



The tips here apply to guitar players of all levels. Here, in no particular order, you'll find ideas for making faster progress in your practice sessions, memorizing, preparing for a performance, dealing with nerves, playing and singing at the same time, and much more.

### **How Much to Practice?**

Question: How much should I practice? Answer: How good do you want to get? To be good – or great! – at anything, you have to put in the time, and you need to do it every day. At the start, it may feel like it's difficult to find time to practice because it's not part of your routine yet. Set aside a block of time to dedicate to guitar practice. If you are having trouble finding the time, ask yourself how much time you spend online, watching TV, or playing video games. Once you get into a routine, it becomes easier to find the time.

How long you practice depends on your level and how much music you have to learn. If you are a beginner and still building up callouses, fifteen minutes is a reasonable length of time. Your fingertips may be too sore to play any longer than that. If you want to practice longer, you could practice twice a day for ten minutes at a time. As you progress on the guitar, your practice sessions will grow longer. An intermediate guitarist might practice forty-five minutes each day, while an advanced guitarist might practice two hours. A college music major or professional might practice two or three times a day for a total of four or five hours – or more!

### **Practicing vs. Performing**

Practicing guitar is quite different from performing. When you see a guitarist perform, you are seeing the end result of many hours of practice. A typical practice session will start with a warm-up and will then cover whatever music or exercises you are working on. Aside from having an audience, the biggest differences between practicing and performing are:

- If you are practicing properly, you will be stopping and starting to fix mistakes.
- You will be playing some music very slowly until you build up speed.
- Repetition – you might practice a measure many, many times in a row trying to get it right.

### **Pick or Fingerstyle?**

To be more flexible in your playing, learn to play with either a pick or fingerstyle. To make sure you're able to play with either pick or fingers, practice both ways. Play a scale or song with a pick, and then switch to fingers.



## **Slow Down!**

Playing fast is impressive, but only if you are playing the right notes. When you listen to a great guitar player rip through a song at lightning speed, you are hearing the final product. What you don't see is the hours she spent practicing slowly and building up speed. Even if a song is supposed to be fast, you first need to slow down – way down! If you practice too quickly, you are training yourself to make mistakes. If you play slowly, you can train your fingers to go exactly where they need to go. Practice so slowly that it's almost impossible to play a wrong note. Then play just a little bit faster, and then a little bit faster, and so forth until you reach the tempo you want to play. You may not reach your speed goal in the first practice session, but you'll get there over time, and you'll be playing the right notes.

## **Focus on Problem Spots**

There may be a measure or two in a song where you consistently make mistakes. Instead of playing all the way through a song every time you practice, spend some time working on the spots that give you problems. Slow down to the point where it's almost impossible to miss a note, then gradually bring these measures up to speed.

## **Repeat, Repeat, Repeat**

To make the best use of your practice, you should be repeating things over – and over – and over. When you practice, you are training your muscle memory. If you play something perfectly the first time, play it again so that you learn what it feels like to play perfectly. If you mess up a measure five times and play it correctly one time, don't stop there! Repeat it until you've played it correctly at least twice as many times as you've played incorrectly. If a basketball player is practicing free throws, she doesn't stop after she's made the first free throw. She keeps on shooting the ball so that she learns how it feels to make a good shot. The same goes for guitar practice.

## **Record Yourself**

One of the best ways to get better is to record yourself. The first time you record yourself can be humbling. A recording has a way of highlighting every single mistake, but don't be discouraged. Once you hear the things you need to fix, you will improve quickly. You don't need expensive equipment to record yourself practicing. Use an inexpensive digital recorder or the voice recorder on your smartphone.



## Write in Your Music

There's nothing wrong with writing reminders in your music. Pros do this all the time! It's not cheating to write in a note name, circle a repeat sign, or add whatever other reminders you need for a good performance.

## Warm-Up

Most advanced guitar players warm up at the beginning of their practice sessions, and they most definitely warm up before performing. A warm-up helps you prepare both physically and mentally. Even if you are just starting out, you can emulate the pros and play a warm-up. At first, your warm-up may simply be playing a song or exercise from a previous assignment that is easy for you, and when you start learning chords, you can slowly play back and forth between chords to warm-up. At some point, you will start to learn scales, which are great to play as warm-ups.

