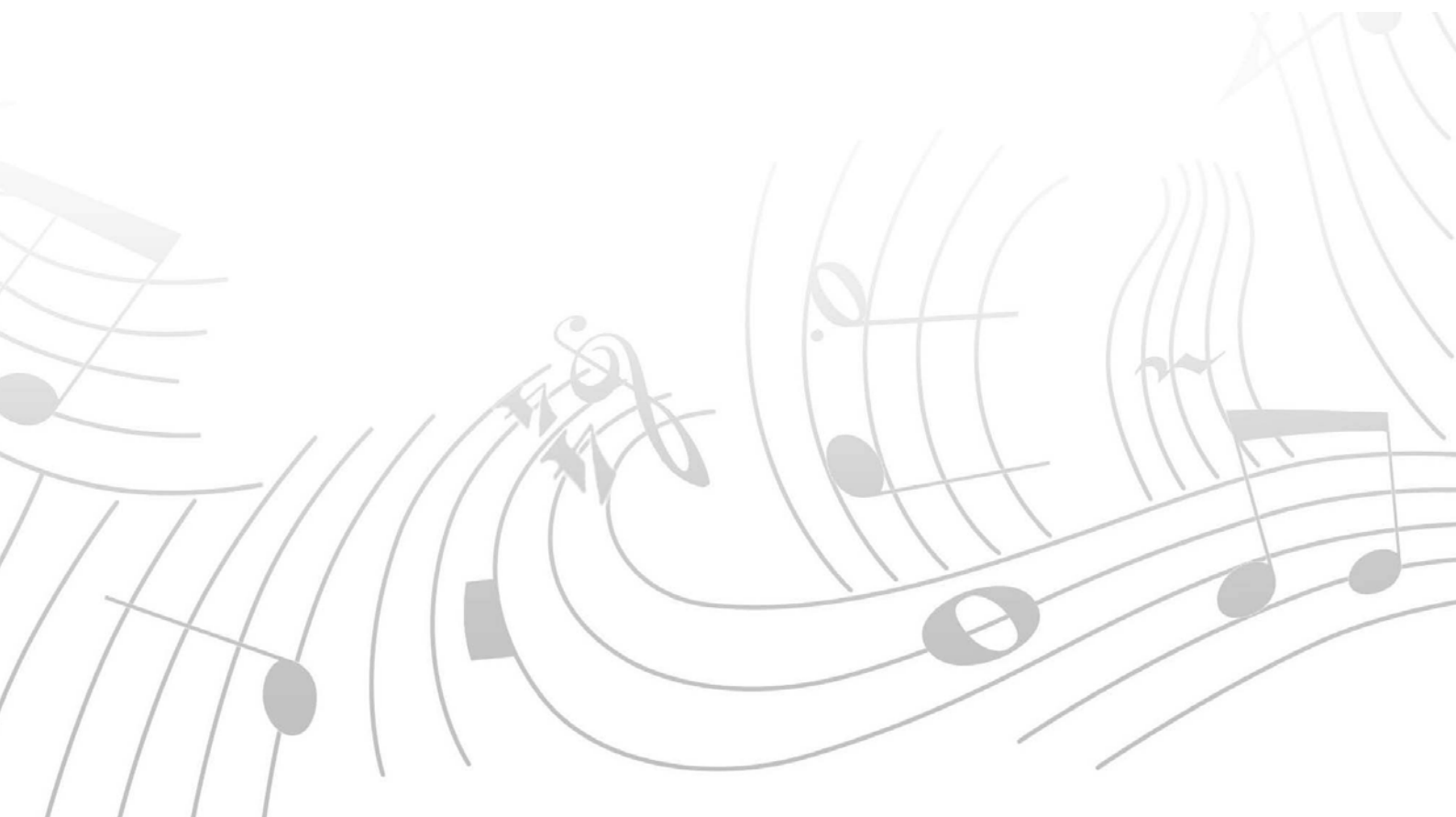
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Preface

Welcome to the Practise Guide. This 5,900 word guide is written with the guitar in mind but much of it can apply to musicians in general. It starts with the broader subjects of how long and how often to practise then deals specifically with how to practise and various issues with some guidance on how to deal with them. It isn't written with any particular skill level in mind, it applies to whatever level you are at, while there might be some insights already familiar to more experienced players. Occasional references are made to research papers.

