

Five Deep Breaths and a Pencil Behind the Ear

Practice Strategies from the Students of Chris Foley



Introduction

Motivating students to practice is one of the core missions of my teaching process. If you can develop a smart practice routine, it can lay the foundation for years of musical enjoyment. I've already written a book about practice ([31 Days to Better Practicing](#)), but this time around I wanted to do something different:

Why not have my students write the practice tips?

For a week I asked my students to come up with three practice strategies that helped them to improve, and three practice strategies that caused them to get worse. Many of my students mentioned similar things that I regularly mention in lessons (practice slowly with metronome, gradually increase the speed, start at difficult spots), but there were also many new ideas, and new ways of saying things that were refreshingly new.

I would also like to thank Wendy Hatala Foley and Lisa Harhay for their help with the editing process. Above all, I would like to thank all of my students for taking the time to think through this process, looking at their experiences, and coming up with some useful strategies to use and avoid. This is exactly the kind of strategic thought that you will need as you embark on the challenges of life.

- Dr. Chris Foley

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78 Successful Ways to Practice

What follows are methods that will help you to utilize your practice time more effectively. Find a few of these that work for you and stick with them (especially #1!). Or if you encounter a problem with a piece you're playing, read through the list and throw several of these strategies at it. Then enjoy the feeling as you surmount the problem and move on to the next challenge.

1. Practice every day.
2. Find the right time of day to practice.
3. Practice for a short time several times a day.
4. Manage your practice time well.
5. Set a specific time for practicing.
6. Practice immediately after lessons.
7. If possible, have a dedicated time for practicing each day. Build it into your daily routine.
8. Try to get in even 5 minutes of practice time when you're really busy.
9. When you're too stressed to learn something new, practice something easy that you already know in order to keep your skills up.
10. Write and follow a practice schedule.
11. Keep your music organized in your practice space.
12. Put your music in a place that is noticeable as a cue for you to start practicing.
13. Set reminders for you to start practicing.
14. Write down a plan of how you're going to utilize the practice time you have.
15. Take five deep breaths to calm down and focus before playing.
16. Put a pencil behind the ear.
17. Warm up before playing repertoire. It can be scales, Hanon, Czerny, or even sight reading.

18. Start at the difficult spots.
19. Start anywhere in the piece (not just from the beginning).
20. Play the songs you don't know first.
21. Have a calm attitude when you practice.
22. Set short-term milestones and they can be small ones. For example, learn one line of music in one day, learn one page of music by the end of the week.
23. Set long-term milestones (e.g. exams or recitals) and build buffer time to have practice performances before the actual performance.
24. Practice by yourself.
25. Get your mom or dad to help you.
26. Have a music buddy who you can share ideas with and play for each other.
27. Practice with your cell phone away from the piano.
28. Make a plan. What are you going to do in the next hour?
29. Practice slowly with metronome.
30. Look at the fingerings on the page.
31. Write in fingerings and commit to them.
32. When learning a new piece, read through the music while listening to recordings/ YouTube videos to understand the overall structure/flow of the music, as well as different musical interpretations; identify difficult spots and figure out a game plan for the piece. Also listen to recordings without the music.
33. Work on spots that are difficult.
34. Start at different parts of the bar when you're struggling with a particular passage.
35. Find out exactly what the bad habit is that is causing you trouble.
36. Don't just drill the hard passages; play something easy to reward yourself.
37. Play slowly and gradually get faster.

38. Focus on particular sections and piece them together.
39. Find and fix exactly where the mistake is.
40. Fix coordination by playing dead slow.
41. Play at the proper tempo.
42. Repeat things.
43. Practice hands separately when you need to.
44. Practice bars separately when you need to.
45. Practice technique every day.
46. Write down things that help you such as notes, accidentals, or fingerings.
47. Keep your eyes on the music, not on the keys.
48. Go back and fix things before you move on.
49. Listen.
50. Practice slowly until perfect. Then use a metronome to slowly speed up to the regular tempo.
51. Practice technical skills and songs a few times in a row until you can play without mistakes or better than before.
52. Practice stable hand position with a coin - the bigger the coin, the harder it is.
53. Keep a tally of difficult spots that you're repeating.
54. Practice landmark notes on important beats.
55. Figure out EXACTLY what the problem is.
56. Practice without the pedal for a time, then add it back later.
57. Play with lots of tone so you can hear all the notes. Then adjust dynamics.
58. Mark things in pencil on the music when you notice them.
59. Start from the last bar of a difficult section and slowly add the bars before it.

