

GUITAR THEORY REVOLUTION

Overthrow the piano paradigm

Guide to designing your own practice routines

Why you need to plan your practice

Everyone knows that if you want to improve at a skill then you need to practice. But how can you get yourself practicing in the right way consistently?

The first thing you need is to know what to practice. With my books, videos and MP3s that part is taken care of. And they include many exercises for you to work on to get the knowledge into your fingers.

But if you're anything like me you might have the best intentions to pick up a new skill but not always follow through with what you need to do. Because we all have responsibilities in our lives; families, jobs, paying the bills doing chores etc. It's a luxury to even find 15 minutes of free time to pick up the guitar.

The temptation is to put off practicing for when you have time, which invariably is not very often, and then to binge-play for a couple of hours.

Now don't get me wrong, if you ever have that much time to play then go for it. But when it comes to practicing and getting better a little bit each day is better than a longer period once a month.

What you need to do is plan ahead for the times you find yourself with a spare 10 or 15 minutes. Because you don't want to be wasting time remembering what you were working on last time. That will only result in aimless noodling.

Again, there's nothing wrong with noodling. That's how I come up with most of my riffs and licks. But once you start messing around on the guitar those fifteen minutes will fly by. And although any moment spent on the guitar is good for your development you can speed up your learning by consciously knowing what you are going to do when you pick up the instrument.

In this short guide I'll help you design a practice plan that will enable you to squeeze the most out of any practice time you have, no matter how little.

Separate Practicing and Playing

This might seem like a trivial distinction to make but the first step is to separate your practicing and playing time. This doesn't mean you can't do both in a single session, rather that you have to be clear with yourself that you're going to spend a certain portion of your time practicing and only practicing.

The definition of practicing is that it involves repeating an activity and being extremely conscious of what you are doing so you do it as well as you can at a comfortable speed, no matter how slow, and that you focus on that until you've mastered it.

This could mean running over a scale slowly and methodically until it's in your muscle memory, it could be focussing on your vibrato technique or learning the quickest and most efficient way to switch between two chords. It could even be practicing to play with as little muscle tension as possible.

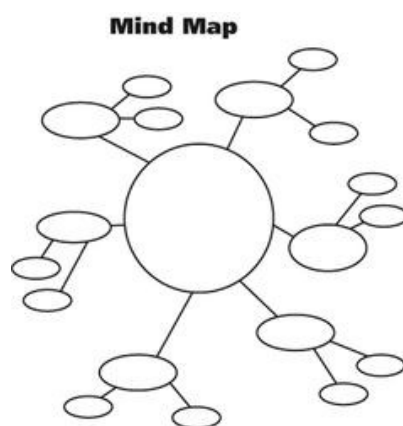
Whenever you find yourself drifting off or side-tracked you make sure you get back to the task at hand until the allocated time is over.

Then when you're playing time starts you can enjoy that without worrying consciously about what you're doing. Just enjoy making music.

Where you are now and where you want to be

The first part of designing a plan is to find out where you are now and where you want to be in terms of your skills and knowledge. To do this I suggest you get a notebook that will serve as your practice diary. It's something that you can keep near your guitars and will prevent you from having to go on your computer.

The first step is to draw out a mind-map of all the things you know you haven't yet mastered when it comes to playing guitar. A mind-map is just a way to draw out topics and ideas where each topic or idea is in its own circle and each sub-topic or sub-idea is in its own circle connected to the bigger idea or topic.



For example, a big idea could be Chord Construction Theory. You know you want to learn how to construct different chords but don't know how to do that yet. Then connecting to that big topic you can have sub-topics for Major chords, Minor chords, Dominant 7th chords etc.

Remember this isn't stuff you know already. It's all the things you want to learn. To find all the topics that you want to cover you can go through the chapter listings in the books you downloaded as part of this course. Of course you can also add playing techniques that you want to work on, like vibrato or tapping as well as particular pieces of music or songs you want to learn to play.

As you work your way through my material you can cross out the parts of the mind-map you've memorised or internalised and perhaps add new sections as you discover new topics that interest you.

The second use for the notebook, as I mentioned earlier, is as a practice diary. You'll write down your current practice routines, which we'll design in the next section, and after every practice session you write down what you practiced and for how long. This is something to help you keep track of your progression and help you identify weaknesses so you can adjust what you're focussing on.

Designing Practice Plans

Now we can start designing some practice plans. We'll start with a full 60 minute routine and then simplify it for a 30 minute and 15 minute routine.

To start you need to pick some short term goals, go to the mind-map or the chapter of the book you're working on, select a topic or idea you want to focus on. The aim is to try and incorporate it into every aspect of your practice session.

