

How Long Should I Practice?

Theresa Bollhagen

This is probably my most asked question. The length of time varies by age and skill level, and one size does not fit all. Really, it's not as much the time spent practicing, but the *quality* of the practice, *what* is practiced, *how often*, and the *kind of environment* the student is practicing in. Here are some general practice session tips.

First, I will address how long a student should practice. For a beginner of any age, approximately 15 – 20 minutes is generally enough. An intermediate student should be practicing anywhere from 45 – 90 minutes, and an advanced student 90 minutes up to 3 hours. All this provided full attention is given to the materials and technique. Also note that this doesn't have to be done all at once. In fact, it's better if breaks are taken especially for longer sessions.

This brings me to the quality of the session. A student can, in fact, practice a shorter amount of time if the time is used wisely and effectively. For example, instead of playing a whole song over and over just to get a couple measures correct, it is much more efficient to practice just those 2 measures several times. Some think that playing only something they are good at counts as good practice. Doing this is fun, however, if no or little time is spent on new material, nothing is really learned.

In addition, there are many people who practice all their exercises first and save working on songs or pieces until the end. Why is this bad? It's because you have the most brain power in the first 20 – 30 minutes of practice, and by doing all the exercises first, you are burning brain power you could be using for tricky passages or new things. Instead warm up a little with an exercise, then dive right into the song/piece. Save the other exercises and just having fun until the end.

What should be practiced then? This, again, varies by skill level. Beginners all have a basic lesson book where I will circle or put an "X" by things that should be practiced. Also, beginners should be practicing basic technique such as a bow or pick

hold, holding the instrument, correct left hand technique and position, bow technique, and posture. Attention should be given to tempo, rhythm, learning the lines and spaces the notes are on, and where they are on the instrument. This should really be paid attention to by more advanced students as well as they tend to get fixated on learning the harder things and ignore the basic ones. A last note for beginners is this – **DO NOT IGNORE THE BASICS!!!** It is MUCH harder to unlearn bad habits than it is to learn good ones the in the first place.

Intermediate students should be working on 2 – 3 octave scales (and memorizing them), etudes, progression pieces, early chords and double stops(violin/viola), more advanced chords (guitar), bow division (violin/viola), and moving around the instrument. Also remember to not ignore the right hand! The left hand can be amazing, but if the right hand can't keep up, it doesn't matter what the left can do. Students in orchestra should also be working on those pieces in addition to personal growth materials. Guitar students may wish to begin focus on styles of interest.

Advanced students should be polishing 3 octave scales, one string scales, upper positions, larger pieces (violin/viola), advanced etudes, and advanced technique. Guitar students should be sure to keep up on their music reading (it's easy to lose sight of that), and all students should be sure to keep sight reading.

One last thing about what to practice. Students should always have plenty of interesting things to practice on hand no matter what the skill level. It's fun and good to play different things. Having a lot of music can also aid in sight reading practice.

Lastly, something that makes a big difference is the practice environment. Practicing should be done in a quiet room away from noise and distractions. The room should have some natural light, a sturdy chair without arms where the feet can be flat on the floor, a music stand, practice materials and instrument at arm's reach, and plenty of light at night. If possible, there should also be a guitar or violin/viola stand or wall hanger, a tuner, a device to listen to music/record on, and an amplifier (electric instrument).

Remember that practice requires just as much attention as homework. Practice time should be reserved for just that – practice. No phone calls/texts/social media, taking out garbage, being called out to play, no tv, etc. Set a time aside every day that the student can practice without interruption. This time should be reserved for practice and practice only.

Playing an instrument is rewarding and fun! When practiced correctly and efficiently, the student can make the most out of lessons and get the most rewards out of learning.

Reference:

Grassel, Jack, "Power Practicing", Frozen Sky Pub., 1992.