

How to Practice, Part 2
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Introduction: In Part 1 of the “How to Practice” series, we learned about the importance of practice, how much we should do, and how set goals and create systems, to help move our skills forward. Now, let’s look more closely at how to facilitate improvement within a single practice session.

Step 1: Identify a “Hot Spot”

- For this activity, you’ll need to find a phrase in your music – any piece is fine – that you don’t currently play up to the standards that you would like, and which you are interested in improving. In my practice, I call these “hot spots” – those parts of the music that I don’t play so well, and which are uniquely challenging.
- For our purposes, narrow this down to something fairly short – maybe 10-15 seconds of music, at most.

Step 2: Take a photo of your “Hot Spot,” to share

- Take a quick snapshot of the spot in your music that you will be working on
- This will be a part of your discussion board post

Step 3: Record a starting point

- Don’t practice your hot spot, don’t do anything to make it better, just **record it**
- This will be your base line, and will help us to see how you progress
- Don’t be self-conscious – this is supposed to be “bad”
- Plus, if you’re willing to share a video of yourself not sounding your best, it will be much easier to share something where you feel confident!
- This will also be a part of your discussion board post

Step 4: Apply deliberate practice techniques

- Last week, we read an excellent article by Noa Kageyama (Bulletproof Musician) titled, “How Many Hours a Day Should you Practice?” In it, we learned the difference between mindless and deliberate practice. The goal of this activity is to apply deliberate practice techniques to your chosen hot spot.
- Apply the process below, and practice your Hot Spot for a **minimum of 15 minutes**

Step 5: Record yourself again

- After trying these techniques, re-record your Hot Spot, and assess what worked!
- Did you improve in any specific area?
- What did you learn about practicing?
- Which technique worked best for you?
- Which technique would you like to use or try next time?
- Were you surprised by anything in this experience?

Step 6: Upload your photo and two videos to the discussion on Canvas/ Comment on at least two posts by other students.

Deliberate practice techniques

- **ASSESS:** Specifically, what needs to be improved here?
 - ✓ Can you accurately perform the phrase at a **slower tempo**?
 - What is the fastest tempo, at which you can accurately perform the phrase?
 - What is your target tempo?
 - ✓ Can you accurately **sing** the phrase, including all pitches, rhythms, articulations, and phrasing?
 - ✓ Can you accurately **clap** or tap all **rhythms**?
 - At a slower tempo?
 - At the target tempo?
 - ✓ Have you **listened** to a professional performance of this piece in general, and this phrase in particular? If not, do so now! What did you learn, and what can you imitate from this performance?
 - ✓ You can move on from this step, **once you have a solid idea about what you want the phrase to sound like.**
- **IMPROVE:** Apply one or more of the following techniques, to help improve the phrase
 - ✓ **TECHNIQUE 1: Play at a slow tempo**
 - *This technique is tried and true, and probably the most commonly suggested for improving performance; however, there are some drawbacks. First, it's a little boring. Second, it may or may not require a different technique to perform slowly, vs. at the target tempo, and lastly it may prevent us from being able to practice and develop phrasing, as we are learning the music.*
 - *That being said, this method is GOOD, and you can use it, if you like it!*
 - ✓ **TECHNIQUE 2: Chunks**
 - *This is a technique I really like, and use frequently both for myself, and my students.*
 - *Choose a "chunk" of only 2-4 pitches, to start with. For the sake of progress, it's probably best to start with the part you play the worst!*
 - *Play the chunk, at your target tempo, if possible. Assess: Is it accurate? Is it up to the target tempo?*
 1. *If yes, add another pitch to the chunk, either before or after your original chunk. Here's an example:*

Start with a "chunk," and play as close to the target tempo as possible. As you gain confidence and your performance becomes more accurate, add pitches before, or after, to expand the chunk.



2. *Chunking has the benefit of allowing you to perform close to or at the target tempo, meaning you can practice the same articulations and techniques you'll need when you play the full phrase.*
3. *As you improve, and add more pitches, be aware of your tempo. Can you still play up to the target? If not, **slow it down**, but only as much as needed, in order to continue playing accurately.*

- ✓ **TECHNIQUE 3: CHANGE THE CHALLENGE**

- This technique involves temporarily altering the phrase in some way, in order to make it easier to perform accurately.
- In the example below, we might bring the circled pitches down an octave. This would allow the player to really hear each pitch, while fostering an easier, more relaxed approach. Once that is mastered, we can pop the pitches back to their



written octave, while striving to achieve the same level of ease and comfort. It's also great to practice back and forth - down the octave, and written pitch, and down the octave again.

- Another helpful practice technique would be to change the articulation. This is a great option for wind players! Instead of playing the phrase above articulated, as marked, change it to legato, in order to practice good, smooth connection, note to note. Once that's mastered, you can go back to the written style.
- If your Hot Spot has syncopated rhythms, it also might help to play the subdivisions, or "bop" (playing only the onset/articulation, with no sustain) the phrase.
- If none of these alterations fit the piece you are trying to learn, brainstorm some other ideas you might try.

Remember Dr. Kageyama's advise: <https://bulletproofmusician.com/how-many-hours-a-day-should-you-practice/>

Problem-solving model

Consider this 6-step general problem-solving model summarized below (adapted from various [problem solving processes](#) online).

1. Define the problem (what do I want this note/phrase to sound like?)
2. Analyze the problem (what is causing it to sound like this?)
3. Identify potential solutions (what can I tweak to make it sound more like I want?)
4. Test the potential solutions to select the most effective one (what tweaks seem to work best?)
5. Implement the best solution (make these changes permanent)
6. Monitor implementation (do these changes continue to produce the results I'm looking for?)