



Lesson 11: How to Use Percentages (and not MINUTES)

In this lesson, we'll discuss one of the main reason your jazz guitar training program (or practice routine) may not work: the rabbit hole!

And by this I mean: instead of seeing your practice time as a well balanced meal (with, say, a little bit of every topic in it), some people start practicing the first exercise ... and don't stop working on that very first item until time runs out!

This is where using a training program with percentages comes in handy. Did you notice, while building your own regimen, we didn't say for example "15 minutes of scales, and then 30 minutes working on a song" ? If you remember correctly we always talked about the proportion (the percent) of your practice time dedicated to each topic.

So if you're ready to practice now, your mission, shall you accept it, consists of three fairly easy parts: -**1- Decide** how much time you'll spend before you start, -**2- Subdivide** accordingly and -**3- Use a timer** and STOP when it's time.

And here are the details of each steps

-1- Decide How Much Time

Before you even touch the guitar, before even getting in tune and assembling the materials for your practice session, you have to decide and ask the question: how many minutes of focused practice can you invest now?

Make it a round number, like 45 minutes, 60 minutes and so on. And be completely honest with yourself. If you have 3 hours ahead of you, don't make the mistake of assuming you'll be focused for ... 180 minutes! That's too long.

Instead, commit yourself to 90 minutes of practice. And use whatever time is left to jam, use play alongs, and other "fun" musical stuff that is NOT focused practice. That's what I call leisure musical time.

-2- Subdivide Your Time in Advance

Now that you know you will spend 90 minutes (as in our example) in focused practice, you can make the percentages into minutes. Let's use this fictional example with John Doe.

John has 5% warm up, 50% on repertoire, 20% on scales stuff and 25% on comping exercises.

It means that John will write down the practice subdivisions according to his 90-minute length.

That makes 5 minutes warm up, 45 minutes on repertoire, 18 minutes on scales and 22 minutes on comping exercises.

Easy enough? Good! You can also use a spreadsheet in a computer to automate these calculations for you.

-3- Use a Timer (to Stop Yourself)

Now, here comes the hardest part of it all: executing the program with discipline. You have to set a timer (seriously) and only practice on a certain exercise for the allotted time. Once the alarm beeps, stop, and move on to the next exercise.

That is, perhaps, the main reason the most amazing of practice routine won't work for any or all students: the lack of discipline in keeping it balanced overall.

You have to stop yourself!

As obvious and childish as it may sound, the above steps may completely change the way to think about music and how much progress you make. Failure to comply to this simple procedure means that you may fall "into the rabbit hole".

I don't know if you've read Alice in Wonderland, but here's the rabbit hole demonstrated in jazz guitar practice. Let's use John Doe again.

John warms up for 5 minutes and it's really fun. When the timer beeps he goes on to practice his scales, which he has only 20% or 18 minutes to work through. He thinks that he will be better prepared and his fingers will be warmer for his repertoire after some scales practice.

So John sets his timer for 18 minutes, and launches into scale positions stuff and arpeggios. But guess what? When the alarm beeps, he continues, for "just one more minute". Next time he looks at the clock, it's time to pick up the kids at school. Or go to bed.

Result: John didn't even get through half of his practice materials, yet spent all his time on scales. A good analogy here: eating only meat and no veggies. Or vice versa.

The reason we built the training program in proportions (and not in minutes) was to ensure you always have enough time to get to everything. If you consistently fall down the rabbit hole, you'll always skim the last few items on your practice plan.

I repeat, you have to stop yourself! Beware of the rabbit hole!

And lastly, you also have to think of the eternal condition of "having too much to practice". If you did your homework and planned a good program, you always have time to get to everything. It adds up to 100%, right?

I've heard this over the years with private students telling me during a lesson "You gave me too much last time". My answer is always: "I only structured your practice and it added to 100%. How can there be too much?"

So that's usually where students confess of having spent lots and lots of time on the first few items of their plan, and completely neglected the last few exercises on their program.

PLEASE, do not do that!

The time splits are there to give structure to your practice time, to maximize your progress.

Remember, the program is not a checklist of things you **MUST** master before the next lesson. The materials are exercises to strengthen your musical muscles. And for most topics, *you'll never actually be done* with them. I've been playing guitar 20 years and I still practice scales!

Here's another good analogy: say you have a program at your local gym for getting in shape. The coach assigns some running to you. Then he'll re-evaluate you in two weeks ... but you'll most likely have *running* again on your next training routine. I'm sure. You can always improve your skills as a runner.

The same way you're never done running, eating, sleeping, brushing your teeth, you'll never be done with scales and arpeggios and comping. This is not discouraging. In fact, it's nice to see that we can always vary the materials to keep it fresh and adjusted to your level.

Good?

So remember the three steps

- 1- Decide how much time,
- 2- Subdivide and
- 3- Use a timer and stop yourself!