

A Little Guide To Becoming A Fiddler

Everything you need to know to easily learn
and happily practice music

By Jason Kleinberg



Here's a short list of everything you need to know about learning the fiddle or any instrument in a simple bullet point list. I'm giving everything away right now. TODAY. If you don't take another lesson from me ever again but you keep and practice these things, you'll succeed as a musician. Here's the short list:

- You are a musician if you PLAY EVERY DAY
- Listening is practice too
- Sing what you play
- Practice audiation
- Beginner's mind
- Go slow
- If you're struggling, then change something
- Repeat 1000 times
- Micro-learning
- Loop it
- Be your own teacher
- Drone on
- Remember to sound good
- Review

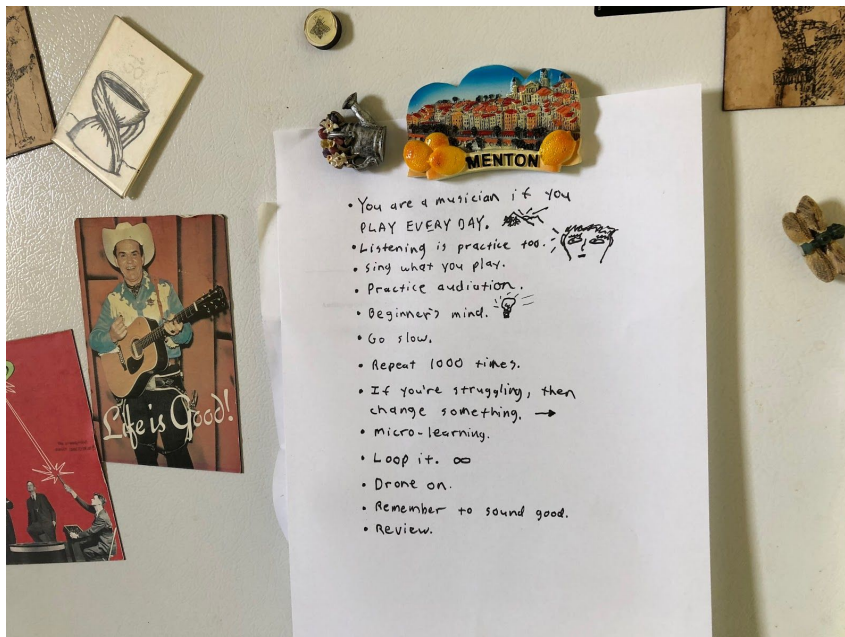


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Imagine a post-apocalyptic world in which the internet is gone but your fiddle remains along with a printout of this document. You'll be able to keep learning music, even in this dystopian future!

People come to FiddleHed because they want to learn fiddle tunes. But the stuff listed here is the heart and soul what I'm trying to give to students.

I suggest you print the list above (or the handwritten list at the end of this little book) and post it on your refrigerator or somewhere you'll see it every day. Or better yet, write it out yourself:



You are a musician if you PLAY EVERY DAY.

You've heard it before, now you're hearing it again. When learning and instrument, there's a lot you have to learn, memorize and remember. Relax you left hand! Curve the fingers! Tuck in your elbow!

But [play every day](#) is by far the most useful thing to remember. If you just do this one thing, questions will be answered and things will fall into place. If you practice consistently you'll naturally learn better ways to practice. Your hands are intelligent; they'll learn what they need to learn if you just give them a chance.

When in doubt, just practice. Don't think about it too much! Just play a simple tune. You'll learn more from regular practice than I'll ever teach you. If you can just do this one thing, you're sure to find your way as a musician.

But here's a new spin on this idea. Besides fiddling, how else can you play today? Can you transform a chore into play somehow? Maybe a conversation can be more playful. Tell some dad jokes (my specialty, and I don't even have kids 😂)

Listening is practice too.

This all-important fact gets forgotten, even if you've been learning, playing and performing for forty years! And then, all of a sudden, you remember to listen.



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Do it NOW. Close your eyes and listen. I just took a break from writing and did it myself. I heard a small plane fly overhead, the quiet hum of the computer, a car whoosh by, another car, some silence (also music) and then some birds.

Remember you can do this anywhere, any time, and it will make you a better musician.

If you're playing with others, take a moment to listen to the sound of those instruments, to what they are playing. Listen to the ideas and emotions behind the music and in yourself. Listen to your mind and body.

Here is a listening challenge:

- Close your eyes and listen.
- Try not to label what you hear.
 - This is hard to do! But try anyway. I find it's easier when there's a lot of different sounds, like in a train station.



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Sing what you play

If you sing what you play, you'll develop a better ear, which means you'll play better in tune and learn tunes more quickly. With this practice the instrument becomes an extension of your voice so that the music can flow with less analytical thinking.

The process of singing and playing:

- Sing a phrase from a tune.
- Then play it on the fiddle.
- Keep alternating in a loop until it's natural.
- Move on to a different phrase and repeat the process.
- Repeat the process using the entire tune.
- Advanced: Sing and play at the same time.
 - Sing the melody while playing it on fiddle.
 - Sing the melody while playing chords on the fiddle.

Practice audiation

[Audiation](#) is the process of "hearing music in your head." When you're walking down the street and you start humming a tune, that's audiation. It's something that everyone does unconsciously.



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Intentionally practice audiation to improve your tuning and better remember tunes. This is because practicing audiation will help you to form a clear mental model of how each note sound. Audiation is closely related to the process of “Sing what you play”. The two modes can be practiced in conjunction.

The basic practice of audiation:

- Play a note or a small phrase.
- Hear it in your head.
- Continuously alternate between fiddling and audiation.