It's not just a case that "practise makes perfect" as the saying goes, but really more like "perfect practise makes perfect". It is at least as much about *how* you practise as it is about how much you practise, in other words quality as much as quantity. Using a metronome during practise is important and some of this guide is written with using one in mind so if you don't have a metronome and are serious about practise you should get one.

By the way, I have used the spelling of the word practice with a "c" on the title, cover and description due to how it appears to be the most commonly used spelling of the word, while practise with an "s" is used inside the book, which is original spelling of the word and is international English.



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How much Practise

How much practise you need to do depends on your goals, the greater the goal the more practise needed. Is music a hobby? Perhaps you are more serious and want to be the best you can be? Or maybe you want to do music for your career?

If you are a beginner, you shouldn't be worried by the idea of practising for many hours. Sessions of 30 minutes practise 5 or 6 days per week is fine, any more might be too much at an early stage, although of course, it's up to you if you wish to do more. Enthusiasm can grow over time. Many very successful guitarists who practise several hours a day did not necessarily start that way. Determine a realistic amount of time to practise that you can stick to.

Did you know that the more we learn the better we become at learning?

The brain generalizes, which means that the better you become at a skill, the easier you pick up similar skills. This ability applies at any age, including into older age. Below is a quote from the Abstract section of a [study](#) which looks at this ability in people aged 60 and over (skip ahead to the simple version in the paragraph below you prefer):

"Significant improvements in assessments directly related to the training tasks and significant generalization of improvements to non-related standardized neuropsychological measures of memory (effect size of 0.25) were documented in the group using the training program. Memory enhancement appeared to be sustained after a 3-month no-contact follow-up period."

In other words after training the brain, significant improvement occurs in memory function for other unfamiliar tests that were not already trained for, and this improvement endured for at least 3 months.

How Often

Frequent practise for reasonable periods of time is better than infrequent longer practise sessions. For example 30 minutes practise on 4 to 6 days of the week is better than 2 to 3 hours on one day of the week. Similarly if you are more serious and have the time, 2 to 3 hours practise on 4 to 6 days of the week is better than spending all of one day practising. This is known as the *spacing effect*. The spacing effect is how studying in separate sessions spread out over time gives better results than studying the same amount in a single large session.

The spacing effect probably has a lot to do with sleep. Sleep plays an important role in motor memory consolidation. In other words if you have practised guitar, later on while you sleep, your brain and body adapts to what you practised in order to become better at it. Here is a [study](#). The quote below is from the last line of the Abstract.

“The observations demonstrate a critical role of sleep for storing and optimizing motor skills.”

Practising only once in a week will mean you only benefit from one period of sleep consolidation. Practising on five or more days of a week however, will give you at least five times as much sleep consolidation and better results. Therefore, as an example, practising for 20 minutes on six days of the week will give you six times as much sleep consolidation and better results than practising for the same total time (two hours) on one single day of the week.

Consistency is the key. Try to be disciplined. Practising for many hours on one day will not make up for missed practise on other days.

Children’s concentration span tends to be lower than it is for adults. For a child 20 - 30 minutes concentrated practise, every other day, or even most days of the week is fine. Any more is a plus. If they start enjoying themselves it can go on for longer.

Concentration

Concentration is important when practising. This means that you should be doing something that is challenging enough that it requires your concentration. If you play what you already know you aren't going to improve. So always try to give yourself a challenge, not easy but not too hard either. This way you can make constant progress, while in the long run you will be less likely to get frustrated or bored repeating the same things you already know.

Avoid Distractions - Proper practise should be done without distractions. This means you should not be in the same room as a television that is on. No using the internet while you practise (unless it actually has something directly to do with the practise itself).

There are plug-in programs that can be used to block the internet at times you set. A couple of examples would be "StayFocusd" for Chrome browser, while for Firefox there is "Leechblock".

Some of the original guitar legends would not have even had a television when they grew up (certainly not before televisions were commonly available), perhaps a fortunate situation in terms of practise.

Patience

Instant gratification has become more and more a conditioned part of life and in so many ways we don't even consider. For one example, once you would have had to physically go to shops to buy the things you need, whereas nowadays we can order over the internet. In contrast, becoming a proficient musician will take time and practise, just like it always has.

Your own playing should satisfy you to a point that it becomes a positive reinforcement to practising; being patient and having time for what might be called "serious boring stuff" is better than being impatient, doing just the "fun" stuff and your playing not progressing. Rather than just playing around on the guitar with your favourite tunes for 30 minutes, try to spend *at least* the first 10 minutes doing something like technical exercises and / or scales to a metronome (scales are the foundation behind most music). This way you'll progress faster. Then the fun stuff becomes more fun and you can do different things because you are getting better, rather than reaching a frustrating point where you feel you can't go any further. If you just play for fun you'll hit a plateau, you can only get better with conscious deliberate practise.