An example of a goal could be: Master the Minor Pentatonic scale

You can also write down your longer term goals but I'll assume that the chapters in my books and the mind-map cover those.

Now each session will be divided into different phases. These can be decided by you but here's a suggestion for a 60 minute practice session where each phase takes up 10 minutes.

1. Theory
2. Warm Up
3. Technique
4. Ear Training
5. Improvisation or Composing
6. Go back to something that you want to devote more time to

In the first phase you read or review the theoretical concept you are learning. This could mean for example memorising the fret formula for the Minor Pentatonic scale, a couple of patterns for playing it or how it relates to the Major Pentatonic scale. If you feel 10 minutes is too long to devote to this you can also spend it reviewing other topics that you've covered before, to keep them fresh in your memory.

The next phase is the warm up phase. Now I'm a big believer in using practice time efficiently so you shouldn't be doing random finger exercises. Instead use the very topic of the session as your warm up exercise. Find all the different ways you can play the Minor Pentatonic scale on the neck and play them slowly and methodically up and down the fretboard with good technique. Preferably you do this along with a metronome and even better if you can follow the Cycle of 4ths and 5ths as you go along (see the books for why this is a good idea).

Now that you're warmed up you can focus on technical exercises. Perhaps you're working on legato technique or tapping. Well why not use the Minor Pentatonic scale again?

You should really be singing or humming along with what you're playing so that you internalise the sounds of the intervals. But this part of the practice session is specifically for ear training exercises. An easy one in this case would be to play the scale through but miss out a random note which you sing instead. Then play it again with the missing note included to check if you got it right. There are several ear training exercises in my first book.

Next it's time to use the new knowledge in a practical way, depending on your preference you can either do some improvisation with the scale or use it for composing your own music.

For the last 10 minutes you can go back to a section you feel you need to work on some more.

Now 10 minutes for each phase may seem short but as long as you stay focused and concentrated on the task at hand it will be very useful. And if you add up these 10 minute sections over the days and weeks of practice it will result in many hours of concentrated effort.

You now have a 60 minute practice plan to write down in your diary. When you feel you've mastered the topic, have a look at the mind-map or the next chapter in the book you're working from for the next thing to work on and design a new plan for it. Remember to always include revision of past topics to keep yourself from forgetting what you've learned before.

Of course it's not always easy to find a full hour of practice time so you need to have two contingency plans. For the 30 minute plan simply take the first 3 phases of the 60 minute plan until you feel you've memorised the theory part. Then run through sections

2, 3 and 4 or 2, 3 and 5.

For a 15 minute plan you can most likely cut out the first phase, cut the warm up to 5 minutes and focus on 3, 4 or 5 for the last 10 minutes.

I suggest that whenever you're covering a new topic you devote a 60 minute session to it so that you can use the 30 and 15 minute plans during the rest of the week or month when you have less time available.

Pretty soon you'll have memorised what you're working on so that even if you only have 5 minutes to spare you'll be able to pick up the guitar and work on something useful.

Final Tips For Practicing

First I highly recommend you use some kind of timer, stop-watch or visible clock to keep yourself to the schedule. 10 minutes might go by in a flash and you'll be tempted to stick to a phase for longer but that can quickly result in unstructured playing. Stay focused for 10 minutes and then move on. You can always come back at the end of the session or do the whole routine again if you have time.

Many guitar instructors advocate using a metronome and I have to agree. You can buy a cheap one or use the metronome built into many multi-fx pedals, your recording software or even use metronomes online (go to Google and type in 'metronome'). Some people find playing along with a metronome a bit stale or boring in which case you can mix it up by playing along with a drum-machine, drum loops, midi drums or drum tracks online. Still a metronome is good for getting your timing spot on and helping you to speed up over time.

If you have the equipment for it I'd highly recommended recording your practice. It's one thing to hear yourself playing as you're doing it but it's another to hear yourself when you don't have the instrument in your hands. It's much easier to objectively hear what's going on and will enable you to focus on areas that need improvement. You can use recording software on your computer, a digital voice recorder or an old tape machine. The sound quality doesn't matter so much, as long as you can hear your timing and phrasing.

Personally I found getting a loop pedal a revelation. I didn't think I needed one because I already have the capability to record myself on the computer. But getting that all set up can take up valuable time and before I know it I'm messing around with virtual amp settings instead of playing.

Getting a loop pedal allowed me to just plug in and start playing, not worrying about any other sound other than what's coming out of my amp.

That's it for this guide. If you have you're own suggestions for practice routines please share them directly with me or in the FaceBook group.

Speak soon,

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