



THE GLASGOW SCHOOL OF MUSIC

How to Practise Effectively

A practical guide for students and parents

GSOFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

**Practice is where the lesson becomes
learning.**

GSoFM Academy Practice Principle

RES-003 | VERSION 1.0 | PUBLIC RESOURCE

Focused - Calm - Consistent - Musical

DOCUMENT CONTROL

Publication Information

A controlled public-facing Academy resource for parents and students.

Field	Record
Document ID	RES-003
Title	How to Practise Effectively
Subtitle	A practical guide for students and parents
Version	1.0
Status	Public Resource
Owner	The Glasgow School of Music
Publication date	29 June 2026
Review cycle	Annual, or after major Academy content changes

GSOFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

**This guide is designed to support lessons, not
replace teacher-led instruction.**

Use alongside tutor advice

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How this guide should be used

Practice does not need to be complicated, but it does need to be clear.

Many students are told to practise, but not all students know what effective practice actually means. This guide explains practice as a series of small, focused decisions: what to work on, how slowly to go, how to notice mistakes, and how to turn lesson notes into musical progress.

It is written for parents and students. Younger students will need parent support; older students can use the guide more independently. The aim is not to create pressure. The aim is to make practice calmer, shorter, more structured and more successful.

GSOFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

The goal is not more practice. The goal is better practice.

GSoFM Academy Practice Principle

CONTENTS

Guide Structure

01**What effective practice is**

The difference between playing through and practising properly.

02**Building the habit**

How to make practice routine, calm and sustainable.

03**The weekly practice method**

A simple structure for turning lesson notes into progress.

04**Solving musical problems**

Slow practice, chunking, repetition and correction.

05**Motivation and plateaus**

How to handle frustration, dips and slow progress.

06**Exams and performance**

How practice changes when preparing to be heard.

07**Tools and checklists**

Practical pages for parents and students.



SECTION 01

What Effective Practice Is

Small, focused practice beats long, unfocused repetition.

PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Practice is not just playing through

Playing a piece from beginning to end can be enjoyable, but it is not always the most effective way to improve.

Effective practice is the process of identifying what needs attention, working on it carefully, checking whether it has improved, and then reconnecting it to the whole piece. It is more like problem-solving than performing.

01**Playing through**

Repeats the whole piece and often repeats the same errors.

02**Effective practice**

Targets one problem, slows it down and checks improvement.

03**Musical finish**

Reconnects the work to expressive music-making.

GSOFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

A mistake repeated quickly becomes a habit. Slow it down before you repeat it.

GSoFM Academy Practice Principle

THE THREE-PART MODEL

Prepare, practise, perform

Every practice session should include preparation, focused work and a final play-through.

Stage	What happens	Typical time
Prepare	Read the lesson notes, decide the goal, set up the instrument and remove distractions.	2-5 min
Practise	Work slowly on the selected passage, exercise, scale or technical point.	10-25 min
Perform	Play something through musically at the end, even if it is short.	3-8 min

This structure prevents practice from becoming either all admin or all performance. The student begins with intention, spends most of the session improving something specific, then finishes by reconnecting the work to music-making.

COMMON PRACTICE TRAPS

What prevents progress

Most practice problems are caused by unclear goals or unsuitable methods.

Trap	What it looks like	Better approach
Too fast	The student repeats mistakes at performance speed.	Slow down until the pattern is reliable.
Too much	The student tries to fix the whole piece at once.	Choose one section, bar or issue.
No checking	The student practises but does not listen critically.	Record, pause, compare and adjust.
Last-minute practice	Work is squeezed in just before the next lesson.	Use shorter sessions across the week.

GSOFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Good practice is not harder practice. It is clearer practice.

GSoFM Academy Practice Principle



SECTION 02

Building the Habit

**Consistency is easier when practice feels calm,
visible and realistic.**

PRACTICE RHYTHM

Little and often usually wins

For most students, short focused sessions work better than rare long sessions.

Stage	Suggested rhythm	Notes
Early beginner	5-10 minutes, 4-5 times weekly	Routine and confidence.
Developing beginner	10-20 minutes, 4-5 times weekly	Lesson notes and short repeats.
Intermediate	20-40 minutes, 4-6 times weekly	Technique, pieces and reading.
Exam preparation	Frequent focused sessions	Avoid cramming; follow tutor priorities.

PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT

Make the easy thing the useful thing

The easier it is to start, the more likely practice will happen.

01**Ready instrument**

Keep the instrument, music and pencil accessible.