Noticing your own progress isn't always easy, especially in the short term. You are witness to every second of every minute of every hour that you practise and every small improvement! On the other hand, someone else who sees your playing less frequently, say from one month to another, will see more contrast in your progress. Similar to the saying "*a watched pot never boils*" (PS always watch a pot when bringing it to the boil).

With something new, it is good to practise it until you are proficient before moving on. However, if you find something particularly difficult and it is taking rather long then it is OK to move on to other things to avoid frustration and doing too much of the same thing. It can be good to work on more than one thing to keep practise varied and enjoyable. When you come back to it later down the line you'll likely find that you are better at it because practise has a general effect.

So far we've addressed overall timeframes and the correct general outlook to practising, now let's get more specific. An awareness of both physical and mental limits is important.

Physical Limits

Playing guitar involves the use of small muscles in the hands and forearm making delicate movements. Play constantly for long enough and a build up of tension can occur in the hands and fingers resulting in a loss of control over these finite movements.

This can apply to both hands but most often affected is the fretting hand, for which guitar playing mostly involves its fingers moving between the application and release of pressure as they move between different frets. Once tension develops in the hand it can become difficult to move quickly and comfortably between these two opposite states. This is especially true if you are trying to push the limits of your playing speed.

For a beginner guitarist practising a piece of music with chords (where the application and release of pressure is required from multiple fingers at the same time), it is worth bearing in mind that because you need to start playing at slower speeds, ironically this will mean you have to hold chords down for longer. This can be troublesome if you are playing chords around the bottom of the neck near the nut on a steel string acoustic guitar. All of the above is why small intermittent breaks can play an important role (as discussed in following section).

If you are starting practise shortly after waking in the morning then it is best to start with something gentle. Overnight while asleep, collagen, which makes up the ligaments and muscle tendons around your joints, naturally shortens due to the lack of movement. It takes a while in the morning for them to loosen up. This is true for any lack of movement, e.g. sitting still for too long.

You need to warm up gently. I always do sight reading / singing exercises first thing in the morning because, for me, it is physically less challenging for the hands and fingers, as opposed to something like technical exercises to a metronome when gradually increasing the speed.

Small Intermittent Breaks

Songs that last for 10 minutes are rare. In a performance situation it is not common that you would play for periods this long without having at least a short break in between. In contrast, when practising, many of us have a blind spot and don't see it in the same way, although perhaps we should? After all, performance is often the end purpose of practise. Yngwie Malmsteen surely didn't when he ended up putting his guitar down for a while after getting tendonitis. For anyone who has not heard of him, Yngwie is an electric guitarist from Sweden of exceptional speed and technical ability.

When practising, some of us will even play our instrument for hours on end. It can be difficult to deliberately *not* play, *especially* if we are having fun and / or making good progress on whatever we are doing. I know this from experience and my hand certainly does from the eventual discomfort and pain. Taking small intermittent breaks can make a world of difference. The importance of this cannot be underestimated so I will repeat it because it deserves emphasis.

Taking small intermittent breaks can make a world of difference!

Prioritising that can save you a lot of trouble. It certainly has for me. 40 minutes of more or less constant guitar playing with no breaks and you can end up hurting. On the other hand 46 minutes spent playing in 10 minute sections spaced by 2 minute breaks will be much safer with total practise time being the same.

The principle can apply to however long you practise. If that's 30 minutes make that 34 minutes consisting of two 2 minute breaks between three periods of ten minutes practise. If an hour, perhaps make it 58 minutes instead with four 2 minute breaks between 5 periods of 10 minutes practise.

This is exactly what I do and have been doing for years. Originally looking at the clock didn't work for me. I would be so involved in what I was practising that the periods of practise and rest would be irregular, after all you should be concentrating while practising not looking at a clock. To keep things disciplined I use a timer with the alarm set to 10 minute and 2 minute intervals ongoing; 10 minutes, 2 minutes, 10 minutes, 2 minutes etc. This is what I recommend. Any kind of timer device capable of doing this will suit. I use a timer designed for High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT). This has now been a mainstay of my practise regime for years.

