

Guitar FAQ

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In this text I compiled some tips about questions / problems I have encountered over the years of teaching and playing guitar. The goal of "Guitar FAQ" is to get you thinking about your playing, and to provide you with some helpful tips about learning this wonderful instrument.

"Guitar FAQ" can be used by players of all musical styles. Enjoy!

It doesn't sound good right away

Practicing an instrument means learning to play something that is new to you, probably something you have never even done before. Therefore don't worry if it doesn't sound good right away. People who always sound good while they are practicing do something wrong - because they obviously practice something they already know how to do and that's not practicing.

Be critical about your playing and play as good as you can but also don't get too keen about getting the technique right. If you are afraid of doing something wrong and keep telling yourself how difficult it is what you are attempting to play you will probably really end up getting it wrong.

Slow down, relax, and remember that with a little patience you *will* be able to do it in the end!

Playing live with other people

Making music is a very social thing. You play with other musicians together in a band and in front of other people. Of course it is a lot of fun playing alone in your bedroom but it is even more fun to be on stage with some fellow musicians!

Remember practicing is just to prepare you for the "real" thing, to give you the tools and technique to play live.

Apart from the fun aspect of playing live there are a lot of things you cannot learn in the lesson or by playing alone at home. By making music together you "tune" into the groove and vibe of the other musicians. Your guitar will sound different and also react a lot different with all the other instruments, the different room / stage, and the people in the audience. And there are people listening to you, someone you have to project your music to. There are ways to simulate that in the lesson, but believe me nothing beats the real thing.

I strongly encourage everybody to try to play with and for other people as much as they can. I have seen so many students progressing so much faster once they started a band or only played with a friend sometimes.

Making music together is nothing that requires a certain level of playing or experience. Do you have friends that play an instrument? Or some guys at your school / work? There are also forums on the internet listing bands and musicians. Don't wait too long, just get together and do it! You don't have to be a complete band right away. Start playing songs, build up a repertoire and it will be easy to integrate more musicians later. If you have 2-3 songs together invite some friends and family for a private concert. This is a lot of fun!

You will notice that playing in front of other people really adds a new kind of energy to your music.

If you are a bit nervous before the gig, don't worry, that's part of the game. You actually need a certain kind of tension in order to play good.

Also don't worry about making mistakes or playing wrong notes on stage. Just don't make a big deal out of it (poker-face!) and you can be sure 90% of the audience won't even notice something went wrong. If you play your own music or improvise a solo nobody in the audience knows what is going to happen next, simply because they don't know the song. If you play something a bit wrong or different nobody will notice, simply because they don't know what you actually wanted to do.

And finally the reason why people still go to concerts instead of only watching Youtube is because they want to see real people with real emotions instead of overproduced studio recordings with no note in the wrong place.

Recording yourself

Often when you are practicing you have to concentrate a lot on what and when you have to play. Therefore there is not much attention left to think about how it actually sounds what you are doing. By recording yourself you can easily put yourself in the position of the listener and really take a look at if you like what you hear. Most likely you will notice things about your playing that you did not notice before. Since this is really good I recommend recording and listening to yourself on a regular basis.

Luckily we live in modern times and recording yourself has become pretty easy. You don't need a studio-quality recording, any mobile phone, laptop, or anything else that has a microphone build in will do! The cool thing about being able to record yourself is that you can also record your own backing tracks and solo over them. If you want to invest a little money buy a loop-station pedal like the Boss RC-3 or RC-20, Digitech JamMan, or Line 6 DL 4.

Timing

Timing is by far the most important factor in making rock and pop-music. Rhythm is much more important than playing the "right" notes. However amazing your new tapping lick technically might be, it won't impress anybody when you play it without a good sense of tempo and rhythm. Actually it will just sound like...well, the word "crap" comes to my mind.

In order to make sense a piece of music needs an inner kind of pulse running through it, and you as a player need to be able to feel that pulse and pass it on to the listener. This pulse is it what makes you drum along on the table, or tap your foot, or bang your head. It is what makes people dance. Generally speaking, the more you feel bodily involved with the music the better it will sound. This bodily feeling is the most important aspect of making your playing fit no matter what the style of music.

I once attended a master class by world famous bass player and producer Marcus Miller. Miller is a Grammy Award winning musician who up to now appears on nearly 500 recordings. He also produced some Grammy winning records of other musicians. You might say he should know what he is talking about. Anyways, someone during the workshop asked him if he had some tips about improving your sense of timing. Marcus answer was simple: "Just go out a lot and dance!".

Music functions like a language. The way you play an instrument can be compared to the way you speak. In language we combine letters to words to sentences. That way we create meaning. What makes the words and sentences distinguishable from one another are the pauses in between them. Those pauses create a rhythm, without this rhythm it becomes very hard to understand the meaning of what someone tries to say. Imagine a book without spaces between the words. It would be really hard to read. The same applies to rhythm in music: If you play without rhythm – without making pauses in the right moment and without the right “spacing” between the notes – you make it really hard for a listener to understand what you want to say.

What you have to remember is: If your timing isn't good your whole playing will sound a lot weaker.

If it is so important, how do I get good timing?

Like everything in music timing is something you have to practice. Be patient, timing really is a “feel” thing and it takes a while to develop it. Now, what do you have to do? In an ideal situation you would just play and practice with musicians that have a very good sense of timing *every time you play*. Since this is impossible for most of us, some clever guy invented the metronome. This is what a metronome is: a substitute for another musician with excellent timing abilities. With computers being cheap today there are also more and more people using a drum-computer instead of a metronome. This is more comfortable than a metronome but serves exactly the same purpose.

One word about metronomes: I often hear people saying that practicing with a metronome isn't good because you will end up playing mechanic, stiff, without feel. Don't believe them, it is just not true! Normally the guys saying that have a bad timing themselves and need an excuse for them being too lazy to start practicing with a metronome.

Before you can start playing with the timing or loosen the rhythm a bit you first have to know *where exactly* the beat is. After some practice you will start to feel the beat “inside” of your body, like you had an internal clock. Then, and only then, you will be able to play with rhythmic feel and variation. You need to know where the base is first.

How to use a metronome

A metronome helps you keeping a steady tempo while practicing. It might need a moment to get used to it but trust me, if you are a little serious about playing guitar you will need one! Although I cannot over-emphasize the importance of playing with other people, a metronome is a great substitute for other musicians (especially the drummer) when you are playing at home on your own.

A metronome can be set to different tempos. The speed (e.g. 120) is in “beats-per-minute”. A speed of 60bpm thus equals one beat per second.

Set your metronome to a medium 100 bpm. Now try clapping along with the tempo. Try to clap exactly at the same moment the metronome ticks. If you can do it, try the same with your foot. Keep doing that for some time. After a while you will feel the tempo somehow gets “deeper”, you can “feel” the tempo. Now choose a random note on your guitar and play along with the click, always one note per click. Can you do it? Good! Now try playing at half the tempo (play a note on every second click). Then double the speed, playing two notes per click. After that, set your metronome to 80 bpm and do the exercise again.

If you can do that easily take a simple technical exercise you can already play well and play it together with the metronome. Set your metronome to 80 first and play the exercise one note per click. If it is too fast or too slow change the tempo on the metronome accordingly. If you find it hard to get the right tempo, sing the exercise along with the metronome without your guitar. This is easier because you don't have to focus on what your hands are doing.

If it works with an exercise, try some piece of music you can play well. If you are not sure about the tempo play or sing the song and tap along with your foot or clap with your hands. Set the metronome to the tempo of whatever part of your body is moving in the right tempo and you are ready to go.

How to use a metronome part 2

When practicing with a metronome it is important to change the tempo a little every couple of minutes (just 2 or 4 clicks). If you practice something always at the same speed your hands will learn to always play it at that speed. Next time you are in a rehearsal with your band and the drummer is a little faster or slower, you will try to always play at the tempo you practiced and thus always be a bit too fast or slow.

Also try playing at a really, really slow speed sometimes. If you can play a rhythm at half of its original speed you can be sure you really understand it. And: in rock and heavy music usually the riffs that kick ass the most are the ones played slow, so it is good to be able to feel music at a slow pulse, too.

If you use the metronome to practice speed, remember to start at a comfortable tempo and raise the speed in really small steps of one or two bpm per step. You can even try to always increase the speed with two bpm, then lowering it one bpm, then raising two bpm again, and so forth.

If you reach the limit where you just can't do it anymore try raising the speed 20 or 30 bpm and play again. Because you are probably at a ridiculous speed now you won't be able to play it properly. But if you go back to the speed where you stopped before it suddenly will feel much slower and might help you to push the boundary a bit further.