## Practice Backwards

Most musicians tend to spend more time practice the first half of the music. If you want to make sure the end of the music sounds as good as the beginning, try practicing back to front. Work on the last few measures until you're satisfied with your progress, and then start a little earlier in the music, working your way back to the beginning.

## Playing without Looking

You may have noticed that many guitar players can play without looking at their hands all the time. This is a skill that comes over time. The more time you spend with the guitar, the more you'll be able to feel where your fingers should go. You can speed the process along if you practice playing by feel. Find a familiar melody or an easy chord progression. Play it once while looking at your hands. Play it again without looking at your hands. See how long you can play a melody without looking at your hands. After you've learned some scales, try playing scales without looking. Spend a little bit of time doing this every practice session to boost your ability to play by feel.

## Minimal Movement

Get in the habit of moving your fingers as little as possible. The smaller the distance between your fingers and the strings, the faster and more efficiently you'll be able to play.

## Sing the Note Names

When you first start learning to read music, sing the note names as you play them. This will help you learn the notes more quickly, and you'll develop an ear for how they should sound.



## Play with a Metronome

One of the absolute most important tools for practicing is a metronome. Using a metronome will help you learn to keep a steady beat. You can also use a metronome to develop your speed. For example, pick a small section of music that you'd like to speed up – four measures at the very most. Set the metronome to a super slow speed. If you can play perfectly three times in a row, increase the metronome speed by 5 BPM (beats per minute). If you can play perfectly three times in a row at the new tempo, increase the speed by another 5 BPM. Continue in this way until your technique breaks down. Write down your max speed at which you can play three times in a row perfectly. The next day, start about 20 BPM slower than max speed and work your way up. Chances are that you'll be able to play faster the next day, and you will definitely be able to play faster if you keep this up for a week or two.

## Three Ways to Increase Speed

The ability to play fast comes over time. As you continue to learn and grow, you will naturally become faster. Here are three things you can do to speed up the process.

1. **Scales for Speed** – Most of the music you play comes directly from scales, the building blocks of music. When you practice your scales, you ingrain note patterns that you will see over and over again in the songs you play. If you are already familiar with scale patterns, you'll be able to play some parts of your music without having to think too hard about the notes.
2. **Slow, Then Fast** – Play your music slowly before you try to play it fast. When you play slowly, you learn how it feels to play correctly. If you try to play too fast, too soon, you are only teaching yourself how to play the wrong notes, and you may be add unnecessary tension in your playing that will limit your speed. Start slowly, then gradually speed up over a period of time.
3. **Speed Bursts** – You may find yourself getting fatigued if you try to play an entire song at top speed. Try speed bursts. If you are practicing scales, try playing a fast four-note sequence over and over again. Then add another note or two at a time. Same with a song. Try just one measure quickly, and then add another. Even if you only practice a few measures like this, you will be gradually building speed. Speed doesn't come overnight. You have to build it up over time.



## Listen to Great Players

Listen to great guitar players often. You'll get a sense of what is possible on the instrument, and you'll begin to develop a concept of what you want to sound like. You can also watch videos on YouTube to actually see what the great players are doing. Make sure to listen to guitarists of all styles!

## Preparing for a Performance

These apply to guitarists of all levels.

- Practice, practice, practice!
- Play a run-through. In a normal practice session, you should stop to fix mistakes, but if you make a mistake in a performance, you have to keep going and pretend nothing happened. You should still stop and fix mistakes when you practice, but if you are preparing for a performance, you should also practice playing through a song without stopping, even if you make a mistake.
- If you are performing more than one song, play your music in performance order when you do your run-throughs.
- Practice performing. Play a mini-show for family or friends. Playing a private "show" for one person counts! The more opportunities you have to play in front of people, the more natural it'll feel when it's showtime.
- If possible, practice once or twice where you'll be performing. Practicing in the venue will help you feel more comfortable.
- If you are going to perform standing up, then practice standing up so you get used to how the guitar feels. You may find that you need to tighten your strap when you stand up to play. Ideally, your strap should be adjusted so that the guitar feels the same whether you are sitting or standing.
- Practice with the equipment you'll be using in your performance.

## So Many Strumming Patterns!

There are so many strumming and fingerpicking patterns! Which ones should you learn? Just pick a handful of patterns and get really good at those. You can add more later, but you only need a few to start with. It's nice to know a lot of patterns, but in reality, you'll play the same few patterns most of the time, adding variations as needed



## Sight-Reading Tips

When you play through a piece of music for the first time, you are sight-reading. Some musicians are such good sight-readers that they can read a difficult piece of music nearly perfectly the first time. If you are learning to read music with the *Godfrey Guitar Method* or any other book, you are already developing your sight-reading skills.

The best way to improve your sight-reading is to practice sight-reading. Buy a songbook with a lot of music in it, then sight-read one or two songs every day. Before you play through a song, look it over for potential problem spots. Get in the habit of scanning through the music before you sight-read it. Scouting ahead isn't cheating – it's what the pros do.

- Look at the beginning of the music for the tempo, time signature, and key signature.
- Then scan the music for repeats, roadmaps (D.S., D.C.), tempo changes, and key changes.
- Look for any spots that may trip you up – a fast run, an awkward part of the melody, or whatever might throw you off.
- Finally, play through the music without stopping. Even if you make a mistake, don't stop. Play a slower tempo than marked. After sight-reading the whole song, you can go back and take a second shot at things you may have missed.

## Three Best Tools

To make the best use of your practice time, the three most important tools in your toolbox are a pencil, a metronome, and a recording device.

- Pencil  
Use a pencil to write reminders in the music such as fingerings, circling a repeat sign, etc.
- Metronome  
Using a metronome will teach you to keep a steady tempo. You can also use a metronome to help you slow things down when you need to tackle a challenging section of music, and you can use a metronome to build your speed by increasing the tempo little by little.
- Recorder  
Your teacher can point out areas where you can improve, but there is no substitute for hearing it yourself.



## Why Learn to Read Music?

You hear stories about great musicians who don't read music. These musicians are the exception. There are even **more** great musicians who **do** read music! When you know how to read music, you don't have to look up the TAB, and you don't need someone to play it for you first. There are many guitarists who don't know how to read music. If you read music, you will stand out, and you will open yourself up to professional opportunities that are unavailable to non-readers.

## Songbooks

Where you can get music? You can find lead sheets online. (Lead sheets contain the essentials: notes, chords, and lyrics.) It's very useful to have collections of music on your shelf. Here are some suggestions:

- ***The Daily Ukulele***  
The chord diagrams in this book are for ukulele, but you can play guitar chords and read the melodies. This is a **great** collection of 365 songs in a variety of styles.
- ***The Real Book*** (also ***The Real Vocal Book***)  
A treasure trove of jazz songs. *The Real Book* is instrumentals only. *The Real Vocal Book* has lyrics.
- ***The Folksong Fakebook***  
A collection of more than 1,000 folk songs.
- ***Encyclopedia of Celtic Tunes for Flatpicking Guitar***  
A great collection of Irish and Scottish instrumentals.
- ***The Celtic Fakebook***  
More great Irish and Scottish tunes with lyrics.
- ***The Ultimate Christmas Fake Book***  
Self-explanatory.
- ***The Ultimate Christmas Guitar Book***  
Also self-explanatory.
- ***The Best Fake Book Ever***  
I don't know if it's the "best," but it has over 1,000 songs, mostly popular music from the '50s through '70s.
- ***This Is the Ultimate Fake Book***  
Another grandiose title, but it has over 1,200 songs, with a mix of jazz standards and popular oldies.



## Memorizing

While it's important to be able to read music, it's also important to memorize music, especially if you want to start playing gigs.

