

Wynton Marsalis' Twelve Ways to Practice: From Music to Schoolwork

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As a boy growing up in New Orleans, I remember my father, Ellis, a pianist, and his friends talking about “sheddin’.” When they got together, they’d say, “Man, you need to go shed,” or “I’ve been sheddin’ hard.” When I was around 11, I realized that sheddin’ meant getting to the woodshed – practicing. By the age of 16, I understood what the shed was really about – hard, concentrated work. When my brother Branford and I auditioned for our high school band, the instructor, who knew my father, was excited about Ellis’ sons coming to the band. But my audition was so pitiful he said, “Are you sure you’re Ellis’ son?”

At the time, his comment didn’t bother me because I was more interested in basketball than band. Over the next several years, however, I began practicing seriously. Practice is essential to learning music – and anything else, for that matter. I like to say that the time spent practicing is the true sign of virtue in a musician. When you practice, it means you are willing to sacrifice to sound good.

Even if practice is so important, kids find it very hard to do because there are so many distractions. That’s why I always encourage them to practice and explain how to do it. I’ve developed what I call “Wynton’s 12 Ways to Practice.” These will work for almost every activity – from music to schoolwork to sports.

1. Seek out instruction: Find an experienced teacher who knows what you should be doing. A good teacher will help you understand the purpose of practicing and can teach you ways to make practicing easier and more productive.

2. Write out a schedule: A schedule helps you organize your time. Be sure to allow time to review the fundamentals because they are the foundation of all the complicated things that come later. If you are practicing basketball, for example, be sure to put time in your schedule to practice free throws.

3. Set goals: Like a schedule, goals help you organize your time and chart your progress. Goals also act as a challenge: something to strive for in a specific period of time. If a certain task turns out to be really difficult,

relax your goals: practice doesn’t have to be painful to achieve results.

4. Concentrate: You can do more in 10 minutes of focused practice than in an hour of sighing and moaning. This means no video games, no television, no radio, just sitting still and working. Start by concentrating for a few minutes at a time and work up to longer periods gradually. Concentrated effort takes practice too, especially for young people.

5. Relax and practice slowly: Take your time; don’t rush through things. Whenever you set out to learn something new – practicing scales, multiplication tables, verb tenses in Spanish – you need to start slowly and build up speed.

6. Practice hard things longer: Don't be afraid of confronting your inadequacies; spend more time practicing what you can't do. Adjust your schedule to reflect your strengths and weaknesses. Don't spend too much time doing what comes easily. Successful practice means coming face to face with your shortcomings. Don't be discouraged; you'll get it eventually.

7. Practice with expression: Every day you walk around making yourself into "you," so do everything with the proper attitude. Put all of yourself into participating and try to do your best, no matter how insignificant the task may seem. Express your "style" through how you do what you do.

8. Learn from your mistakes: None of us are perfect, but don't be too hard on yourself. If you drop a touchdown pass, or strike out to end the game, it's not the end of the world. Pick yourself up, analyze what went wrong and keep going. Most people work in groups or as part of teams. If you focus on your contributions to the overall effort, your personal mistakes won't seem so terrible.

9. Don't show off: It's hard to resist showing off when you can do something well. In high school, I learned a breathing technique so I could play a continuous trumpet solo for 10 minutes without stopping for a breath. But my father told me, "Son, those who play for applause, that's all they get." When you get caught up in doing the tricky stuff, you're just cheating yourself and your audience.

10. Think for yourself: Your success or failure at anything ultimately depends on your ability to solve problems, so don't

become a robot. Think about Dick Fosbury, who invented the Fosbury Flop for the high jump. Everyone used to run up to the bar and jump over it forwards. Then Fosbury came along and jumped over the bar backwards, because he could go higher that way. Thinking for yourself helps develop your powers of judgment. Sometimes you may judge wrong and pay the price; but when you judge right you reap the rewards.

11. Be optimistic: How you feel about the world expresses who you are. When you are optimistic, things are either wonderful or becoming wonderful. Optimism helps you get over your mistakes and go on to do better. It also gives you endurance because having a positive attitude makes you feel that something great is always about to happen.

12. Look for connections: No matter what you practice, you'll find that practicing itself relates to everything else. It takes practice to learn a language, cook good meals or get along well with people. If you develop the discipline it takes to become good at something, that discipline will help you in whatever else you do. It's important to understand that kind of connection. The more you discover the relationships between things that at first seem different, the larger your world becomes. In other words, the woodshed can open up a whole world of possibilities.