

How Many Hours a Day Should You Practice?

Description

2 hours? 4 hours? 8 hours? 12 hours?

How much is enough?

Is there such a thing as practicing too much?

Is there an optimal number of hours that one should practice?

What Do Performers Say?

Some of the great artists of the 20th century have shared their thoughts on these questions. I seem to recall reading an interview with Rubinstein years ago, in which he stated that nobody should have to practice more than four hours a day, explaining that if you needed to practice more than four hours a day, you probably weren't doing it right.

Other great artists have expressed similar sentiments. Violinist Nathan Milstein is said to have [once asked his teacher Leopold Auer how many hours a day he should be practicing](#). Auer responded by saying "Practice with your fingers and you need all day. Practice with your mind and you will do as much in 1 1/2 hours."

Heifetz also indicated that he never believed in practicing too much, and that excessive practice is "just as bad as practicing too little!" He claimed that he practiced no more than three hours per day on average, and that he didn't practice at all on Sundays. You know, this is not a bad idea – one of my own teachers, [Donald Weilerstein](#), once suggested that I establish a 24-hour period of time every week where I was not allowed to pick up my instrument.

What Do Psychologists Say?

When it comes to understanding expertise and expert performance, psychologist [Dr. K. Anders Ericsson](#) is perhaps the world's leading authority. His research is the basis for the "ten-year rule" and "10,000-hour rule" which suggest that it requires at least ten years and/or 10,000 hours of *deliberate* practice to achieve an expert level of performance in any given domain — and in the case of musicians, often closer to 25 years in order to attain an elite international level.

Note that the real key here is not the *amount* of practice required (as the exact number of hours is debatable) but the *type* of practice required to attain an expert level of performance. In other words, just

practicing any old way doesn't cut it.

Mindless Practice

Have you ever listened to someone practice? Have you ever listened to yourself practice, for that matter? Tape yourself practicing for an hour, take a walk through the practice room area at school and eavesdrop on your fellow students, or ask your students to pretend they are at home and watch them practice during a lesson. What do you notice?

You'll notice that the majority of folks practice rather mindlessly, either engaging in mere repetition ("practice this passage 10 times" or "practice this piece for 30 minutes") or practicing on autopilot (that's when we play through the piece until we hear something we don't like, stop, repeat the passage again until it sounds better, and resume playing through the piece until we hear the next thing we aren't satisfied with, at which point we begin this whole process over again).

There are three major problems with the mindless method of practicing.

1. It is a waste of time

Why? For one, very little productive learning takes place when we practice this way. This is how we can practice a piece for hours, days, or weeks, and still not feel that we've improved all that much. Even worse, you are actually digging yourself a hole by practicing this way, because what this model of practicing *does* do is strengthen undesirable habits and errors, literally making it more likely that you will screw up more consistently in the future. This makes it more difficult to correct these habits in the future — so you are actually adding to the amount of future practice time you will need in order to eliminate these bad habits and tendencies. I once worked with a saxophone professor who was fond of reminding his students that "Practice doesn't make perfect, practice makes *permanent*."

2. It makes you less confident

In addition, practicing this way actually hurts your confidence, as there is a part of you that realizes you don't really know how to consistently produce the results you are looking for. Even if you establish a fairly high success rate in the most difficult passages via mindless practice, and find that you can nail it 3 or 4 out of every 5 attempts, your confidence won't grow much from this. Real on-stage confidence comes from (a) being able to nail it 10 out of 10 tries, (b) knowing that this isn't a coincidence but that you can do it the correct way on demand, because most importantly (c) you know precisely *why* you nail it or miss it — i.e. you know exactly what you need to do from a technique standpoint in order to play the passage perfectly every time.

You may not be able to play it perfectly every time at first, but this is what repetition is for — to reinforce the correct habits until they are stronger than the bad habits. It's a little like trying to grow a nice looking lawn. Instead of fighting a never-ending battle against the weeds, your time is better spent trying to cultivate the grass so that over time the grass crowds out the weeds.

And here's the biggie. We tend to practice unconsciously, and then end up trying to perform consciously — not a great formula for success. Recall from [this article](#) that you have a tendency to shift over into hyper-analytical left brain mode when you walk out on stage. Well, if you have done most of your practicing unconsciously, you really don't know how to play your piece perfectly on demand. When your brain suddenly goes into full-conscious mode, you end up freaking out, because you don't know what instructions to give your brain.

3. It is tedious and boring

Practicing mindlessly is a chore. Music may be one of the only skill-based activities where practice goals are measured in units of time. We've all had teachers who tell us to go home and practice a certain passage x number of times, or to practice x number of hours, right? What we really need are more specific outcome goals — such as, practice this passage until it sounds like _____, or practice this passage until you can figure out how to make it sound like _____.

After all, it doesn't really matter how much time we spend practicing something — only that we know how to produce the results we want, and can do so consistently, on demand.

Deliberate Practice

So what is deliberate, or mindful practice? Deliberate practice is a **systematic** and **highly structured** activity, which is, for lack of a better word, *scientific*. Instead of mindless trial and error, it is an **active** and **thoughtful** process of **experimentation** with **clear goals** and **hypotheses**. Violinist [Paul Kantor](#) once said that the practice room should be like a laboratory, where one can freely tinker with different ideas, both musical and technical, to see what combination of ingredients produces the result you are looking for.

