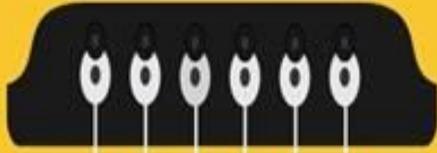


10 Mistakes Beginning Musicians Make



How To Set Yourself Up for Success

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Are you wondering why you don't seem to be making any progress with your guitar playing? You are taking guitar lessons, you practice a lot and you've been trying to improve but it just doesn't seem to happen. Are you tired of seeing your friends making faster progress on the guitar than you are, even though they don't seem to have any more 'natural talent' or practice time than you do? Are you becoming very frustrated because you are spending so much time, energy and money into playing the guitar, but not seeming to make any progress?

Chances are you are probably standing in your own way because of the mistakes you are making in your practice. If you've been playing for a while, and I'm sure you have been, you have more than enough licks, techniques, exercises, scales, and songs to practice. But, because of the mistakes you are making your guitar practice is ineffective, inefficient, and unorganized. Slow progress is often blamed on a number of factors, but the mistakes they are making in their practice are the cause. It's not your potential, how much you practice, or even how disciplined you are in your practice. The mistakes listed below can make the difference between years of struggling to achieve your goal and being able to play the guitar the way you've always dreamed about.

1. **No Goals. Don't know where you are going.**

Too many times we "just want to do something," whether it's learning to play an instrument, a sport, or something else, but we don't look at why we want to do it. If the person is under aged they may be taking music lessons because a parent says, "everybody in our family takes piano lessons," or a best friend is learning to play the guitar and you want to learn also, maybe start a band.

That's understandable if the student is young, but sooner or later the student has to decide if that's what they want to do for themselves.

In my case, I was 4 years of age when my mother started me on piano lessons because I was starting to pick out songs on the piano by ear. The teacher had to teach me the alphabet as she taught the piano lessons. I took classical piano lessons until I was 16 years of age and played off and on until well into adulthood.

I remember thinking, do I really want to play. If so, I have to dedicate the time and energy to learning the music and perfecting my skill. My skill at that point was probably a C-. I could do okay if I had to, but I knew that if I wanted to be a

serious musician I had to practice with intent. My husband, Larry, was a serious musician and I knew I couldn't play around with it anymore.

After giving it some serious thought, I concluded that I didn't want to play, I would rather write. So, now, I write about music and what it takes to be really good.

The question is "where do you want to go as a musician?" Grab a piece of paper, preferably a notebook so you can journal your progress, and answer the following questions then answer them.

Assignment:

- *My Ultimate long term goal as a musician:*
 - *If you want to be a professional musician, what are the requirements:*
- *In order to reach my long term goal I need to:*
 - *What I need to learn, be specific:*
 - *What I need to change, be specific:*
- *In 3 months I want to be able to:*
- *In 6 months I want to be able to:*
- *In 9 months I want to be able to:*
- *In 12 months I want to be able to:*

2. No inventory of skills.

How can you move forward, if you don't know where you are currently? The next step is to take an inventory of what you know, so you can determine the skills needed to get you to your long-term goal. Leave room to add to the inventory lists as you progress toward your long-term goal.

Assignment, Grab your notebook for a skills inventory:

- *What I know:*
- *What I am working on:*
- *What I need to know:*

3. Have the idea that practice, practice, practice will make you a perfect musician, will get you to Carnegie Hall, or make you the next big rock star. WRONG!!

In the last post I wrote, [“Practice Makes Progress; Not Perfect.”](#) I stated, it’s not about sitting down with the guitar in your lap or sitting at the piano/keyboard or even sitting at the computer keyboard.

We often assume that if we “practice” enough we will become perfect. With the right kind of practice, we won’t necessarily become perfect, but with smarter practice, our practice makes progress towards our goal.

We need to learn how to “Practice Smarter.”

4. **Log practice hours, but practice is unfocused and unproductive.** Your log looks like you’ve practiced an hour every day, but instead of practicing your lesson or drills that will improve your playing you’re playing with a CD or horsing around with a friend. Or perhaps, you played for a few minutes then you kicked back in an easy chair listening to your favorite CD.

Sorry, you aren’t going to reach your ultimate goal by osmosis (a process of absorption without doing anything).

5. **No Set Practice Time.**

If you don’t have a set practice time you might practice or you might not. You can tell yourself or your teacher that you are going to practice for 30 minutes every day, but without a set practice time it’s hit-or-miss, it may or may not happen. Set aside a practice time. If possible, make it the same time every day. For example, after school or work and dinner, instead of watching TV schedule a half-hour practice time (7:30-8:00 pm) daily or if you’re a morning person, perhaps, before breakfast or just after breakfast.

