

PRACTICE LIKE A CHAMPION

THE FIDDLE SCHOOL PRACTICE METHOD

- 1. Foundation Time** – This is your warm-up and skill building time. This is where you go from *mind to body*.
- 2. Noticing Time** – This is when you notice, make observations, then fix and find solutions. This is where you go from *curiosity to problem solving*.
- 3. Action Time** – This is when you put everything together and perform. Be yourself, make it sound musical. Your mental space is: *Lights, Camera, Action!* Oh, and one more important thing: *Enjoy!*
- 4. Learning Time (Bonus Section)** – This section is for learning new things, from songs and techniques to theory and chords. Your mental space is: *Engage new material*. And... have *Fun* too!

PART I: FOUNDATION TIME

Lay out your music practice session into three evenly-timed parts (we'll get into a fourth "Bonus" part, *Learning Time*, later). For each section, you'll use a specific frame of mind to shape the way you practice.

In the first part of *Foundation Time*, the goal is to get mentally alert – so you'll want to warm up with the best possible habits. In the second part, you'll refine your technique and work on skill building. During this time, you'll get good at using your mind to send specific directions to your body.

The *Foundation Time* opens every practice session. Begin with fundamental exercises and scales to get mind and body warmed up. Then move on to skill building such as working on challenging phrases within tunes. These are what I call "check points."

The most important principle of the *Foundation Time* is to create a chain of actions: your mind may know complex concepts such as finger or wrist position, but now the task is to send clear directions to your body so that these movements can be performed smoothly, naturally and consistently. This gives you the ability to translate knowledge into action with a minimum of tension or self-consciousness. And once you integrate this into your work, the stress goes away! In fact, it doesn't feel like work anymore. It's just what happens when you sit down to play. Your mind and body are connected.

The best way to strengthen this connection is to begin your practice with a defined start and an intentional warm-up that progresses from simple to

something more complex. This is why I always have my students begin their practice time with the one note jam of some kind (and while this might sound simple, it's super valuable when done with focus – which is why I'll demonstrate it for you). But the basic idea is that by warming up the right arm and not worrying about fingerings etc, we can really focus in and refine the mechanics of the right arm, tuning into everything that goes with our right arm actions along the way. It's deceptively difficult to focus on any specific aspect of your playing, such as the right arm. In fact, focus can always be a challenge at this stage of practicing. Sometimes I'll be thinking about my right arm, ONLY my right arm, and I realize two minutes later that I've just planned what I'm going to make for dinner.

So, how can you hold yourself accountable and make a conscious effort to strengthen your mental focus? First of all, take a deep breath. Say the thing you're working on out loud in a few words. See the connection between your mind and body as you ask yourself to create the motion and the sound you want to hear through your warm up. And no matter what you're working on, enjoy the process of making even one note sound beautiful. Once you've done a focused one note jam (and importantly, do this for no more than five minutes), take the same approach with a left hand warm up such as slowly playing a scale (with relaxed fingers and hand, open ears and the same attention to beauty) or doing a positioning/intonation exercise, or even strumming and changing chords in time the metronome. But again, the goal is to be focused and attentive to what matters – and again, what matters is playing with a relaxed body and creating a beautiful sound.

After this, when your mind is engaged and your right arm and left arm feel in synch, then it's time to move on to the skill-building "check points." These are spots within songs that might give you trouble such as 2-4 notes that are difficult to navigate, a tricky bowing pattern, or a tricky transition from one chord to the next if you're a guitar player.

So, you might complete this phase of our Foundation Time by dissecting one of these trouble spots. Something that eluded you might turn out to be very playable with a little attention. And by taking such a close look, you might also gain a deeper connection to the song as a whole. So many times, these fiddle tunes just collect themselves in our minds as one big heap of notes. But, it's so nice to gain the skill to pull out a couple notes and get to know them really well, even if you first did it as a problem-solving exercise. Later, when you're playing a song and those notes come by, it'll feel like seeing an old friend or two on the street, rather than just some people you kind of know but struggle to recognize, (and you keep forgetting their names too!). Practicing in small chunks gives you some clear-cut sections to work out, and before long you learn to anticipate the movements you're going to need without even thinking too much. This all comes from a good practice that strengthens your mind to body connection.