Length of your practise periods and rest periods may differ depending on your own preference or the intensity of what you are doing but you should not play for more than 20 minutes without a short break. A beginner learning to play chords on a steel string acoustic guitar (similar to as mentioned earlier under Physical Limits) may be wise to spend as little as 5 minutes (or less) on this between short breaks to avoid over straining.

The only time I start feeling discomfort in my hands is when occasionally I disobey my own rules. After 40 to 50 minutes practise of 10 minute sessions and 2 minute breaks, “just a little bit more” followed by another “just a little bit more” etc. becomes more than just a little bit more and the timer is forgotten about.

For many, the difference with using small intermittent breaks might be that previously an indication to stop playing would have been physical discomfort or pain in the hand(s). After all, if after 10 minutes of playing your hands feel fine then why stop? If it *does* start to hurt then you’ll stop, right? (some don’t).

My answer would be that this is a limit from which there is **no benefit**. A bit like a plane that can fly at 30,000 feet maximum and flies that high all the time, or a submarine that can go to a maximum depth of 2km going that deep all the time. In either case, if neither actually need to fly that high or descend that deep in order to achieve whatever it is they need to, then what is the point? The same goes for playing guitar for a prolonged period of time with no short breaks.

Other advantages of having short intermittent breaks are discreet but important. After a short break you will likely find your hands are more fluent than when you left off at the end of the last practise period because tension does not only develop when we can actually detect it as the feeling of discomfort or pain. Another is a mental advantage, which will be discussed next.

Mental Limits

Did you know that towards the end of the 100 metres sprint athletes start to slow down? Of course it would make sense to decelerate *after* the finish line if that was at all possible, but their energy starts to deplete before they get this far.

Often people associate exhaustion with physical activity but the same can apply to mental concentration. It stands to reason that with sustained mental effort you will eventually reach exhaustion (albeit after a longer time than it takes to do a 100 metre sprint of course). To quote [Professor Claude Messier](#) *"The brain has a hard time staying focused on just one thing for too long."*

This is another argument for taking small intermittent breaks, in order to become mentally refreshed also.

As opposed to simply wearing out mentally in general, something more elusive can be getting better at something, then losing it. Let's say after several attempts practising a challenging part you finally get it right. At this point we might naively assume that we've "got it" and can easily repeat it. However, each further attempt will still require concentration, because it is not ingrained yet and you've only just got it right. Due to this, while concentrating, once mental exhaustion is reached you may also find you are no longer able to play the part as well. Little can be accomplished past this point without repeating the same mistakes. Only when something becomes second nature can you repeat it as well every time.

I have sometimes seen students, with a slightly confused look, say: *"I got it right that last time, I just can't get it again!"* Having finally got something right, they either assume they no longer need to concentrate as much during further attempts, or they are reaching mental exhaustion. Don't be fooled into ending up confused at how you got something right, yet after a while your playing seems to be getting worse. Perhaps, if it's not your hand(s) getting tired, it is actually your concentration that is becoming exhausted.

To reiterate; all of the above is argument for taking small intermittent breaks, as discussed in the previous section.

Coordination

Most of the time in our day-to-day lives we use our hands in ways that don't require independent coordination for each finger. That is to say that for most things we do, when more than one finger is used, the fingers act together at the same time, often (although not always) with the thumb opposite. For example holding a steering wheel, using a remote control, scratching your head, eating with a knife and fork, holding most kinds of sports equipment / racquet, using a spork (half spoon half fork), opening or closing a window or door, feeding your pet, using tools to build things, doing washing up, using cooking utensils, using a knork (half knife half fork), brushing or combing our hair. The list goes on. Even the more intricate tasks of holding a pen, pencil, soldering iron or paintbrush to write, draw, solder or paint, involve only the thumb and one or more fingers gripping at the same time.

The most similar to playing guitar (or many other instruments) in terms of finger independence would be typing on a keyboard. Those who are unfamiliar with typing will often use only the index finger of both hands rather than using more or all of their fingers. Indeed, a lot of beginners at guitar will tend to use only their stronger index and middle fingers on the fret-board, rather than using their ring finger or little finger. The kind of finger independence required for playing guitar is relatively unique.

On the next page are a few sample exercises for developing independence in each fretting finger. The italic numbers underneath the guitar tablature indicate which fretting fingers to use for the corresponding notes above; 1 for the 1st finger (index), 2 for the 2nd finger (middle), 3 for the 3rd finger (ring finger) and 4 for the 4th finger (little finger).

You may not be able to do all of them, while the speed at which one person to the next can play them will vary. Playing controlled clean notes is the priority at whatever speed you are capable of.