02**Quiet start**

Reduce distractions before the first note.

03**Visible routine**

Make practice part of the weekly rhythm.

GSOFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

The first win is simply starting calmly.

GSofM Academy Practice Principle

PARENT SUPPORT

Support without taking over

Parents do not need to be musicians to help practice succeed.

Helpful action	Why it works
Ask what the teacher set.	Keeps practice linked to the lesson.
Praise focus, not just results.	Builds resilience and effort.
Use a timer when useful.	Makes the session manageable.
End before frustration takes over.	Protects the student's relationship with music.



SECTION 03

The Weekly Practice Method

A good week has a simple plan, not a perfect plan.

THE WEEKLY LOOP

Lesson note to progress

The best practice weeks begin by translating the lesson into a small plan.

Step	Question	Example
Identify	What did the teacher ask me to work on?	Bars 9-12, scale, fingering.
Prioritise	What matters most this week?	Fix rhythm before speed.
Repeat	How many careful repetitions?	Five slow correct repeats.
Check	Can I play it accurately?	Record or play for a parent.
Reconnect	Can I put it back into context?	Play the surrounding phrase.

GSOFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Practice should turn lesson notes into evidence of progress.

GSoFM Academy Practice Principle

EXAMPLE SESSION PLANS

10, 20 and 30 minutes

Practice plans should match the student's age, concentration and level.

Session	Suggested structure
10 minutes	2 min prepare, 6 min target passage, 2 min play something enjoyed.
20 minutes	3 min warm-up, 10 min target passage, 4 min technique, 3 min play-through.
30 minutes	5 min warm-up, 12 min main problem, 6 min technique/reading, 5 min second piece, 2 min review.

These are models, not rigid rules. The principle remains the same: begin with focus, work on a target, and finish musically.

WEEKLY BALANCE

Pieces, technique, reading and listening

A balanced week prevents one area from dominating all practice.

01**Pieces**

Music being learned for lessons, performance or enjoyment.

02**Technique**

Scales, warm-ups, rudiments, exercises or coordination.

03**Musicianship**

Reading, rhythm, theory, listening and reflection.

GSoFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

A rounded musician practises more than the current piece.

GSoFM Academy Practice Principle



SECTION 04

Solving Musical Problems

**Do not repeat the problem. Reduce it,
understand it, then rebuild it.**

PROBLEM-SOLVING METHOD

Find the exact problem

The smaller the problem, the easier it is to fix.

Problem	Possible cause	Practice method
Wrong notes	Reading, fingering or hand position.	Name notes, slow down, isolate parts.
Unsteady rhythm	Pulse not internalised.	Clap, count aloud, use subdivisions.
Technical tension	Movement too large or too fast.	Slow motion, release tension.
Memory slips	Weak structure awareness.	Identify patterns and landmarks.

SLOW PRACTICE

Slow enough to be correct

Slow practice only works if it is slow enough to remove the error.

If the student cannot play it correctly at the chosen speed, the speed is still too fast. Slow practice is not a punishment. It gives the brain and body time to understand what should happen.

GSOFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Slow practice is not slow progress. It is how secure progress is built.

GSoFM Academy Practice Principle

Slow Practice Checklist

- Choose a small section.
- Set a speed where accuracy is possible.
- Repeat correctly several times.
- Increase speed only when secure.
- Reconnect the section to the music around it.

CHUNKING

Practise in small sections

Most difficult passages become manageable when reduced.

Chunk size	When to use it
One note or movement	For technical blocks or coordination problems.
Two to four notes	For fingering, articulation, bowing or voice placement.
One bar	For rhythm or reading problems.
One phrase	For musical shape and expression.

REPETITION

Repeat the correction, not the mistake

Repetition only helps when the repeated version is accurate and attentive.

01**Correct**

The version repeated should be good enough to build security.

02**Slow**

The speed should allow the student to notice detail.

03**Short**

The section should be small enough to stay focused.

GSoFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Five careful repetitions are worth more than twenty careless ones.

GSoFM Academy Practice Principle

LISTENING BACK

Record, notice, adjust

Students often hear more clearly when they listen back.

Listen for	Question
Accuracy	Were the notes, rhythms or words secure?
Fluency	Did the music continue without unnecessary stops?
Tone	Did the sound match the musical intention?
Expression	Did the music communicate shape and character?



SECTION 05

Motivation and Plateaus

**Progress is not always visible every week, but
good routines still compound.**

MOTIVATION

Do not depend on constant enthusiasm

Even committed students will have flat weeks.