By the time you've finished your Foundation Time, you're warmed up and have addressed areas of difficulty in the tunes that you're about to work on. This section can be the most mentally and physically tiring of them all, but remember that the payoff is huge. The energetic goal of Foundation Time is to really rev up your mental and physical engines so that they're rolling for the rest of practice.

PART II: NOTICING TIME

The *Noticing Time* is when you engage your ability for self-observation and learn to observe with curiosity. In this time, you're adding to what you did in the *Foundation Time*, except now you're playing longer sections as you put the pieces of your songs together. What was once two to four notes is now two to eight measures (or one part of the song like a verse or chorus). So here you might start out by playing a section of a song, let's say a chorus, and the goal is to observe yourself without wearing yourself out or losing focus. If you immediately play the whole thing, it can be a lot to take in as a "self-observer."

The key to making positive changes in your playing is to become aware of your challenges and notice them. It can sometimes be difficult to find and notice your own issues. But, once you start to see them, you'll be on the road to fixing them. In *Noticing Time*, you'll play detective as you find trouble spots but you'll also play the part of the fixer who solves them. You can motivate yourself to improve your powers of observation and problem solving. And as you get better at this, you might just see how much fun this process can be.

You'll want to have two tools handy for your Noticing Time:

5. A mirror

6. A recording device (smartphones are incredible!)

Yes, these are for self-observation. These tools will help you notice things in your playing that might be hard to catch without an outside perspective. Now, let's go a step further with how to use these tools.

And now you're left with a simple two-step process: 1. Notice 2. Fix.

Simple? Well, here's how it works...

Step One: Notice & Observe by Looking & Listening

Notice and take an interest in what's going on with your playing, again, as if you're outside of yourself. I recommend rotating every couple of days between using the mirror and recording. You're working your eyes and your ears.

Look: By using the mirror, you'll see the good stuff and notice trouble spots and physical challenges. They're just to be observed with kindness and curiosity at this stage of the process.

I won't overload you with examples, you can find very good categories to consider in my *You Be the Teacher* hand out, but here are a few to get you going (feel free to come up with your own):

- a) **How does my posture look?**
- b) **Right arm/hand/fingers?**
- c) **Left arm/hand/fingers**
- d) **Do I look relaxed? Where am I holding my tension?**
- e) **Do my motions look smooth**
- f) **Is my face relaxed?**
- g) **Am I making this look fun?**

Listen: Sometimes, I think I'm totally sounding amazing and then I record myself just to double check and see if I'm missing anything. Lo and behold, when I hear myself as an audience member would, I'm absolutely shocked and surprised. "This can't be how I sound! I'm a failure! I suck!" Then all this despair and drama shifts into something productive: "I had no idea my rhythm was dragging there. Wow, there's an out of tune note. My goodness, when I was actually playing this, I was focusing so hard that I forgot to listen. Okay, I can fix those things and I'll sound so much better. Easy."

Can you sense my shift? It's all in the flow of my practice routine. And yours.

My shock and dismay were a very normal, typical reaction to taking things in from that outside perspective, using those tools mentioned above. And once you get through that same initial shock of hearing yourself (and trust me, you'll also be surprised by the good things you hear in your own playing) you'll enjoy the rewards of recording yourself, listening back, noticing, and fixing. In fact, it's a thrill. When you record yourself again -- and hear your improvements, you'll know you're on the right track. Give yourself a pat on the back! You're doing this right.

Here are a couple of things to listen for (again, I encourage you to come up with your own too):

- a) **Notice your own personal nuances**
- b) **Notice your tone**
- c) **Listen to your rhythm and timing**
- d) **Listen for the tuning (Is your instrument in tune? Are you playing in tune?)**
- e) **Do you sound like YOU?**
- f) **Is there a natural flow to your playing?**
- g) **Does my playing have the right vibe for the tune? (Does it have life?)**

Step Two: Fix & Find Solutions

Noticing Time is your opportunity get to know yourself better as a musician and to participate in your own progress. Step two is when YOU get to BE YOUR OWN TEACHER! Now it's time to make the fixes. Make this as enjoyable of a process as you can. (Remember that you can always put some of the fixes into your practice for the next day – don't let yourself get overwhelmed). Prioritize the biggest elements you would like to “fix” today. You'll want to ask yourself questions like these here:

- 1. Of the elements I noticed, what would I like to troubleshoot today?**
- 2. What type of issue is it? Positioning, musical expression, rhythmic, stylistic etc. (again, refer to my You Be the Teacher handout for ideas)**
- 3. How can I improve it? Remember, the easiest and most general way to fix something is to “slow it down” and “take a small chunk”. (Note: you may want to earmark certain spots to put into tomorrow's Foundation Time).**
- 4. Enjoy making improvements!**

Here's an example of how *step two* could look: Say you're playing your song and everything sounds very good, except it doesn't sound smooth. Why? Are you lifting your left fingers too high? Nope. Looks good. Do you need to work more on learning the song? No. You know it. What could it be? Notice that your positioning is stiff and you just need to relax physically. Problem solved! Relax your body and breath. Keep scanning for any tension as you play through a couple of repetitions, make relaxation a habit -- and everything sounds better.

In the *Noticing Time*, you learn how to integrate *Foundation Time* “check points” into your songs to make them sound not only beautiful and musical – but also, they will sound like YOU. People can close their eyes and know who is playing.

Now, how kind are your words to yourself? This leads us to an extra topic that I’ll discuss in this interlude here...

Preparing your mind for the *Noticing Time*:

What is A Curious Mind VS. A Critical Mind - Let’s undo the negative self-talk. Being curious is more about noticing and observing while being critical is more like judging oneself. You want to be self-aware, not self-conscious. Negative self-talk is not helpful to musical growth (or any growth for that matter) There’s a world of difference between “Why do I always do this?! (Said angrily)” And “I wonder why I do this?” (Said with curiosity).

Practice hard, but take a friendly attitude toward your practice. Observe yourself with curiosity and aim to maintain a positive attitude throughout your session. Both *Foundation Time* and *Noticing Time* are where we focus on physical control and what I like to call a “curious ear.”

No matter what you’re practicing, use your mind to prepare your body and constantly use your curious ear. The curious ear can tell when something’s working and when it’s not quite there yet. To exercise your curious ear, it helps to record yourself and listen back to it (something you’re comfortable with by now). By keeping your ear constantly engaged as you listen back, you are training yourself to hear your playing exactly as the audience would. When you record and listen, you can make fixes and then record again. Once you see the benefits, you’ll be inspired to do this more often. Your curious ear is your best teacher! When you’re practicing in the mirror, your curious ear learns to listen in a different way: in conjunction with your eyes. You are now using your full self to become the musician you would like to be!

PART III: ACTION TIME

Lights, Camera, Action. Hmmmm. How about: Lights, Camera, Enjoy?!

I love how classical violin pedagogue, Ivan Galamian, describes a phase of practice that he called “performance time,” which influenced me as I adapted it to fit my practice philosophy. Here are his words:

“The necessity for adding musical playing to analytical dissection of difficulties is well demonstrated by a phenomenon that can be observed time and time again. A student practices a difficult passage from a tune, analyzes it properly, transforms it into well devised exercises, and finally masters it technically. Yet, when playing the whole tune, this same passage fails to come off properly and sometimes even breaks down completely. How can this be explained? The answer lies in the entirely different conditions of the mind and muscles in the playing of a passage as an exercise and in playing it as part of a musical composition. In the complete play through, the addition of the accompaniment, the eye on expression, for nuance, and good rhythmic feel all add entirely new elements that were not present for the technical building time. These additional factors disturb the smooth functioning of the practiced section. This is not the fault of the building time approach, which is still the indispensable first step in overcoming difficulties in a tune. What has been overlooked is that after this first step has been taken and the section has been mastered from a technical and memorization point of view, it must be practiced again as a piece of music, in the context of the musical genre and with expression. Only then can one expect that the isolated section can be successfully integrated again into the piece and made to grow together with the rest of the tune without showing a seam or a scar.”