Deliberate practice is often **slow**, and involves **repetition** of small and very specific sections of your repertoire instead of just playing through (e.g. working on just the opening note of your solo to make sure that it “speaks” exactly the way you want, instead of playing the entire opening phrase).

Deliberate practice involves **monitoring** one's performance (in real-time, but also via recordings), continually looking for new ways to improve. This means really listening to what happens, so that you can tell yourself exactly what went wrong. For instance, was the first note sharp? Flat? Too loud? Too soft? Too harsh? Too short? Too long?

Let's say that the note was too sharp and too long with not enough of an attack to begin the note. Well, how sharp was it? A little? A lot? How much longer was the note than you wanted it to be? How much more of an attack did you want?

Ok, the note was a little sharp, just a hair too long, and required a much clearer attack in order to be consistent with the marked articulation and dynamics. So, why was the note sharp? What did you do? What do you need to do to make sure the note is perfectly in tune every time? How do you ensure that the length is just as you want it to be, and how do you get a consistently clean and clear attack to begin the note so it begins in the right character?

Now, let's imagine you recorded all of this and could listen to how this last attempt sounded. Does that combination of ingredients give you the desired result? In other words, does that combination of ingredients convey the mood or character you want to communicate to the listener as effectively as you thought it would?

Few musicians take the time to stop, analyze *what* went wrong, *why* it happened, and *how* they can correct the error permanently.

How Many Hours a Day Should I Practice?

You will find that deliberate practice is very draining, given the tremendous amount of energy required to keep one's full attentional resources on the task at hand. Practicing more than one hour at a time is likely to be unproductive and in all honesty, probably not even mentally or emotionally possible. Even the most dedicated individuals will find it difficult to practice more than four hours a day.

Studies have varied the length of daily practice from 1 hour to 8 hours, and the results suggest that there is often little benefit from practicing more than 4 hours per day, and that gains actually begin to decline after the 2-hour mark. The key is to keep tabs on the level of concentration you are able to sustain.

5 Keys For More Effective Practice

1. Duration

Keep practice sessions limited to a duration that allows you to stay focused. This may be as short as 10-20 minutes for younger students, and as long as 45-60 minutes for older individuals.

2. Timing

Keep track of times during the day when you tend to have the most energy. This may be first thing in the morning, or right before lunch, etc. Try to do your practicing during these naturally productive periods as these are the times at which you will be able to focus and think most clearly.

3. Goals

Try using a practice notebook. Keep track of your practice goals and what you discover during your practice sessions. The key to getting into the “zone” when practicing is to be constantly striving to have clarity of intention. In other words, to have a clear idea of the sound you want to produce, or particular phrasing you’d like to try, or specific articulation, intonation, etc. that you’d like to be able to execute consistently.

When you figure something out, write it down. As I practiced more mindfully, I began learning so much during practice sessions that if I didn’t write everything down, I’d forget.

4. Smarter, not harder

Sometimes if a particular passage is not coming out the way we want it to, it just means we need to practice more. There are also times, however, when we don’t need to practice harder, but need an altogether different strategy or technique.

I remember struggling with the left-hand pizzicato variation in Paganini’s 24th Caprice. I was getting frustrated and kept trying harder and harder to make the notes speak, but all I got was sore fingers, a couple of which actually started to bleed. I realized that there had to be a smarter, more effective way to accomplish my goal.

Instead of stubbornly keeping at a strategy or technique that wasn’t working for me, I forced myself to stop practicing this section altogether. I tried to brainstorm different solutions to the problem for a day or so, and wrote down ideas to try as they occurred to me. When I felt that I came up with some promising solutions, I just started experimenting. I eventually came up with a solution that I worked on over the next week or so, and when I played the caprice for my teacher, *he* actually asked *me* how I made the notes speak so clearly!

5. 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?)

It doesn't matter if we are talking about perfecting technique, or experimenting with different musical ideas. Any model which encourages smarter, more systematic, active thought, and clearly articulated goals will help cut down on wasted, ineffective practice time.

After all, who wants to spend all day in the practice room? Get in, get stuff done, and get out!

UPDATE: Think all of this only relates to classical music? Jazz aficionados, check out this post on [practicing effectively](#) written by acclaimed jazz violinist [Christian Howes](#) for a helpful perspective and tips on practicing in jazz. Funnily enough, we were in Suzuki together back in Columbus, OH as kids, and both studied with the late British violinist, Michael Davis.

Better practice, in 1 hour

Deliberate practice can be pretty transformative – but it's just one third of the effective practice equation.

If you'd like to learn more about the other two types of practice, and how to integrate all three into your daily routine, you may be interested in [Practice That Sticks](#).

This concise, 1-hour, no-fluff practice course will teach you how to be a better practicer through 16 videos, and four 7-day practice challenges with step-by-step instructions and printable worksheets to guide you through it all. Click the red button below to get started:

[Get Practice That Sticks](#)

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