



# Maximize Your Practicing

Get the Most From Whatever Time You Have by Jeremy Hummel

It seems that now more than ever we live in a world where it's a challenge to find the time to do anything outside our daily responsibilities. Whether we're a student, a parent, a businessperson, or even a professional musician, our fast-paced lives make it more and more challenging to improve at the craft of drumming. In this article, I'd like to address how to maximize practice time.

The first step in figuring out how to make the most of your practice time is to ask yourself, "What am I trying to get better at?" Take a close look at where you are as a drummer and which concepts interest you the most. Playing the drums is supposed to be fun, yet I maintain that there's a definite difference between freestyling and practicing. Let's take a look at each.

## FREESTYLING VERSUS PRACTICING

Freestyling is when you sit behind the drums and play whatever happens to come into your mind. This can be therapeutic and perhaps give you a sense of well-being, because for the most part the ideas you play are within your comfort zone. Most people, however, tend to spend too much time freestyling.

Practicing, on the other hand, is spending time working on the things that you cannot do well or that need more refinement. People sometimes avoid practicing because they don't want to risk not sounding good to themselves or others. Without any real discipline or organization to your practice routine, though, advancement will be limited.

Here's a common scenario. You're working on a page from a book in a slow, methodical manner. There's one particular spot you can't seem to get

past. When frustration sets in, what you do next is usually one of three things: You maintain focus and continue practicing in the same manner (the least common), you try to play the phrase faster, or you start to freestyle. The point is that often freestyle playing results from impatience. Many people in our society have a seriously short attention span. When I discuss practicing in clinics, people often say, "My intentions are good, but after the first ten minutes I get frustrated and play something different or start thinking about something else."

There are a number of books available that deal with staying focused. Two that I really like are *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle and *The Art of Practicing* by Madeline Bruser. The best mantra to keep in mind is "be here now."

## FOCUS AND SIMPLIFY

Once you decide which areas of your playing you wish to improve, it's important to be disciplined and not stray from that. I recommend picking no more than two or three things at a time. With all the media that's now available (Web videos, DVDs, books, and so on), it's very easy to get sidetracked and overwhelmed. It's wonderful to use these tools as resources for inspiration. Yet to truly get better, it's paramount to have a clear vision of what you're trying to achieve.

Consider the phenomenon where one Web video leads to another. It's like going on a cruise with multiple stops. Each place you visit is great and has inspiring qualities, but you never really get to know any of them because the experiences are short-lived. Sporadic practice routines have the same effect.

If you have an abundance of practice time and many things to explore, try setting goals to get through more material. We all want instant gratification, but the reality is that the things we cherish most in life require much attention and work. Remember, practice time is a privilege, not a chore.

A technique I find helpful in my own practicing is to remove all distractions. I value the time I have to work on my craft, so I turn off my computer, cell phone, and anything else that could steal my focus. If there are other people in your house when you want to practice, ask them if you can remain uninterrupted for that time period. You could simply say, "Please give me this time, and I'm all yours when I'm finished."

## SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM GOALS

Short-term goals are things you can achieve within a brief period of time. These would include anything you need to work on in order to sustain a gig. I've read countless articles in which professional drummers, when asked what they're practicing, say, "Whatever is going on at the time." In other words, if you have a fill-in gig, audition, or recital coming up in two weeks, preparation for that is a short-term goal.

Long-term goals are works in progress—concepts you chip away at over time. Examples of these are advanced independence and coordination, left-foot clave, or working through a particularly challenging method book. It's important to contribute to both short- and long-term goals at each practice session whenever possible.

The reason why long-term goals need to be addressed with frequency

is because they often involve developing muscle memory, both physical and mental. For example, when you learned to ride a bike without training wheels, you had to develop your sense of balance. The process is expedited if you work at it each day, rather than once every three or four days, because it doesn't feel like starting all over again.

### THE ART OF SACRIFICE

Students often ask, "How long should I practice?" I remind them that it's about quality rather than quantity. Some musicians may claim to put in three or four hours a day. That sounds great, but I often wonder how much of that time is spent productively. I feel one hour of disciplined practice each day can help you achieve your goals.

In life, you must ask yourself, "What is truly important to me?" When I encounter students who claim they don't have enough time to practice, I ask them to outline a weekly schedule of their current activities, from the time they wake up until they go to bed. Together, we usually find that there are things that are not so important, which can either be cut down or eliminated to free up time for practicing.

This is especially true for younger musicians. I understand that kids need to be kids, but the amount of time spent playing video games and watching television can be startling. It would be much more beneficial to use your time productively, with an activity that nurtures your mind, body, and soul, even if it doesn't include drumming. Use your youth to your advantage. The older you get, the more responsibilities you will have.

Improving as a musician is not a part-time task. Many people don't have the disposition to continually work at something, regardless of how much they think they enjoy it. Educators see students who start with the best of intentions, only to realize they don't possess the desire or the time required to truly progress. There's a great book called *Outliers*,

in which author Malcolm Gladwell repeatedly mentions the "10,000-hour rule," claiming that the key to success in any field is, to a large extent, a matter of practicing a specific task for that long. My mention of this book is not to suggest that you need to practice for 10,000 hours in order to become a proficient drummer. Rather, it's meant to encourage you that with a strong work ethic, results will come.

I'd like to share a personal story that will help to illustrate the results of hard work and passion. It involves something I wasn't so good at: basketball. When I was in eighth grade, I tried out for the school team. I did so because most of my close friends were going to play. But I was horrible. I made the team only because I was willing to play defense and do the dirty work. While I didn't play much at all that year, I became very passionate about the game. I knew that I needed to get better over the summer. I met a guy named Bill Caviston, who was much older and was a great basketball player. I told Bill of my desire to get better, and he said, "I'll help you, but you're going to work!"

Every day that summer, I was at the basketball court from nearly sunrise to sundown, practicing and running drills. Before leaving each day, I had to make at least twenty free throws in a row. If I got to nineteen and missed, I did sprints and push-ups and started over until I succeeded.

After working harder that summer and fall than I ever had before, I saw results. When basketball season came,

I not only made the team but was voted captain. I worked hard again the next summer, and in tenth grade I was the only sophomore to make the varsity squad. This story is not to pat myself on the back, but to reinforce that you don't need to be blessed with talent to succeed at something. You need a good work ethic.

Conversely, drums and music have always come naturally to me. But my career would've been short-lived, and my growth stifled, had I not continued to work and cultivate my abilities. After thirty years of playing, I'm more passionate than ever about learning and improving. I can attest that hard work and passion equals results, no matter what your current skill level.

To reiterate this idea, we would like to share a video clip called "The Gift" from jazz drummer/educator John Riley's DVD *The Master Drummer*. John eloquently explains how the gifted are not those blessed with natural ability but rather the ones who've found their passion. If you have a smartphone, use it to scan this QR code and view the clip, which will also be available at [moderndrummer.com](http://moderndrummer.com).



I wish you the best in developing a solid and disciplined practice routine.

**Jeremy Hummel** was an original member of Breaking Benjamin. He has since turned his efforts to session work and drum instruction in Pennsylvania. He can be reached through [jeremyhummel.com](http://jeremyhummel.com).



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