

The snarescience.com Practice Guide - *Practice Smarter, not Harder*

The purpose of this practice guide is to provide an effective method for rapidly improving your drumming skills. No matter what skill level you are currently at, you should be able to take some of the ideas in this guide and apply them to your own personal practice routine.

The practice guide is broken down into six sections:

I. Self Assessment

The first step in this guide is self assessment, i.e. determining your own personal skill level. In this section I will describe a few methods for figuring out your current skill level.

II. Setting Goals

The second step is setting goals. Goals are absolutely necessary for achieving success, whether it be in snare drumming or any other aspect of life.

III. Planning and Scheduling

At step three, we have already assessed our weaknesses and know how we want to improve. This step lays out the framework for improvement.

IV. Create Your Practice Space

Your practice space must have a few specific characteristics that will allow you to practice as efficiently and effectively as possible.

V. Good Practice Habits

In addition to creating an effective practice space, we must also develop effective practice habits.

VI. Example Goals and Practice Schedule

This section provides some example goals and schedules. You can use these as a template for creating your own goals and schedule.

I. Self Assessment

In designing your own personal practice routine, it is absolutely crucial to determine your strengths and your weaknesses. If you approach this step with complete humility, you will probably discover that you have many, many weaknesses -- way more than you would have imagined!

While this can be a sobering experience, you must realize that without performing this step you will forever be trapped in your 'comfort zone', only playing things that feel good to play. In order to truly grow as a musician, you must step out of your comfort zone and challenge yourself to improve on your weaknesses.

Steve Pavlina runs a great blog on self improvement, and there is one particular article that applies to this step. The article is titled, "[How to get from a 7 to a 10](#)".

A few good methods for self assessment are the following:

1) Practice in front of a mirror: This is a great way to analyze your playing technique. Some things in particular to look for: arms, hands, and finger positions, stick angles, stick heights, stick motion, and body posture.

2) Video recording analysis: While watching yourself play in a mirror is very useful, it doesn't really compare to watching video of yourself. While playing in front of a mirror, you are allocating a large part of your brain power to playing the drum (or practice pad). There will be many small tendencies that you don't catch. When watching a video of yourself, you can allocate 100% of your brain power to critiquing yourself. You will probably see and hear many errors that you would otherwise miss.

3) Have better players critique your play: While this isn't really 'self' assessment, it will greatly speed up your progress to get instruction from experienced players.

II. Setting Goals

If you have gotten this far, you are probably serious about taking control of your practice routine and your growth as a snare drummer. You are (or will be) putting in many hours of practice time. The reason for setting goals is to give your practice time purpose and direction. Without goals, it is easy to fall into 'hack mode' where you diddle around on a pad for awhile, playing your favorite BD or SCV snarelick, before retiring to watch TV or whatever. With specific goals, on the other hand, you will make effective use of your practice time and improve WAY faster than you would by constantly operating in 'hack mode'. Don't get me wrong, I like to hack on a pad as much as the next guy, but this must be done in moderation.

There are a few general guidelines to follow when creating goals (guidelines slightly modified from www.psywww.com, follow the link for more details) :

1) Positive statement: Express your goals positively: 'Execute flam drags with consistent grace notes' is a much better goal than 'stop sucking at flam drags'.

2) Be precise: If you set a precise goal, putting in dates, times and amounts so that achievement can be measured, then you know the exact goal to be achieved, and can take complete satisfaction from having completely achieved it. One of my goals for this month is to simply 'practice (not hack!) for at least 45 minutes every day'.

3) Set priorities: When you have several goals, give each a priority. This helps you to avoid feeling overwhelmed by too many goals, and helps to direct your attention to the most important ones.

4) Write goals down: To avoid confusion and give your goals more force, write them down. Also, it helps to write down goals in the following proactive form: "I *WILL* practice for at least 45 minutes every day", as opposed to "Practice 45 minutes a day". In this way, YOU are initiating the action instead of the piece of paper on which the goal is written.

5) Keep operational goals small: Keep the goals you are working towards immediately (i.e. in this session) small and achievable. If a goal is too large, then it can seem that you are not making progress towards it. Keeping goals small and incremental gives more opportunities for reward. Today's goals (i.e. practice double stroke rolls for 1 hour, etc) should be derived from larger goals (i.e. march with BD, be the next DCI I&E Snare Champion, etc...)

See part VI of this guide for some example goals.

III. Planning and Scheduling

The next step is to translate your goals into day by day actions by planning and scheduling your practice sessions. This step is a bit tedious, but it can be fun if you approach it as if you are planning an adventure. You know what you want your final destination to be, and now you get to plan the steps along the way.