- Make memorizing a habit. Spend part of each practice session memorizing something or reviewing some music you have memorized.
- Don't try to memorize an entire song in one sitting. Memorize four to eight measures at a time.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat!
- If you sing, practice singing away from the guitar – on a walk, in the car, etc.
- If you are memorizing an instrumental version of a song that has lyrics, learn to sing the melody and memorize the words. This will bring more life to your instrumental, and putting words with the melody will help you remember the notes more easily.
- Look for patterns within a song. You will often see the same sequence of chords repeated from one section to the next.
- As you memorize more songs, look for patterns and similarities between different songs.

## Smooth Chord Changes

When you first start learning to play chords, it seems like it will take forever before you can change quickly from one chord to the next. Don't worry; you'll get smoother over time. Here are some ways to improve your chords.

- Play on your fingertips and keep each finger curved to avoid touching other strings.
- For the best tone quality, place each finger close to the fret, but not directly on top of the fret.
- Pluck one string at a time to make sure each string is ringing clearly.
- Play chords slowly at first for accuracy. Your speed will naturally increase over time.
- When playing from one chord to the next, look for similarities between chords. Sometimes two chords will have a similar shape (such as C and G7). Other chords may share a common finger (such as C and D7), or one finger may only have to move a little bit (such as G to D7 if you play G with fingers 1, 2, and 3).
- Pick two chords and practice playing them back and forth over and over again.





## Stage Fright

Most performers experience stage fright. When I first started playing in front of audiences, I got so nervous that my hands would shake. I still get nervous, but I've learned to manage my stage fright. Here is what has worked for me.

- Perform as often as you can. It doesn't have to be a paid gig. For example, you could play at a retirement center once or twice a month, or play at some open mics. The important thing is to get used to getting in front of people to play. The more often you perform, the more normal it will feel.
- Be ultra-prepared. The more you practice, the more confident you'll feel as a performer.
- Get comfortable with your equipment. If you are going to perform standing up, practice standing up. If you are going to be using an amp, practice with the amp. Learn how to quickly adjust your amp's settings, as well as the volume and tone knobs on your guitar.
- When you get nervous, don't try to fight the nerves. I discovered the hard way that, the more I tried to suppress my nerves, the worse my hands would shake. It felt like I was fighting myself. Now, when the nerves hit, I accept that it is happening, and I take deep, calming breaths. I imagine breathing calmness into my body and breathing out the nerves.

## Less Is More

When you are accompanying someone else, the simplest accompaniment patterns are usually the most effective. Once you have developed solid technique, it's tempting to play fancier accompaniments, but if you try to do too much as an accompanist, you'll get in the way of the soloist. As an accompanist, your role is to support whoever is playing the melody and to lay down a good groove. This also applies to playing in a band. The more people there are in a group, the less each person has to do.

## Why Scales?

The *Godfrey Guitar System* emphasizes scales. Here's why:

- Scales are the building block of musics. Once you know your scale patterns – especially the major scale patterns – you'll find it easier to learn new music.
- You can use scales to increase your speed.
- Scales are a great way to warm up your fingers and prepare your mind for practicing or performing.



## Playing and Singing

Playing guitar and singing can be challenging at first, but it's a great skill to develop, and it's fun!

- Learn a handful of strumming and fingerpicking patterns really well. It's best to learn just a few patterns and get really good at those. You can add new patterns later.
- Practice singing and playing separately. Sing the song away from the guitar, learning the vocals to the point where you can sing on autopilot. Learn the guitar part so that you can play it easily.
- Sing without a strum pattern at first. Just play steady quarter notes to get used to singing and playing at the same time.
- When you can sing and hit the chords at the same time, start adding a strumming or fingerpicking pattern.
- Play with a metronome. Even if you can play the guitar part steadily by itself, you may be surprised at how wobbly your time is when you start singing and playing at the same time.
- If you are still having trouble putting the singing and playing together, take the words out of the equation. Just sing "la-la-la" for a day or two, then "mumble" the words for another few days, and then start singing the words normally. I can't tell you why this works; I can only tell you that it works for me.

I hope you find these tips helpful. If you have a question or a tip of your own, I'd love to hear it! Use the contact form at [www.godfreyguitarlessons.com](http://www.godfreyguitarlessons.com) or send an email to [godfreyguitar@gmail.com](mailto:godfreyguitar@gmail.com).