Practice Tips
UTM Woodwind Studios

Practicing is very important, for a number of reasons:

- It allows you to solidify your fundamentals; while we discuss these in lessons, it is up to you to become fluent in them when you practice.
- It is the time to learn notes and rhythms so that we can discuss advanced concepts in lessons instead of spending time learning the music.
- It is also when you will truly learn the concepts we discuss in lessons so that we don’t have to constantly review the same ideas.
- Its repetition allows you to become comfortable with your music so that you won’t get as nervous when you perform. Or if you do, you will be able to fall back on all the times you played that music in your practicing.

Remember that you only see your teacher for one hour a week. This is not nearly enough time to make the progress that you are capable of – and that they expect from you. It is the time and effort that you put in between lessons that determine how far you will advance as a player and musician.

Organizing Your Practicing

1. Begin by taking a moment to focus yourself on practicing; this can be done while assembling your instrument.

2. Decide what you will work on, and in which order, during that session and gather your music. It’s often helpful to use a practice planner or log of some sort for this. Doing so will also allow you to track your progress and make notes for the next time you practice a piece.

3. Begin your playing by warming up. Even though playing is not a sport, you can cause physical problems if you do not warm up correctly every time you play.
   a. First, stretch your wrists.
   b. Play some long tones to get the air moving and embouchure formed.
   c. Move to slurred technical studies or scales to warm up the fingers.
   d. Finally, add the tongue by playing an articulation exercise.

4. Proceed to work through the music you have chosen for that session.
Always remember to take breaks, at least every 30 minutes. You may find that you need to take them more frequently, especially if you haven’t practiced in awhile, and that’s just fine. Listen to your body; if your mouth gets tired, if you get air leaks, if your wrists start to hurt, or if your mind wanders, then you need to take a break. Actually, you’ve gone a little too long and should’ve taken one a few minutes earlier! =)

**Practice Tips**

**General Tips:**

- **Practice at the same time each day** (whenever possible) so that it becomes a part of your daily routine that you are less likely to overlook.

- **Break your practice time into two or three shorter periods during the day** if you’re practicing for a long duration. While this is helpful if you have to work around a busy class or work schedule, its main benefit is that it prevents you from becoming mentally and physically fatigued. Warm up fully for your first session of the day, and then use an abbreviated warm up for subsequent sessions.

- **Know your own tendencies** and take them into account in deciding the order in which you will work on music. If you get bored in the middle of a practice session, plan on practicing something easier then. If you’re most alert at the beginning, that’s the time to work on the piece you’re having the most difficulty with.

- **Mindless repetition does not work.** Since you only see your teacher for one hour per week, you need to learn to evaluate yourself **whenever you play** (inc. in lessons and band) so that you can make the most of your practice time and progress as a player and musician.

- **Listen to recordings,** by different players, of whatever you’re working on. This will obviously help you learn rhythm, but even more, it helps with style and ensemble. If you’re playing an accompanied piece or a chamber work, it is very important to know the other part(s) as well as your own. This makes it much easier to put the work together, which is especially important if you’re paying an accompanist! =)

- **Don’t be afraid to write in your music** (in pencil). If you always missing an accidental or rhythm, mark it. If you’re working a few measures more slowly, write that tempo next to them. If you’re in rehearsal and have trouble with a passage, place a mark at the end of the line so you know what to work on.

**Practicing Tools:**

- **Record yourself** when you practice. This allows you to separate listening from playing so that you can focus on one or the other. Record a single piece or portion of a piece. As you listen to the recording, ask yourself whether you met the goals you set and what you want to work on next. Pay attention to rhythm, and listen to see if your phrasing is coming across.
• **Practice with a metronome.** Period. I cannot over-emphasize how important a metronome is in developing your sense of rhythm and overall musicality! Make sure, though, that you listen carefully while you’re playing to make sure that you stay with the metronome. If you notice that you’re off, stop right away (don’t wait until the end of a phrase) and figure out where you got off. Work that spot several times before moving on.

• **Use a tuner,** especially during long tones, so that you learn your pitch tendencies.