01**Reduce**

Make the target smaller.

02**Start**

Begin with something familiar.

03**Finish**

End with music the student enjoys.

GSOFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Routine is more reliable than mood.

GSoFM Academy Practice Principle

PLATEAUS

When progress feels stuck

Plateaus are normal in learning.

Sign	Likely meaning	Response
Same mistake returns	Correction is not secure.	Slow down and reduce the section.
Piece feels too hard	Task needs breaking down.	Ask tutor for priority sections.
Student avoids practice	Goal may feel overwhelming.	Use short structured sessions.
Progress feels invisible	Improvement may be gradual.	Record the same section across weeks.

GSOFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

A plateau is not a stop sign. It is a signal to change the method.

GSoFM Academy Practice Principle

AVOIDING CONFLICT

Protect the relationship with music

Practice should be structured, but not emotionally damaging.

Parent Support Checklist

- Keep practice times realistic.
- Praise effort, attention and improvement.
- Separate behaviour issues from musical ability.
- Ask the tutor for help before a pattern becomes entrenched.
- End sessions before frustration becomes the main memory.

GSOFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

The home routine should support the lesson, not turn the parent into the teacher.

GSoFM Academy Practice Principle



SECTION 06

Exams and Performance

**When students prepare to be heard, practice
needs structure and confidence.**

EXAM PREPARATION

Accuracy, fluency and confidence

Exam practice is not just about playing pieces from beginning to end.

Area	Focus
Pieces	Secure notes, rhythm, fluency, character and recovery after slips.
Scales/technical work	Regular short repetition with accuracy and evenness.
Sight-reading	Small frequent attempts; keep going rather than correcting every note.
Aural/listening	Use tutor-recommended activities and active listening.

PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

Practise starting, finishing and recovering

A performance is not the same as a private practice session.

01**Start**

Practise beginning from silence.

02**Continue**

Keep going after small slips.

03**Finish**

Practise endings and confident closure.

GSoFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Performance confidence is practised, not wished into existence.

GSoFM Academy Practice Principle



SECTION 07

Tools and Checklists

Simple tools make practice easier to start, track and improve.

WEEKLY PRACTICE TRACKER

A simple record

This page can be printed or copied into a notebook.

Day	Time	Main focus	What improved?
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

PROBLEM-SOLVING SHEET

Use this when something gets stuck

A short thinking tool for students and parents.

Prompt	Response
What exactly is difficult?	
Where does the problem start and end?	
Can I make the section smaller?	
What speed allows accuracy?	
How will I know it improved?	

STUDENT CHECKLIST

Before the next lesson

A student does not need a perfect week, but they should arrive knowing what happened.

Student Lesson Preparation Checklist

- I looked at my lesson notes.
- I practised the main target more than once.
- I slowed down the difficult section.
- I can explain what improved.
- I can explain what still needs help.
- I brought my music, notebook and materials.

PARENT CHECKLIST

Supporting the practice week

Parents do not need every musical answer. They need to help the structure hold.

Parent Practice Support Checklist

- The practice routine is visible somewhere in the week.
- The student knows the main task from the lesson.
- The instrument and materials are easy to access.
- Practice is short enough to be realistic.
- Questions for the tutor are noted before the lesson.
- Progress is praised specifically.

RECOMMENDED NEXT RESOURCES

Continue the Academy pathway

This guide sits inside the wider GSofM Academy Resource Library.

ID	Resource	Use
RES-001	The Complete Parent Guide to Music Lessons	Broad overview for families.
RES-002	Preparing for Your First Lesson	First-lesson preparation guide.
RES-004	Weekly Practice Planner	Printable planning sheets.
RES-005	Music Practice Journal	Longer-term record of progress.

GSOFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Practice is the bridge between teaching and independence.

GSofM Academy Practice Principle

FINAL SUMMARY

The effective practice standard

Practice should be focused, calm and connected to musical purpose.

Effective practice is not measured only by minutes. It is measured by attention, method and improvement. A student who learns how to practise gains a skill that reaches far beyond one piece, one exam or one lesson block.

Effective Practice Checklist

- Choose a clear target.
- Slow down enough to be accurate.
- Practise small sections.
- Repeat corrections, not mistakes.
- Listen back when useful.
- Finish musically.
- Ask for help when stuck.



The Glasgow School of Music

GSofM Academy Resource Library

GSOFM PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Lessons in Music, Skills for Life

The Glasgow School of Music

RES-003 | How to Practise Effectively | Version 1.0

theglasgowschoolofmusic.co.uk