The first, most basic, exercise ascends four frets on each string, starting at the low E string, moving up to the high E string. After this you move your hand up one fret then descend with the reverse finger pattern as shown on bar 4 of the exercise. Take note of the alternate picking directions from the start, down, then up, then down, up etc.

The exercise can be continued like this as far up the fret-board as you like (or until your hand gets tired).

This is a very common finger exercise to start with. Let's look at some more finger combinations.

The next exercise uses a 1 3 2 4 finger sequence over four frets on each string. On bar four you move your hand up one fret then descend with the reverse of the finger pattern (4 2 3 1).

The exercise can be continued like this as far up the fret-board as you like (or until your hand gets tired).

The next exercise uses a 1 2 4 3 finger sequence over four frets on each string. On bar four you move your hand up one fret then descend with the finger pattern 4 3 1 2.

The exercise can be continued like this as far up the fret-board as you like (or until your hand gets tired).

The next, more tricky exercise uses a 1 2 3 4 finger sequence (like the first exercise did) except it skips between two strings for every note. On bar four you move your hand up one fret then descend with the reverse of the finger pattern.

The exercise can be continued like this as far up the fret-board as you like (or until your hand gets tired).

If you find any of them difficult you could start from further up the fret-board where the frets are a little closer together. For example the very first exercise could be started from the fifth fret, meaning you play the 5th, 6th, 7th then 8th

frets with fingers 1, 2, 3 and 4 respectively. Likewise for the other exercises starting further up the fret-board.

These exercises demonstrate the kind of finger independence that is generally useful on the guitar. There are potentially many more combinations.

Playing guitar generally involves coordination between the left and right hand, however, sometimes when introducing something new for one hand, a loss of coordination can occur in the other hand for something that it is normally used to. The reason for this is quite likely because in order to be efficient, the brain wires things together when they occur often enough at the same time.

"The general idea is an old one, that any two cells or systems of cells that are repeatedly active at the same time will tend to become 'associated', so that activity in one facilitates activity in the other."

Hebb, D.O. The organization of behavior. Wiley & Sons: New York; 1949 (p.70)

I occasionally see this with new students who have already played for a while and have got used to using only a downward picking motion. As soon as an upward picking motion is introduced as well, their fretting hand coordination suffers because its coordination has been associated with the plucking hand using only downward picking. Or vice versa. If someone has got used to using only their first and second fingers on the fret-board, when starting to use their third and fourth fingers as well, the coordination of their plucking hand suffers, because its coordination has been associated with the fretting hand using the first and second fingers, but not the third and fourth fingers.

This illustrates why it is important to start using the correct techniques as early as possible. You are future proofing yourself. At first poor technique is a bit like a low powered moped. If you only need to go at 30mph you'll be fine. If eventually you want to go faster you'll need something more powerful (the equivalent of correct technique). By using the correct techniques from the start, if later down the line you want to advance your playing skills, you won't come to a barrier and have to re-learn. The vehicle / speed comparison is completely metaphorical of course.

Guitar practise should involve modesty. Even if you have already been playing a while, completely new techniques should be approached properly almost as though you are a beginner.

Sense of Timing and Rhythm

Before starting, below is a key for the specific meaning of some of the words used just to make sure there's no confusion over some of the terminology.

Tempo – The speed of the music.

Timing – Your ability to stay at the correct tempo.

Rhythm – Whereabouts in time various notes occur.

Sense of timing and rhythm is a skill in its own right. Technical ability on its own is meaningless without it. Using a metronome during practise is important. Guitarists who have focused only on the technical side of playing and can play fast, yet have not practised to a metronome or over any other kind of steady beat can lack rhythmic control. Once a metronome is introduced, they may play faster than the metronome is set due to how they are playing to their technical ability, rather than being aware of timing. You need to be able to play at various speeds whether slow, your fastest, or anything in between, and while playing through music, be able to keep a consistent tempo throughout.

To illustrate how technical playing ability and timekeeping are different disciplines set your metronome to a very slow 40 beats per minute and try to clap on each beat. How close to the beat were you, were you right on it every time? It's tricky isn't it?

If you're still not convinced of the usefulness of a metronome for music practise, using a metronome can even help with Golf. Below is a quote from the last line of the Abstract section of a [study](#).

"this study's results provide further evidence that motor timing can be improved by SMT (synchronized metronome training) and that such timing improvement also improves golf accuracy."

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