You may need to discuss this with the other members of the household, especially if your instrument is a drum or tuba or something really loud. I also played the trumpet in junior high. I was shut in the backroom to practice so my practice didn’t grate on everyone’s nerves.

Assignment:

- Choose a time that will work for you, at least 30 minutes. It could be a different time on different days depending on your schedule.
- Set an alarm on your phone for 15 minutes before practice time and an alarm for practice time. When you start practicing, set a timer so you know you practice for the full amount of time.

- If you set 2 alarms you will have everything you need out so you're not wasting your practice time with setup.

6. **Allow Distractions.**

How many times do you go into practice with the TV or the radio on? Or perhaps you have a pet that comes in and wants to play while you're practicing. Under these or similar situations you might as well not practice.

Assignment:

- Practice in an area that is away from other activities and distractions.
- Turn off the radio, TV, cell phone (except for your timer).
- You cannot multitask your way to your ultimate goal.

7. **No Practice Schedule or Time Per Step.**

Dividing your practice time into too many sections can be confusing and unproductive. If it is confusing, I dare say, you won't stick to the schedule. You'll end up, once again, with unproductive practice.

Assignment:

- Design your practice time into steps, as I describe in [my last article](#).
- Allocated 20% of the practice time to Steps #1 & #3 each. Step #2 should be 60% of the practice time. So, for a 30 minutes practice time:
 - Step #1 Warmups and Drills – 6 minutes
 - Step #2 Learning New Times – 18 minutes
 - Step #3 Playing and Being Creative – 6 minutes

Step #1: Warmups and Drills:

Warmup practice consists of exercises, scales, and simple chord progressions. Things you already know nothing new. Concentrate on plaything with good technique, properly and cleanly. Practices exercises and drills that work on muscle memory, such as:

- Finger toughening (at first)
- Hand and forearm strength.
- Left hand, finger speed, precision, and flexibility (for swift, precise playing of scales, arpeggios, and sweeps).
- Right hand, finger speed, precision (for swift, precise picking).

Step #2: Learning New Things

In this step, you will focus on learning new things, such as new songs, new scales, some theories, new techniques. In this step, your attention should be on new material, things you don't know, things you can't play or you're just learning.

Step #3: Playing and Being Creative

Okay, now you get to have some fun, play with jam tracks from your favorite group, artist, or instructor. This is where you learn to improvise and be creative. Try your hand at learning to write songs if you're so inclined. This is the FUN ZONE.

Important Note:

Always start your practice with Step 1 and Step 2. It's very easy to skip the first two steps and start with Step 3 and never leave. Don't do it. Disciple yourself to follow the schedule, otherwise, you are having fun, but you aren't advancing your skill and technique levels.

8. Rush through the exercise at top speed.

Many beginning guitarists think they are going to be the next star to hit the big time. They have a guitar, an amp, and an attitude that says, "Look at me." They see themselves with their guitar slung over one shoulder and a backpack over the other walking into Nashville, Los Angeles, or some other city announcing their arrival. The dream of being an instant star obscures the fact that they have to learn the skill, the fact that it requires work and dedication.

Instead of shifting into high gear to get through training as quickly as possible, slow down. To be that great guitarist, you must learn the basic fundamentals which will equip you with the techniques to reach that dream goal.

Assignment:

- Move from one lesson to the next, only when you have mastered the fundamentals and techniques of the first one.
- Plot your progress in your practice schedule.

9. Focus on what you can do instead of what you can't do.

We as humans like to impress people, including ourselves. When we've worked really hard on a project or a skill we like to show it off. It's okay to show off once in a while. We all need the pats on the back. We all need to feel that we've

accomplished something. Pat yourself on the back. Then move on. Learn something new.

Practice time should be about acquiring new skills, learning new things. It's a time of making "mistakes." We learn from our mistakes. If you do everything perfectly in practice you aren't learning anything. In essence, you're wasting your practice time.

Step #2 is where you put new things, things you don't know yet. Allow yourself the opportunity to make mistakes, that's how you learn. See those mistakes as an opportunity to improve and advance in your skill.

10. Don't know when to call it a day.

Sometimes we think that if we practice this exercise just one more time, just one more time. Unfortunately, it's very easy to practice one chord progression or one strumming pattern for hours without making any progress. You would think, that the more you practice it will begin to sound better, but instead, it sounds worse. It doesn't matter if it's learning to play a musical instrument, sport, writing, or working on a design project, it doesn't matter. At some point, your brain has had enough. It's time to quit and give your brain and body a rest. Walk away. Usually, after walking away, you go back to it the next day and you can play it flawlessly. Sometimes your brain and your body just need some downtime.