60. Practice transitions between sections.
61. Mark in things with a pencil.
62. Repair the trouble spots.
63. Look at your notes while practicing.
64. Write in details so that you remember it in the future.
65. Play slowly and observe the notes and fingerings.
66. When you see something wrong, write it down.
67. Crescendo to the end of a phrase as practice.
68. Play legato passages as staccato to make sure that you have all the notes.
69. Practice slowly 90% of the time, then up to tempo 10% of the time.
70. Practice fast passages in rhythms.
71. For memorization, divide the piece into sections, then play them in different sequences.
72. Record your playing and do some critical listening - e.g. where you can improve technically, trying different musical ideas, etc.
73. Practice sight reading.
74. Plan for your lesson.
75. Do a quick harmonic analysis. (In other words, figure out the chords.)
76. Do some quick research about the background for the composer or work.
77. Go to a live concert and be inspired.
78. Find the passion that informs what you do at the piano.

51 Unsuccessful Ways to Practice

These are strategies that you don't want to follow through with. It's worth reading from time to time, if only to make sure that you don't fall into the trap of doing them.

1. Don't practice.
2. Only practice once a week.
3. Procrastinate about playing the piano all evening.
4. Pretend to be sick so you don't have to practice.
5. Only practice one piece from your weekly repertoire assignment.
6. Only play the songs you like.
7. Doing one long practice every week instead of short practices every single day.
8. Sight read your repertoire at your lesson.
9. Only practice the night before your lesson.
10. Practice for a maximum of 5 minutes each day.
11. Never listen to corrections.
12. Never ask for help.
13. Get my brother to help me.
14. Play when you're really tired.
15. Don't warm up before you play.
16. Never practice technique.
17. Only practice one part of a piece.
18. Skipping the hard parts of the piece.
19. Run through all the pieces without stopping to fix mistakes.

20. Solve a Rubik's cube when practicing piano.
21. Ignore the left hand.
22. Keep changing fingerings each time you practice.
23. Fingerings don't matter.
24. Only play at full tempo.
25. Play as fast as you can.
26. Always start at the beginning.
27. Only play through once.
28. Watch TV in the background.
29. Don't use metronome.
30. Set the tempo too fast when learning a new piece.
31. Check messages/email on the phone in between changing tempo on your metronome app.
32. Practice only the easy parts.
33. Working too hard on the rhythm and ignoring the dynamics.
34. Leave learning dynamics last (or forget about it altogether).
35. Pedal at the wrong time or too loudly.
36. Do my theory homework during my brother's lesson.
37. Play a piece from beginning to end only.
38. Don't focus on anything in particular.
39. Being over-confident and not working hard enough.
40. Being under-confident and not working hard enough.
41. Spacing out.

- 42. Ignore the mistakes.
- 43. Make excuses.
- 44. When you hear something wrong, go to the beginning and play again.
- 45. Ignore your teacher's suggestions.
- 46. Playing the same thing over, and over, and over again without breaking down what the problem is.
- 47. I'm sorry, but I didn't have time to learn the left hand.
- 48. Play non-stop and don't think about what you just played.
- 49. Playing a section totally fast and messing up every time.
- 50. Giving up easily whenever there is a difficulty.
- 51. Forget to eat beforehand and make a huge meal right in the middle of your practice session.

Bonus tip: The bottom line is practice. Because if you don't practice, it shows.

About Chris Foley

Thank you for reading this short ebook with so many insightful ideas from my students. Based in Toronto, Canada, I'm a pianist, teacher, vocal coach, and blogger. I teach piano in Oakville at my home studio and in Toronto at The Royal Conservatory. As a Senior Examiner for The Royal Conservatory, I have the honour of traveling across Canada and the US to hear many talented musicians of all levels. After many years of study, I received a Doctor of Musical Arts Degree in Piano Accompanying and Chamber Music from the Eastman School of Music in 1994.



Over the last few years, I've adjudicated numerous festivals, including the BCRMTA Competition, the ORMTA Provincial Competition, the Vancouver Academy of Music's Senior Secondary Competition, the Davenport Festival, the Windsor Kiwanis Festival, the Royal Conservatory Festival, the Davenport Festival, and the Rotary Music Festival in Whitehorse, Yukon.

If you would like to study with me, [you can register here](#) and I would be glad to get back to you. Also be sure to check out [the Collaborative Piano Blog](#), one of my long-running projects, as well as [my teaching site](#).