Here are some tips for planning and scheduling your practice activities:

1) Build a set period of time into your day for practicing: By making it a regular part of your day, practicing will become a habit, and habitual activities require very little will power. If practicing is not a regular part of your day, it can be easy to make excuses for not practicing. The experts claim that it takes 21 days to form habits (good or bad), so commit to practicing at a regular time for 3 weeks and it should become a habit!

2) Focus on your weaknesses: While this might not be the most fun activity initially, you should notice a lot of improvement if you continually work on improving your weaknesses. Seeing self improvement is a great positive feedback mechanism leading to more practice and better drumming skills. In the long run, better drumming skills = FUN!

3) Try to split your practice time evenly into 3 general areas:

a) Fundamentals / chops / technique: Play exercises such as ['Eight on a Hand'](#), ['Sanford Double Beat'](#), ['Eight and Four'](#), or long double stroke rolls. This is where we build and perfect our foundation of technique and chops. Think of it like a pyramid. If the foundation of our pyramid is weak, we will not be able to build it to great heights.

b) Advanced coordination / timing / independence: Play advanced exercises that work on coordinating both hands, such as ['Flam Accent Break Down'](#), ['16th Note Grid'](#), ['Triplet Grid'](#), ['Mini Three'](#), or ['Pantera'](#). This is a very general category that encompasses many different aspects of rudimental snare drumming. If you are weak in one particular area, such as flams, paradiddles, or grids for example, try to focus on that specific area.

c) Performance: Play solos or show music for your school or drum corps, and practice *performing*. Put everything together into the final product that the audience will actually see. Perform in front of a mirror, video camera, or peers. Imagine that you are in front of a huge audience, they are all watching your every move, and you are throwing down every note directly in their faces. If you make this part of your regular practice, your stage presence and performance will improve by leaps and bounds. Check out [Niko Jasniewicz](#), a great performer in my opinion.

See part VI of this guide for an example practice schedule.

IV. Create Your Practice Space

There are a few characteristics that are absolutely necessary for a practice space to be effective.

1) Metronome / drum machine: You must have a 'perfect' example of time with which to reference. I have recently heard the metronome referred to as 'The Truth'. I would advocate practicing with the metronome the vast majority of the time. While the metronome can become a 'crutch' if you completely rely on it to keep time, there are some creative ways of using the metronome to avoid this trap. I will cover that in a future article.

2) Mirror: It is very important to play in front of a mirror so that you can analyze what you are doing - stick heights, stick motion, posture, fingers and hand positions, performance, etc. It is almost guaranteed that parts of your technique or performance will deteriorate if you aren't checking in with the mirror on a regular basis.

3) Absence of distractions: This one is only necessary if you are especially prone to being distracted. Distractions include: cell phones, TV, food, and other people -- especially people who get annoyed with drumming! Find a place that is quiet, turn off your cell phone, and prepare to be in your own little practice world. If the weather is nice, go outside and find a nice bench in a park. One of my favorite things about drumming is that it is a physical activity that includes some meditative aspects. Who needs Yoga when you have drumming?

V. Good Practice Habits

Below are a few practice habits which are good to develop.

1) Warm up: It is important that your muscles are properly warmed up before jumping into high demand playing. I usually start with 'Eight on a Hand' at 120 bpm and slowly ramp up the tempo over 10 - 15 minutes until I am maxed out. Then I do some stretching and finish up by playing 'Eights' a couple more times at 120 bpm. This warm up shouldn't be mindless drumming. Don't think of it as a warmup, but as an exercise which requires you to...

2) Pay attention: Your brain should be tired at the end of a good practice session. There are many things that require your attention while you are practicing, such as:

a) The metronome: Simply starting an exercise and ending an exercise with the metronome is not good enough. Is every note in between lining up exactly with the click? If you can't answer this question with a definitive 'yes' or 'no', then you aren't paying close enough attention. Listening to the click and correctly adjusting to it are learned skills. You must first develop your ears in order to distinguish if you are playing exactly with the click, and then you must learn which way you need to adjust if you are ahead or behind the click.

b) Sound quality: Now that you are playing perfectly with the metronome, how is your sound quality? Are your rolls right-hand heavy? Are you 'feather tapping' your taps, i.e. not playing into the drum at a solid 3" stick height? Answering these questions requires listening and paying attention to the sound you are creating. If you have a drum pad with a hard side and a soft side, play on the hard side -- it will exaggerate any sound quality errors you might be committing and make them easier to recognize and correct.

c) Stick heights: How are your tap heights... 3"? Are your right handed accents higher than your left handed accents? Knowing the answers to these questions requires paying attention to yourself in the mirror.

d) Technique: Are your wrists rotating the way you want them to, or are you using too much arm? Are those dang fingers shooting off the stick even though your brain is telling them not to? Again, this requires paying attention to yourself in the mirror.

