

PRACTICE ADVICE

As a drum teacher I have heard many reasons why students don't practise.

The simple fact is that if you want to learn to play the drum set (or any musical instrument) you have to practise; preferably every day. Sorry, that's just the way it is. No one is born with the ability to play drum set to a high level, it comes down to whether or not you're willing to do the work.

Coordination problems

I often hear beginners and non drummers say "I can't play drums, I'm uncoordinated." Very few people, if any, have the raw/natural coordination required to play three- or four-way coordinated drum set rhythms; you need the coordination, and that has to be developed over time with practice. In fact all of the primary exercises involved in drumming, such as paradiddle variations and sticking exercises are coordination building exercises.

Another thing to keep in mind is that some rhythms require less coordination than others. For instance a basic rock pattern, say exercise 2.1.8 for example, can usually be learned in about thirty minutes, and with a few minutes practice a day can be mastered within about one week. However something like a Samba rhythm, such as 5.1.1, requires a much higher level of coordination and may take an experienced player several days of practice just to learn, let alone speed up and use practically. In either case all drummers who play at a high professional level have done serious physical practice to train their brains and bodies to coordinate the way they want, so they can play the correct drum or cymbal at the right time.

"Oh, but they're naturally talented"

I hear a lot of people say that other people are "naturally talented". When it comes to drums, I don't believe in "Natural Talent". I say this because drumming isn't one skill, it is lots of little skills brought together. To put *all* these skills under the heading of "Natural Talent" could be insulting to someone who has worked extremely hard on them. Every person has different strengths and weaknesses. Someone who is genetically blessed with a body which responds quickly to physical training may struggle with the theoretical concepts involved in drumming, while others may easily learn the theoretical material, or have a great sense of rhythm, but be lacking in the quick physical response or the drive to spend time practising. Instead of worrying about "natural talent" try to think about where your strengths and weaknesses lie.

The table below lists some personal attributes which you'll find in successful musicians. A quick self-assessment will help you identify what you should work harder on, as well as highlighting areas in which you have a head start.

Attribute	Very Good	Good	Poor	Very Poor
ability to concentrate for long periods (mental endurance)				
ability to do physical work for long periods (physical endurance)				
ability to memorise and recall theoretical concepts and ideas				
ability to imitate others by sight				
inner sense of timing and rhythm				
ability to read, decipher and understand written material				
ability to identify and imitate sounds you hear				
ability to not be distracted by background noise				
ability to do isolated work away from others				
Interest in this subject compared to other subjects				
ability to notice fine detail				
ability to learn physical, practical skills				
ability to recover from negative criticism				
sense self esteem, (do you get stressed and embarrassed easily)				

All of these attributes work together when it comes to learning something. You'll notice the table above doesn't include luck, natural talent or an expensive drum set.

Do you need a drum set to practise on?

Many of the exercises you will learn early on are primarily music reading, coordination and control exercises. Most of these can be done away from the drum set. So no, you don't need a drum set straight away. You can learn the exercises by tapping on other things, drum pads, pillows, an old chair or a mattress for example. Once you have control over the exercises then you can then sit at a drum set and polish them. Doing this will cut down on the noise, frustration and aural fatigue that comes with the stop, start, stop, start practice that happens when you're first learning new exercises and rhythms. However you will need a drum set to perfect these exercises and your technique. If you are practising drum fills or patterns that involve hitting toms and specific cymbals then you will need something to imitate these, (or target practice, as I call it). Obviously the best option is to have a drum set, however I have seen and have used practice kits that are combinations of rubber practice pads set up in the same configuration as a drum set.

Do you need to practise to a metronome?

Some drum teachers will want to slap me for saying this but... Technically speaking no you don't. Having said that there are some undeniable benefits to owning and using a metronome. If you use one correctly they will improve your sense of timing, let you know how much more you have to speed up (or slow down) the rhythms you're learning, and help you develop the stability in your playing necessary for playing to a click track – an essential skill when it comes to recording.

“How long does it take to become good at playing drums?”

Many people ask this because they want to know how much work is expected of them, how long it's going to take or even how much it will cost them. The answer to the question depends on many things, but what you have to ask yourself is **what do you consider to be "good"**? Do you just want to play along to songs in your bedroom or are you wanting to tour the world with successful musicians?

The best advice I was given was **"Do it because you love music and want to get good at it"** if you enjoy your practice and drumming then the question of how long it takes is not important anymore.

Studying the techniques of master players

Studying the skills and techniques of master players is a must for any aspiring musician and can be inspiring and rewarding. However, there are times when it can be very tiring and discouraging to study the work of someone more advanced than you, especially if you are struggling to learn the skill/s you're focusing on.

Every musician goes through times of self doubt; wondering why they bother learning in the first place. If you find you are not enjoying the learning process and are feeling rundown and depressed about your abilities, take a break from those elements and practise the things that make you happy again. Don't push yourself to get too good too quickly. It's better to take your time and enjoy it than quit playing all together because you're tired and depressed.

You might be surprised to know that many of the great players come from musical families where their parents influenced them to learn music from a very young age. Most of these players have spent a lifetime studying their art with music lessons starting before school age, going all the way through their school years and then on to college / university; they may also have done very detailed personal study on their instrument and have practised for hours every day. In fact, it's not unusual for a professional musician to practise for eight to fifteen hours each day. Not everyone has the resources to be able to practise eight hours a day for 30 years, so keep this in mind when you're studying the work of these masters.

Other general practice Advice

- **Look after your instrument:** Having broken equipment or equipment you can't use properly makes practising harder and less enjoyable.
- **Make yourself comfortable:** A comfortable practice environment (temperature, noise, smell) will make it easier to spend the time practising, as well as making learning easier.
- **Keep your instrument handy:** You're more likely to spend the time practising if you don't have to spend half an hour moving everything out of the way of your instrument and then putting it back again when you're done.
- **Keep the neighbours happy:** Talk to anyone who might be concerned about the noise and see if there is a specific time you can practise, even if it is only for a short period of time. Negotiation here is the key and will help to keep all parties happy and you practising uninterrupted.
- **"Out of sight, out of mind":** This is true when it comes to practising! If your drum set is somewhere obvious and you see it several times a day you will be reminded and inspired to practise. If it is in a spare room or backyard shed and "out of the way" then you will have to consciously make the effort to go out to it and do your practise.
- **Small bites:** You don't need to practise for hours at a time. Break your practice into five or ten minute blocks of time, you might do five minutes in the morning, and another ten minutes later in the afternoon.
- **Lessons are for learning:** If you are having lessons with a teacher then your lesson time should be a time for learning new skills. If the only time you play drums is at your lessons then you're wasting time and money, and you'll be learning a lot slower. Make sure you practise what your teacher gives you at home during the week so when you turn up to your next lesson you can learn something new and build on the skills you have learned.
- **Repetition is the rule:** I often get asked "how many times do I have to play this exercise?" Here's an approximate guide I use.
 - 5 times will let you understand it.
 - 50 times will let you play it.
 - 500 times will let you use it in a song.
 - 5000 times will let you master it and teach it to others.

While not true of all exercises, it gives some insight into how much work you will have to do to get results.
- **It's not about the equipment:** You don't need a high end professional drum set to learn to play drums. **All** of the exercises in this book are playable on a standard five piece beginners drum set. I have designed them that way. Just because someone has an expensive drum set doesn't mean they're a good player, it just means they have the money to buy an expensive drum set.
- **Talking about practising is not practising ... NOW GO PRACTISE!**