Besides improving your tuning and melodic recall, audiation is something you can learn to practice anywhere. If you have a ten-minute break from work, listen to something you’re learning, pause the recording and then audiate that. Visualize yourself playing that on fiddle.

Beginner’s mind

Most students are in a big hurry to not be a beginner anymore. They want to learn more, do it faster. I encourage you to approach every new tune and technique with curiosity, no matter what “level” you’re at. What can I learn from this tune? How can I use it to practice things I’m struggling with? How is it connected to other music and even other non-musical things in my life?

Go slow

Most students go way too fast, and they do it in two ways:

- They play things too fast.
- They learn new things at too fast of a rate.

Remember: your brain is usually quicker than your hands. Your brain gets the basic idea, gets bored and wants to move on. Your hands, arms and ears need a lot more time to learn something.

If you're struggling, then change something

Maybe you're getting bored. Or maybe you just can't get something. Sometimes it's best just to change something about what you're practicing or the way you practice:

- Add variation
- Add dynamics
 - slow/fast
 - loud/quiet
- Sing then play
- Audiation
- Change something external
 - Walk to a different room
 - Sit down or stand up
 - Close your eyes
- If all else fails, just take a little break, or stop for the day
 - It will most likely be easier when you return.

Repeat 1000 times

Student: Ha ha Mr. FiddleHed, that's funny. Play it 1000 times. Good one.

FiddleHed: No joke! Repeat a thousand times. I learned this from Earl Scruggs.



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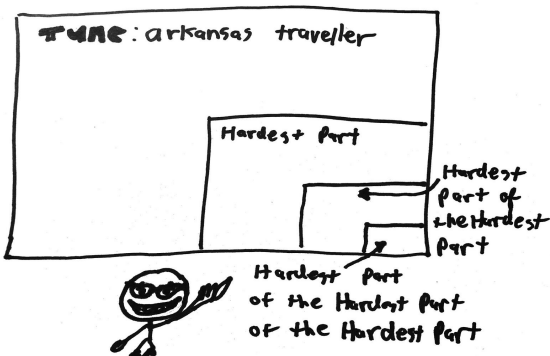
This is a simple way to become a master. But remember to approach it as a human instead of a robot. Pay attention. Adjust *how* you practice that one thing. Add variations to make it a creative practice. This will make it interesting, fun and productive.

After playing for over forty years, I can still take a simple tune like Kerry Polka and play it for an hour. Not bragging, just saying!

Micro-learning

There's an overwhelming amount of things to remember and practice when you learn an instrument. Don't panic! Start with something very, very small. Get a little bit better at, then a little better still. Then do the next small thing. String together small things until a bigger thing starts to sound good.

This is the essence of [micro-learning](#). After you've learned a tune you may encounter new difficulties. Return to micro-learning to work it out. Pinpoint what is actually difficult and practice that.



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Loop it

Once you have slowly worked out the technical details of a scale, exercise or tune phrase, the next step is to slowly and continuously [play that in a loop](#). This will bring flow to what you're doing. It will start to sound like music.

Loop on one little thing until it feels and sounds good. Then loop on the next little thing. Then put together those two little things and loop that bigger thing. This is the very essence of practice.

Be your own teacher

Pay attention to what you do. Ask yourself, "Where could I improve?" Track your practice with audio recording and journaling. Take notes on what needs to improve and what has gotten better. Refer to that the next day so you can consistently work on the same problems and challenges.

Ask yourself, "How can I best learn this? How can I best practice this problem?" [Make up exercises](#) to practice things you struggle with. Loop them, play around with them making it fun.

Ask yourself, "What do I want to learn?" Write that down, but don't be in a hurry. It might take a few years to get to some things on your wish list, but you can eventually do it if you practice consistently.

Remember: even if you already have a teacher, you can [be your teacher](#) every time you play.



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Drone on

[Practicing with drone tracks](#) will improve your tuning. It's also a nice way to make practicing on your own more fun.

- Tuning notes with drones
 - If you're practicing a scale, practice [tuning each note with it's own drone](#) until it sounds in tune.
 - So if you're trying to tune up D1 (first finger on D string) you'd use an E drone. Use F sharp drone if you are tuning up D2, etc.
- [One drone, many tunes](#)
 - Play one drone track and use it to practice different tunes that use the same root note.
 - So with a D drone, you can play tunes in D major, D minor or D klezmer:
 - Oh Susannah
 - Arkansas Traveller
 - Shady Grove
 - Hava Negilah

Remember to sound good

Most people can make a good sound on their instrument but simply forget to do it.

Take breaks from working on tunes and new or challenging techniques to focus on sound. Play single notes until it sounds nice. You are bringing the **awareness** of sound into your playing. Try to also relax your body and breath while you're at it.



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Next, bring this good sound to something a little more complex, like a scale or small phrase from a tune. Continue in this way until you can play the challenging thing with a better sound. Shoot to make it 10% better. That's something you can do! You just have to [remember](#) to do it.



10% Better

Review

It's fun to learn new things. But if you keep charging off into the new you might forget how to play an older tune you loved. Or you might lose the ability to do some useful technique that you stopped practicing.

Take time return to techniques and tunes that you haven't practiced in awhile. In this way you can build on what you've already learned instead of treading water, floating from one new thing to the next.

You could review things based on different time spans, reviewing what you did:

- Today
 - [Fingerprinting](#): say and play the first part of each tune you played.
- The past week
- The past month the past 2-3 months
- The past year



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Say it, Play it.

How do you remember what you did so you can review it? Make a master practice list of tunes and techniques, look over that when you decide to review.




Some great things about review:

- You enjoy these older tunes even more now that you can play a little better.
- You hear them in a new and fresh way.
- As you learn new techniques and concepts you can apply them to older tunes.

That's it (for now). But don't forget the very first thing: **Play every day.**



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