3) Practice how you want to perform: Will you be lounging back on your couch while you perform in a parade or a drum corps show? We can dream all we want, but I don't think DCI will be offering high scores for couch performances anytime soon. Practice playing with your drum or practice pad on a stand while marking time, or if you are more ambitious, wear your drum while practicing. You should also practice the body posture and 'vibe' (stage presence) that you want to portray during a performance.

4) Warm down: Play some more eights at a nice relaxed tempo to finish up your practice session. Your muscles will thank you.

5) Don't forget to have fun! If you find that your practice time is starting to feel like a grind and you are losing motivation, don't be afraid to make a change. Try drumming along with your favorite band for a few days. Maybe watch your favorite DCI videos. Do whatever it takes to renew your love and passion for drumming!

VI. Example Goals and Practice Schedules

Goals: It is important to make goals precise and measurable. Also, write down short-term action-oriented goals in addition to results-oriented goals. Here are some example goals:

Long-term goals:

- I will make the snareline in my high school winter drumline next year.
- I will march with xxxxxx drum and bugle corps in 2011.

Mid-term goals:

- I will be able to play a 32nd note roll at 200 bpm within 3 months.
- I will have perfect attendance at my drumline rehearsals all season long.
- I will write and perfect a snare solo to perform at the I&E solo competition next year.

Short-term goals:

- I will practice for at least 45 minutes every day this month.
- I will fix the gap between my right thumb and index finger this month.
- I will practice with a metronome every time I touch drumsticks this month.
- I will practice flam accent grids for at least 3 hours total this month.
- I will practice 'Sanford Double Beat' and increase my max speed to 180bpm by the end of this month.

Schedule: Below is an example practice schedule based on the above short term goals:

Day 1: 15 min 8s, 15 min Sanford 120-150, 15 min flam accent grids

Day 2: 15 min 8s, 15 min eight and four, 15 min perform show music

Day 3: 15 min 8s, 15 min Sanford 120-152, 15 min flam accent grids

Day 4: 15 min 8s, 15 min flam exercises, 15 min paradiddle exercises

Day 5: 15 min 8s, 15 min Sanford 120-154, 15 min flam accent grids

Day 6: 15 min 8s, 15 min roll exercises, 15 min perform show music

Day 7: 15 min 8s, 15 min hybrid rudiments, 15 min perform show

Day 8: 15 min 8s, 15 min Sanford 120-156, 15 min flam accent grids

Day 9: 15 min 8s, 15 min eight and four, 15 min perform show music

Day 10: 15 min 8s, 15 min Sanford 120-160, 15 min flam accent grids

Day 11: 15 min 8s, 15 min flam exercises, 15 min paradiddle exercises

Day 12: 15 min 8s, 15 min Sanford 120-162, 15 min flam accent grids

Day 13: 15 min 8s, 15 min roll exercises, 15 min perform show music

Day 14: 15 min 8s, 15 min hybrid rudiments, 15 min perform show

Day 15: 15 min 8s, 15 min Sanford 120-164, 15 min flam accent grids

Day 16: 15 min 8s, 15 min eight and four, 15 min perform show music

Day 17: 15 min 8s, 15 min Sanford 120-166, 15 min flam accent grids

Day 18: 15 min 8s, 15 min flam exercises, 15 min paradiddle exercises

Day 19: 15 min 8s, 15 min Sanford 120-170, 15 min flam accent grids

Day 20: 15 min 8s, 15 min roll exercises, 15 min perform show music

Day 21: 15 min 8s, 15 min hybrid rudiments, 15 min perform show

Day 22: 15 min 8s, 15 min Sanford 120-172, 15 min flam accent grids

Day 23: 15 min 8s, 15 min eight and four, 15 min perform show music

Day 24: 15 min 8s, 15 min Sanford 120-174, 15 min flam accent grids

Day 25: 15 min 8s, 15 min flam exercises, 15 min paradiddle exercises

Day 26: 15 min 8s, 15 min Sanford 120-176, 15 min flam accent grids

Day 27: 15 min 8s, 15 min roll exercises, 15 min perform show music

Day 28: 15 min 8s, 15 min hybrid rudiments, 15 min perform show

Day 29: 15 min 8s, 15 min flam exercises, 15 min paradiddle exercises

Day 30: 15 min 8s, 15 min Sanford 120-180, 15 min flam accent grids