

Effective Strategies for Rewarding Practice: Set Goals for EVERY Practice Session

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I just love to practice the guitar. Of course I love *playing* the guitar too. And there actually is a difference between the two.

"Playing the guitar" means sitting down and playing songs, playing pieces. Maybe stopping now and then to clean up something, but mostly just enjoying the sound of the instrument and the music, the feel of it, and enjoying how it makes you feel.

"Practicing the guitar" involves a lot of that but also involves more intellectual and conscious thought, lots of stopping and starting, and playing a passage or chunk of music over and over again to get it right. Or, practicing might mean playing at a slower tempo than it will eventually be played.

As I said, I have always found practicing enjoyable. But I discovered that even though I was accomplishing a lot, I wasn't using my time to the best advantage. I was having a wonderful time playing and practicing for endless hours, but found my practice sessions sometimes meandered. Because I had a lot of time available to me, my practice sessions didn't always have sharp daily focus or direction.

For your practice session to be rewarding, whether it's 30 minutes or 10 hours, it must be sharply focused so that every minute is used wisely to improve your playing. How do you do that? **ESTABLISH VERY SPECIFIC GOALS FOR EVERY PRACTICE SESSION.**

EVERY DAY, before you pick up your guitar to practice, say out loud or write down specific goals you want to accomplish **that day** for each piece and exercise you are working on. Just sitting down and saying, "I'm going to work on this song to get it better" is not going to get you very far.

You must choose specific items to accomplish in that single practice session which will not carry on to the next day. In other words, saying, "That passage was okay today but I will continue on it tomorrow" will not work. No, No, No! Choose one aspect of the passage that you will absolutely positively **master that day**. Tomorrow you will choose another aspect of the same passage which you will master on *that* day.

For example, a passage may consist of several difficult chord changes. Don't choose as your goal, "I'm going to master the entire passage" in one practice session. Instead, you say, "Today I will master the first chord change." Or the first *two* chord changes—

whatever you can reasonably master in one practice session. Or, if one chord change is so difficult that it can't be mastered in one practice session, you might make it your goal on the first day to accurately place and lift chord X over and over again. On the second day make it your goal to accurately place and lift chord Y over and over again. Then, on the third day, master actually making the change from chord X to chord Y but not necessarily in rhythm, or perhaps with just the left hand alone. On the fourth day, try it in rhythm but at a very slow tempo. On the fifth day, try a faster tempo. You take it step by step by step. But as you see, even though the steps may be small, you are constantly moving forward every day with a clear goal in sight.

Or, if you are trying to master a fast scale passage, instead of making it your goal to learn the entire scale passage in one day, make it your goal to master the first 4 notes, or the first 8, the first 12—again, whatever you can actually master in one day.

Or for another example, don't say, "I will work on memorizing *Adelita*." Instead, you say, "Today I will memorize the first phrase of *Adelita*." Or you might choose just the first measure. Again, choose a goal you can definitely achieve in one practice session.

There are literally hundreds or thousands of things you must do, correct, and improve to master a piece of music. But you can't do it all in one day. Choose only a few goals that you can actually accomplish in your allotted practice time. If you have only thirty minutes, one or two goals might be enough. If you have two hours, you can choose more. But be specific and realistic.

Don't just play passages over and over. Decide on a particular thing you want to do **that day** and do it. Don't meander. Don't practice things you can already do. Focus on achieving *specific improvements* in the song for **that day**.

It's kind of exciting to think, "Today, I am going to do X and improve my guitar playing." It's something you can see and hear. You never want to end a practice session thinking, "Well, I'm really not any better than I was when I sat down." What a waste of time! Even accomplishing *one* specific goal **that day** makes the whole session (whether 30 minutes or 2 hours) worth it! If you write the goals down, focus on them, and achieve them, you can take pride in saying, "I am definitely playing that song better today." Then you will think enthusiastically that tomorrow you are going to accomplish Y or Z. If you keep achieving enough X's, Y's, and Z's, before long you will be playing the piece really well! And you will have done it by consciously choosing clear **DAILY GOALS**.

But what if you set goals and find you are not accomplishing them? First, be sure you are working with a teacher who can help you set specific weekly or monthly goals that are within your reach. *Make sure your teacher explains specifically how to practice to accomplish those goals.* (If they say "Well you gotta just do it over and over," find another teacher.) *Make sure you listen to what your teacher says, that you understand it, and that you write it down!* If you don't have a teacher, it will be more difficult. If you are having difficulty achieving your daily goals, try smaller steps towards each goal. Try memorizing fewer measures or phrases at a time. Try working on perfecting one or two difficult chord changes instead of seven. Try to increase your metronome speed just 5 beats or 2 beats per minute instead of 20.

By setting specific accomplishable goals every day, your practicing will cease to be a seemingly endless journey towards "I'm kind of getting better." Your very specific daily goals will give your practice focus. Those goals will tell you what you need to work on and how to do it. They will relieve frustration, disorganization, and disappointment. When you practice, you will see an end result every day. You will experience success and a feeling of moving forward every day, taking you closer and closer towards mastery of your piece or exercise.

Don't make your journey towards mastery a trip on a seemingly endless series of winding roads, detours, dead ends, and potholes. Instead, **every day**, choose a clear, direct route on solid pavement with a clearly marked destination in sight.