

The Four Step Method on How to Practice

by Matt Richard, revised September 2019

Playing a brass instrument is a lot of fun! But while we all love making music, many people don't like practicing. Some think of it as a chore, some are intimidated by it, and some just don't know how to start. My four step method addresses all these: it gives you a plan, so you know how to start; it provides easy-to-follow and flexible steps so as to be approachable and non-intimidating, and it gives you a recipe for success, making it feel less like work and more like fun as you keep it up!

How much should I practice?

Brass instruments are probably some of the most athletic instruments we have: they involve lots of muscles, lots of deep breathing, and require lots of endurance. Therefore, if you play your instrument every day, you'll find it much easier than if you only play it once a week.

As for how much to practice in a day: I divide my practice into four steps. You should spend at least five minutes on each step, which makes a starting point of twenty minutes. However, there's no maximum amount of time to practice: play as much as you want! You should be aware that no one has infinite endurance, so if you start to get tired or sore, take a break and come back to it later. Personally, I take a break between each step.

Step 1 - The warm-up (5-20 mins)

Start your warm up in the middle of your range (around a G in the staff for most players). You'll be playing mostly long tones and lip slurs here. Starting in the middle of your range, go down as low as you can go, then go back to the middle, and go up as high as you can go. Remember the three strike rule for high notes: if you miss a note three times, move on to something different and come back to it later. End your warm-up with something easy and lyrical.

Step 2 - Technical practice (5-20 mins)

I have four handouts that I give to all my students at the beginning of the year: Basic Major Scales, Basic Minor Scales, Major Triads and Dominant Sevenths, and Minor Triads and Diminished Sevenths. Choose one (or more!) of these each day, and play through as many as you can. For younger students, feel free to jump around and play the ones in your range. Older students, don't skip any! Make sure you play them all. For all students: don't shy away from strange accidentals! Write in the fingering if you need to, but you **MUST** learn all your sharps and flats. You can always feel free to ask your teacher for help.

Step 3 - "Due dates" (10-45 mins)

This is the meat and potatoes of your practice session. Here you want to go over: music for your school, for other bands you might be in, and for concerts coming up in the near future. The actual music you'll be playing in front of people! Remember, playing a piece once from top to bottom may not accomplish as much as you'd like, but focusing on the difficult parts and playing them slowly will help you learn much faster.

Step 4 - Making music for fun (as long as you want!)

Finally, this is what we all came here for! Find music you enjoy and play it! It can be old solos or band pieces, it can be new solos, it can be music you found online, or you can even just improvise! The important thing is that you're having fun, because that's what music is all about!