

The Student Practice Guide

A practical guide to focused practice, problem-solving and steady progress between guitar lessons.

Good practice is not simply playing for longer. It is focused problem-solving. A short, regular and thoughtful session will usually do more than a long session on autopilot.

Music is training, not cramming

Learning an instrument is closer to athletic training or learning a new language than memorising facts for a test. Your hands, ears and memory need frequent contact with the material. Imagine going to the gym for two hours once a month: the session may be tiring, but there is not enough regular stimulus for much progress to build. Music works in a similar way. Short sessions repeated across the week compound over time, while long gaps allow coordination, recall and confidence to fade.

Keep the balloon in the air: every practice session gives it another tap. Frequent taps help it rise; when the taps stop, it begins to float down.

Some skills eventually become deeply learned and return easily, like riding a bicycle. Reaching that point still takes many accurate repetitions. Until a skill is securely burned in, regular reminders protect the progress you have already made.

Start with these four habits

- Practise a little and often. Consistency matters more than occasional heroic effort.
- Choose one clear target before you begin.
- Slow down enough to notice what is actually happening.
- Finish with music you enjoy so practice still feels musical.

Useful tools

Keep a tuner, metronome, timer, pencil, practice journal and simple recording device nearby. Your phone can do most of these jobs - provided notifications are switched off.

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1. Structure practice like a three-course meal

A balanced session has a gentle beginning, a focused middle and an enjoyable ending. The proportions can change, but the structure makes it easier to begin and helps important work get done.

STARTERS	MAINS	DESSERTS
Warm up the hands and brain. Use a scale, chord changes, rhythm work, stretches or a short technical drill. Stay relaxed.	The focused work. Use lesson material, exam pieces, tricky sections, timing, tone, accuracy, reading or a problem your teacher has set.	Finish with something enjoyable: a favourite song, improvisation, a backing track or older material you already know.

Do not forget the vegetables

Theory, note reading, rhythm counting, ear training and musical understanding may not always feel exciting, but they make the rest of your playing stronger.

Example practice plans

Time available	Starter	Main	Dessert
10 minutes	2 mins	6 mins	2 mins
20 minutes	5 mins	10 mins	5 mins
30 minutes	5 mins	15-20 mins	5 mins
45 minutes	10 mins	25 mins	10 mins

10-minute emergency session: 2 minutes warming up, 6 minutes on one specific problem, and 2 minutes playing something enjoyable.

2. Practise like a problem-solver

When something is not working, repeating the same mistake at full speed rarely helps. Use a deliberate loop instead.

1	Pick a target	What exactly do I want to improve?
2	Try carefully	Play slowly enough to notice what is happening.
3	Notice the gap	What differed between the result I wanted and what happened?
4	Change one thing	Try a fingering, tempo, picking motion, count, posture or smaller section.
5	Repeat	Keep the solution that works and write it down.

Rules that make practice work

- Practise regularly when possible. Even 10-15 minutes can keep progress moving.
- Practise when you have energy. If you are tired, choose lighter revision or familiar material.
- Remove distractions. Deep focus matters more than total minutes.
- Break problems down. Isolate difficult bars, transitions and chord changes.
- Do not always start at the beginning. Endings and weak spots need repetitions too.
- Record yourself. Listening back reveals things that are hard to hear while playing.
- If you feel pain, stop. Rest, adjust and ask for advice rather than pushing through it.

Slow enough to notice. Small enough to solve. Repeated enough to remember.

3. Make practice easy to begin

Reduce the number of decisions between thinking about practice and actually starting. Keep the instrument safe but accessible, and prepare the tools you use most often.

☐ Guitar and plectrums	☐ Music, lesson notes or backing tracks
☐ Tuner and metronome	☐ Timer
☐ Pencil and eraser	☐ Practice journal
☐ Amp, cable or headphones	☐ Water and a quiet space
☐ Recording device	☐ Spare strings if needed

Keep a practice journal

A journal is a map: it records where you are going, what you tried and what to do next. A few honest lines are more useful than a perfect diary you never maintain.

Date and duration	
My goal today	
What improved	
What was difficult	
What I tried	
Next step	
Question for my teacher	

4. Stay motivated and keep returning

Motivation is easier when progress is visible and practice still contains music you enjoy. The aim is not perfection - it is returning often enough for small improvements to accumulate.

Build confidence

- Set a goal small enough to achieve in one session.
- Use rewards positively: finish the main work, then play something fun.
- Listen to recordings from a few weeks ago. Progress is often easier to hear over time.
- Play for someone occasionally. Feeling nervous is normal, and performing gets easier with practice.
- Compare yourself with your past self, not with someone else's highlight reel.

When you think you have no time

Busy weeks are normal. The answer is not guilt - it is preparation. If a full session is impossible, use the 10-minute emergency plan or do one tiny task that keeps the habit alive.

When you are not sure what to practise

- The hardest two bars of your current piece.
- A chord change that feels slow or messy.
- A rhythm you cannot count confidently.
- A scale, arpeggio or technique exercise from your lesson.
- Playing with a metronome or backing track.
- Recording yourself and writing down one thing to improve.

Final reminder: start well, work carefully, finish with music you enjoy, and come back tomorrow.

Free for personal practice and use with Rodaidh Mackay's students. Please link to rodaidhmackay.com rather than re-uploading this file.