

## How (and Why) To Keep a Practice Journal

With my students, I find myself talking not only about *how* to practice, but also about how to organize practice time. I encourage all of my students to keep a practice journal: an oft-overlooked structural tool for practicing.

Keeping a practice journal is very helpful for a number of reasons.

1. You will be able to sit down and start right away at the important parts, without trying to remember where you were the previous day.
2. You can more easily set and meet certain specific practice goals by writing them down.
3. A practice journal is a flexible tool and can evolve right along with you.
4. It helps you keep track of how much time you're actually practicing, as opposed to how much time you think you've practiced!
5. It gives you a sense of how long it will take to learn a new piece, based on your history of practice with similar pieces.
6. You can save time by remembering when you learned a similar piece quite well and looking back to see what you did when you practiced it.
7. It will show that you are making demonstrable progress over time.

There are several ways to keep a practice journal. More important than figuring out the "right" method is to find a method that works for you and stick to it for a consistent length of time.

Step 1: Find a notebook that will work well for this task. It should be relatively light but large enough to write longer entries when needed. I use a page-a-day calendar, but you can also use a lined or unlined notebook. A steno notebook works really well.

Step 2: List all the solo and collaborative pieces you're working on. Include your warm-up exercises and etudes. Include any technical information your teacher has discussed with you recently. Write it out in list form. This is your starting point, and will provide an overview of what you need to be spending your practice time on in a given day.

Step 3: You are ready to start logging your practice time. Some people find it helpful to write start and stop times for each piece, while others prefer to just write what they have done, preferring not to be aware of the passage of time.

A sample entry could read like this:

5:20-5:50 Chopin etude. Metronome work measures 15-23, from 88-112.

5:50-6:15 Schumann sonata, development, slow practice for relaxed fingers and good sound quality

6:15-6:45 Bach Fugue, fingering. Practiced individual voices throughout.

It's possible to go into more detail per entry, noting, for example, if you find something frustrating to work on or if you have a breakthrough. It's also helpful to write down where you would like to start the next day on a given piece.

A practice journal can also be useful to jot down errant thoughts you may have during a practice session. For example, you might remember that you forgot to return a phone call or pick up something from the store, right in the middle of a really good practice session. Or perhaps you'll get a good idea for a term paper topic you've been working on. Writing it down can free up your thoughts to focus on the task at hand, because you can trust that it will be waiting for you -- along with the rest of the "real world" -- at the end of your practice session.