• **Play with a drone pitch,** either from a tuner, piano, or something else. Put the drone on the tonic or dominant in whatever key the phrase is in, and play slowly to make sure that you are in tune with the sounding pitch. If you are having trouble playing a particular pitch in tune, place the drone on that particular pitch. If you are working on an atonal passage, you may place the drone on an arbitrary pitch, like the tuning “A.”

• **Use a mirror!** By monitoring your finger motions in a mirror, you can tell whether or not you are keeping your fingers curved properly and close to the tone holes or keys. You can also watch for changes to your embouchure and for extraneous body movement (the “clarinet wing”).

Learning Tricky Passages:

• **Fingerings.** Are there alternate fingerings that 1) sound just as good and 2) might facilitate this particular passage? If so, use them!

• **Isolate.** There are two reasons most musicians who struggle with a passage, the first of which is that they are trying to play too much of any given passage at once! Work on tricky passages on their own; if a passage is long, break it into smaller chunks (phrases, measures or even beats). Remember to overlap chunks so that you can put it back into context more easily.

• **Slow it down – with a metronome.** The second reason for musicians struggling with a passage stems from trying to play a passage too quickly! If you can’t play a passage slowly, then playing it at tempo will never happen.

  1. Choose a tempo where you can comfortably execute the passage several times.

  2. Once you’ve played it correctly three times in a row, speed up the metronome: 10 beats per minute if you had no trouble at all, 5 beats per minute if you had a little trouble getting it at the previous tempo. If you are using a traditional metronome, each “click” is approximately a 5% increase in tempo. In that case, speeding up one or two “clicks” is analogous to 5-10 beats per minute.

  3. When you can play it three times in a row at the new tempo, speed it up again.

  4. Repeat until you’re at performance tempo.
5. Some musicians write down a top tempo for a particular passage for a practice session. This way, they can quantify difficult spots, and can visually see the progress they are making when they return to the spot and are able to play it faster!

Remember that this should be done over a period of time, not in a single practice session. Once you get “finger-tied,” write down the tempo and move on to something else.

- **Choose your breaths early in the practicing process.** When working on a difficult passage, people often add unneeded breaths so that they have extra time to figure out the notes. Don’t rely on this crutch! Choose your breaths early on and avoid taking extra breaths. (You can always move a breath as you speed the passage up.)

- **Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.** Playing something correctly once isn’t enough, especially if you’ve played it incorrectly several times before that. The human body cannot distinguish between “right” and “wrong;” it only remembers what you have done repeatedly. In other words, if you make the same mistake 10 times and then play it correctly once, your body will remember the mistake instead of the correct version. It has been said that for every erroneous performance, the brain needs 25 correct repetitions to “undo” what it has learned!

- **Work backwards.** We practice the beginning of a tricky passage many times, but the end gets relatively few repetitions. So, start from the end: play the last note group until it’s comfortable, then add the note group before that and play until comfortable, then add another note group, etc… The thought here is to work TOWARD familiarity, not AWAY from it.

- **Use the Prepared Finger Technique** if you’re working on an articulated passage and your fingers and tongue aren’t lining up. Play the first note and then put your tongue on the reed. With your tongue still on the reed, move your fingers to the second note. Release your tongue and then return it to the reed. Finger the third note. Release the tongue and return to the reed. Repeat for the entire passage.

- **Change the rhythm.** If you’re playing a passage of eighth or sixteenth notes, the following rhythms are useful:

![Rhythms](image)

If the passage is triplets, try these rhythms:
If you’re working on sextuplets, then you can use the triplet rhythms. Another option is to think of three groups of two notes; then, play it again, thinking of two groups of three notes:

• **Change the articulation.** If the passage is slurred, tongue the entire passage; if it is tongued, slur it (note: if the fingerings for a given passage are dependent upon the particular written articulation, so use your best judgment). It is also helpful to use the following articulation patterns for groups of eighth or sixteenth notes:

For triplets or sextuplets, these patterns are helpful:

**Resources**


Focused, deliberate practicing:

Practice habits: