

TAKE A BREAK

By Douglas Niedt

Copyright Douglas Niedt. All Rights Reserved.

This article may be reprinted, but please be considerate and give credit to Douglas Niedt.

How to Practice the Classical Guitar Efficiently

Practicing efficiently is an essential skill one must learn to master the classical guitar. Countless problems are caused not by a lack of physical ability, but rather by poor practice strategies.

To learn how to practice, one practice concept that will reap tremendous benefits is a simple one: TAKE A BREAK. Taking a break is beneficial both mentally and physically. Three types of breaks are very effective:

1. Avoid mindless repetition. Practice a passage a few times, then take a break of at least five minutes. Practice the passage again, take a break of at least five minutes. Continue the cycle several times.
2. Engage in "Random Practice".
3. Stop playing, get out of your chair, and do something else for at least five minutes.

The goals of all three types of breaks are to *maximize habit strength* and *prevent muscle fatigue and injury*.

Maximize Habit Strength

If you do not remember what habit strength is, for a full discussion reread: [*The Keys to Consistent Classical Guitar Playing, Part 2 of 2*](#). But briefly, the development of habit strength is what makes it possible for you to play a passage flawlessly on the first attempt. If you practice a passage 30 times, you will probably get it right a few times by the time you reach repetition #30. Unfortunately, the way you play the passage on the 30th repetition is only the *momentary strength* of the habit. It is not a true reflection of your *real mastery* of the passage. Momentary mastery is stored in your short-term memory which means that when you play the passage it sounds good right now, especially after a few or several repetitions. But it doesn't stick well overnight. Instead, you must develop your habit strength which is stored in your long-term memory and "sticks" over time. Habit strength will give you the ability to play the passage flawlessly on the *first* attempt.

Prevent Muscle Fatigue and Injury

Taking a break is one of the best ways to prevent muscle fatigue and injury. Over-practice of a passage that is taxing to the hands can lead to injury. At the very least it will produce muscle fatigue. Muscle fatigue results in a general loss of control and increases the likelihood of making mistakes. When a player over-practices a passage, those mistakes are practiced over and over. The hands learn the mistakes which become embedded in the subconscious neuro-muscular memory. After that happens, the mistakes are difficult to expunge.

Taking a break is a very powerful tool but requires a very strong dose of the "D" word: DISCIPLINE. You must remind yourself to limit the repetitions of a passage and take a break. You can almost get into a

trance practicing a passage over and over and over. You keep telling yourself, "Just a few more repetitions. It's getting better. I almost have it. Just a few more..." But unfortunately, "just a few more repetitions" ends up being 10-20 minutes of very inefficient practice.

Learn How to Practice: TAKE A BREAK to avoid mindless repetition

This refers to the concept of "Deliberate Practice" that I covered in Part 1 of [*The Keys to Consistent Classical Guitar Playing*](#). Deliberate Practice requires extreme focus. When we practice too many repetitions of a difficult passage, we lose focus and the effectiveness of our practice drops off sharply. As mentioned above, our hands actually begin to learn the mistakes.

Most passages should be practiced no more than 5-10 times. That does not mean to only practice a passage 5-10 times a day. After a break of 5-30 minutes, go back and practice the passage again another 5-10 times. Then, take another break of 5-30 minutes, come back, and hit the passage again 5-10 times. Depending on the amount of your total practice time, you will practice the passage 20-50+ times! Just not all at once.

It is very tempting to "power through" a passage—to keep doing it until you get it. Occasionally that will work (usually not) but it is very inefficient.

*You will learn a difficult passage much more quickly and it will "stick" better the next day if you only do a few repetitions, **take a break and play something else**, do a few more repetitions, **take a break and play something else**, etc.*

The brain and hands seem to process and work out the difficulties during the break periods. Each time you return to the passage you will play it better. Often, you will suddenly understand or observe something you did not notice before. That new understanding will improve the passage in the next set of repetitions. You are also less likely to embed mistakes into your playing.

Taking breaks should be used in combination with other forms of Deliberate Practice such as:

1. Divide a passage or measure into small chunks that can be easily mastered individually. Then combine the small chunks into larger chunks until you can play the entire passage.
2. Speed burst practice and metronome practice of both the small chunks and larger chunks.
3. Constant analysis of what needs to be done to play the chunk or passage flawlessly.

BAR CHORDS

Limiting the number of repetitions works especially well with passages requiring the use of bars. Practicing a bar passage will fatigue the hand in under 60 seconds. From then on, your playing will get worse and worse. "Powering through" will not only make your playing worse but may also cause hand injury. Take a break! Play something else that does not require a bar. Or get out of your chair for five minutes. Then return to the bar passage. You will do much better.

Learn how to practice: TAKE A BREAK by engaging in "Random Practice"

Random Practice is another form of taking a break. It is also a key to developing habit strength, the ability to play a passage flawlessly on the first try. Once again, the idea is to limit the number of

repetitions of a given passage. But Random Practice takes it a step further. I quote here from my [Technique Tip](#):

If we are working on two pieces and have one hour to practice, most of us naturally will spend 30 minutes on Piece #1 and 30 minutes on Piece #2. The problem with that is we will tend to do a fair amount of repetitious practice which only reinforces momentary mastery. Instead:

1. Practice Piece #1 from point A (not necessarily the beginning) for no more than 5 minutes. Note: there is nothing magical about 5 minutes. It can be one minute, three minutes, whatever. But usually, no longer than 5 minutes.
2. Jump to Piece #2 and practice it from Point A for no more than 5 minutes.
3. Back to Piece #1 but begin practicing at point B.
4. Jump to Piece #2 but begin practicing at point B.
5. Back to Piece #1 but begin practicing at point C.
6. Jump to Piece #2 but start at point C.
7. Back to Piece #1 and take another shot at point A.
8. Jump to Piece #2 and go back to point A.

Keep randomizing which piece you practice and where you start.

9. Back to Piece #1 from point C.
10. Stay with Piece #1 from point A.
11. Piece #2 from point B.

Keep randomizing. Don't fall into any pattern.

If you have more practice time available, you could work on more pieces at once. Or, if you are working on 26 difficult passages from several pieces, you can randomize the practice of those 26 passages. Depending on the length of each of the passages, you may want to limit the practice of each to no more than 1-3 minutes, jumping randomly from one to another.

If you are working on passages, gradually reduce the practice time you are spending on each passage until you are randomly playing each passage once. You are now experiencing your real habit strength—how you play something on the first attempt. You should see a definite improvement.

If some passages are still not going well, continue your Random Practice, but go back to spending more time on each passage. Instead of 1 minute, do 3 minutes. If a passage is

still giving you trouble, you may need to step back to Deliberate Practice to fix weak spots. Then, return to Random Practice.

As you see improvement in short passages or small sections, expand your Random Practice to focus on larger sections and entire pieces.

For some passages or for entire pieces, you may find a combination of Deliberate Practice and Random Practice works best. Both practice strategies may be combined in one practice session or randomly alternated from day to day. Experiment.

Random Practice gives the mind and hands a break from overly repetitious practice. Limiting the practice time of any single element prevents us from falling into a repetition loop. It also keeps us fresh, engaged, and alert. In Random Practice, our fingers and mind are undergoing constant change of movements and thoughts. The elimination of rote repetition wakes up the parts of the brain responsible for the *retrieval of information* previously encoded by Deliberate Practice. As you jump from passage to passage, the hands and brain process what they learned so they are able to recover that information more efficiently when you return to the passage, whether it is later that day, the next day, or next week.

The intentional practice of retrieval through Random Practice is what increases our habit strength. Retrieval of the habits strengthens our *long-term* muscle memory of those habits, resulting in real mastery that sticks day after day.

Learn How to Practice: TAKE A BREAK and get out of your chair

Getting out of your chair helps prevent mindless repetition, clears the mind, and provides the physical benefit of resting the hands as well as the entire body. Take at least five minutes and walk around, stretch, or even lie down. Do anything but sit.

Set a kitchen timer for 20 minutes to remind yourself to stop and get out of the chair. I'm a tech geek and have an Interval Timer app on my phone. (I use *Interval Timer* by dreamspark for Android). This type of app is usually used for high-intensity interval training (HIIT) but works well for music practice too. I can set it for "x" minutes of practice time and "y" minutes of break time. It can be programmed for a certain number of "sets" (for us that would be total practice time) and it just keeps going without you having to reset it after each practice period or break period.

I assure you that your practice will be more productive and your hands and body more comfortable and relaxed if you take at least a five-minute break every 20-30 minutes. *You will play better after the break.*

Conclusion:

Do not discount the power of this very simple practice strategy. TAKE A BREAK. You will experience the positive results within days. Your body will thank you for it, your hands will thank you for it, and your brain will thank you for it. You will feel better and you will play better.

Doug's Secret Advantage

This is Renly. He is our son's dog. My wife and I "dog-sit" every weekend when his master must work long shifts.



When I practice, every 20-30 minutes, Renly nudges my arm to tell me it is time to take a break and go outside with him to chase squirrels, rabbits, and chipmunks. He can't be ignored, turned off, or reset like a timer. Not only do I get a mental break but running around with him is good exercise too. Highly recommended.