Action Time is where everything comes together, the ultimate stage of your practice. Depending on your personality type, you may really be drawn to this stage, or you may try to talk yourself out of it. This is when you'll play with your play-along tracks, band tracks etc., and keep playing straight through the song, no matter what. In Action Time, you'll put on your game face, give it your all, and play fearlessly and without self-consciousness or tension. Even if you're feeling like a song is too new, that you're not ready yet or still struggling with a certain element, this is no longer going to hold you back. In Action Time, you take a deep breath and put all those concerns behind you. You push forward and find out where you're at -- and you show the joy in your music. Guess what, even if you're not feeling it, that doesn't matter anymore -- you put on your game face and go. Even if that means you are PRETENDING to be brave. Did you ever hear about that study where even faking a smile can send endorphins to your brain? Use this! I smile every day in my practice, and it really helps me to lighten up and give my fiddle tunes the happy feeling they deserve.

In Action Time, be sure to choose a playing speed that's comfortable for you so you have the brain space to enjoy your song. Notice your tripping points here, but don't be bothered by them. Practice moving through the tough parts and brushing off unexpected events. Show off your stuff and don't look back ☺

Also, when you're playing with any type of play-along track, sing the song in your head as you're playing. If you need to stop, it'll help to keep the tune going in your mind so that you know where to come back in. This is a very valuable skill to develop, and it too takes practice. Finally, as you review your songs, remember that maintaining songs IS progress. The wins can come all kinds of ways.

Remember, mistakes will occur, but it is how you react to them that can make you a better musician. That's why *Action Time* is the final stage of your practice session. It's an opportunity to practice "moving through" everything that comes your way and noticing how you feel before, during and after. Remember, you can ALWAYS be in control of how you feel if you make this part of your practice.

Many people feel that they're not good enough. They say things like, "when I'm better, I'll play through the whole song." Guess what? YOU are good enough NOW. It might be a cliché, but the message and the mindset are one and the same -- Go for it! The more you can exist in this "performance" frame of mind in every practice, the better. Even if your goals don't include performance, this is still the essential time to make your songs sound like music, for you to enjoy your playing, and most of all, for you to enjoy yourself as a musician. It's not just an opportunity to review songs that you're good at playing, but also a chance to really feel the magic of performing (even if it's just to yourself and your mirror and your recorder) and putting your music out into the world! Or just your living room ☺.

BONUS SECTION: LEARNING TIME

Learning Time is the optional practice slice that you can plug in (or omit) depending on what you're working on. If you've been learning tune after tune but they all sound the same and you really want to push yourself to make some lasting changes in technique, you may press pause on learning tunes and just focus on improving musicality, technique and interpretation within the tunes you already know. In fact, this is so important that I encourage my students to take this approach at least twice per year. (I force myself to do it too!)

Another scenario in which you would leave out this practice phase is when you're polishing tunes for a performance, gig, jam session, or contest. In this scenario, your *Foundation Time* and *Noticing Time* are very detail oriented, which can be super fun because you'll see a lot of progress and it'll pay off at your performance. When I'm in the middle of focused repetitions, I get excited because I've seen the results that follow onstage and I know what's coming.

You'll want to add the *Learning Time* when you're learning a song, a part of a song, a new improvisation technique, new licks etc. Really, anything new. I put the *Learning Time* after the *Noticing Time* because you may find you already

know a part of a tune and review it in your *Noticing Time*, then segue to learning the rest of the song in the *Learning Time*. But you can feel free to put the *Learning Time* anywhere within your practice depending on what feels best. I'd encourage you to try different things on different days to see what you like.

In the *Learning Time*, you'll work with your learning reference (whether it's recordings, lesson instructions, sheet music, videos, etc.) to learn sections of a tune, repeat them, and then put them together. Once you've fully memorized the part, it's ready to move into the *Noticing Time*. Conversely, if you're working on something like a new improv technique, a chord progression, a scale or arpeggio, and your *Foundation Time* lasts too long, you can move it into your *Learning Time* to keep the sections even.

Like every stage in this routine, keep things fun and focused. There's a rhythm to a good practice session. Find it. My advice is to feel the flow. It's there. Enjoy that feeling as you move through the various parts of your session. Nothing here should feel rigid, so feel free to be flexible and creative with the way you use this. Enjoy the process. And enjoy your progress!