Why do I have to start practicing slow?

It might sound ridiculous but in order to be able to play super-fast you *have* to start by playing super-slow.

When you are learning some new piece of music you have to start by learning the right movements first before you can even think of speeding them up. The reason for this is in the way our brains function (as I will explain later). This also means that there is no shortcut or trick. You have to start slow, practice, and be patient.

Your fingers will move precisely in the way you train them, so if you practice something just fast and sloppy all the time *it will always just sound fast and sloppy*. If you don't play slow enough to control your technique you will only practice your mistakes.

Learning an instrument really is about the journey, not the results (am I sounding a bit Zen here?). There is no sense in getting angry about yourself if a riff continues going wrong (in fact it is really counter-productive to be angry at yourself). Just relax, take a break and when you come back to the guitar start at a comfortable speed. Don't lie to yourself by forcing up the metronome. Just practice playing it technically right and in a relaxed posture and with a little time results will show up by itself.

„Speed is a by-product of accuracy“. That’s the ticket. I know you heard that before and (like me in the beginning) didn’t care because you wanted to see results quickly. But believe me, it really is true and it really applies to everyone. Take your time and don’t lie to yourself by forcing up the metronome before you are ready.

- Always start practicing new things slow. Aim for accuracy, not speed.
- Pay attention not to tense up anywhere in your body.
- Be patient! It takes time to learn new movements. That’s perfectly normal.
- Take small steps. Don’t try to learn a long lick at once but break it down in smaller steps.

Why you have to start slow-part 2 (for the curious)

Movements that we use on a regular basis (like walking for example) are stored in a certain part of our brain called the brainstem. This is nothing fancy by itself, most creatures on earth do it that way.

Movements that have been stored in the brainstem can be executed *automatically*, that means without you having to consciously think about them. The trick about this is that our brain saves a lot of energy and “processing power” that way. If we had to consciously control every step we take, there wouldn’t be much brain power left to think about anything else while walking. So how does our brain know which movements it has to store there? Our brain is constantly looking for patterns that we use a lot. If we do a certain movement often and over a longer period of time our brain considers that movement important and will store it in the brainstem. Of course our brain isn’t a computer that can just copy something to a different location. It takes time for the right connections to grow.

Now how does this connect to playing guitar? When we play music there is no time to think about where and how to place your fingers on the fretboard. Think back to when you learned your first chords and had to change from one chord to the other in a fraction of a second. Impossible first, but after some time your fingers somehow just “knew” how to play an am-chord without you having to think about it. That is because the shape of the chord and the movements you have to do have been “wired” into your brainstem.

Remember, only movements that we do often, regularly, over a longer period of time, get stored in the right place. *This is why you have to practice often instead of only once a week.* Playing as short as ten minutes per day will already teach you a lot, practicing once a week for one hour will have nearly no effect at all.

The good thing is that you can be sure that you *will* learn a certain lick if you just repeat it a lot *over a longer period of time.* This is just what our brains are designed to do.

There is one downside though: Our brainstem has no idea of a good guitar-technique. It just learns movements that we use often. *This is why you have to start practicing slowly and aim for perfect control first instead of speed.* Your brain can’t tell if you play a lick sloppy, out of time and with your thumb somewhere over the neck. If you don’t play slow enough to control your technique you will only practice your mistakes. In addition our brain doesn’t know that you only want to train your hands, it checks your whole body! This is why you have to pay attention to relax your *whole body* when you play. If

you practice too fast and always tense your shoulders during that difficult 16th lick, you will always get tense when you play it.

To make it even worse: The brainstem has about ten times as much connections into the rest of our brain as the rest of our brain has into the brainstem. The effect is that our brain considers information in the brainstem as being true. That is why it is so hard to get rid of mistakes once you have learned them. This is also why it feels “wrong” if you try to change your technique, even if you *know* that the new technique is better.

Sound

Remember what I said about what happens if you want to show off your fancy new lick but only thought about practicing speed and totally forgot about timing? The same is true about sound. Your sound is the second most important factor in playing music.

1. Rhythm
2. Sound
3. The actual notes you play

The key to getting a good sound is in the way you play, in your fingers (and in some amp and effect settings to be honest). Guitar magazines and companies try to tell you that you first of all need to buy an expensive rig with lots of effect pedals and vintage amps but believe me that’s only advertisement. That stuff is to *enhance* your sound. It only can make better what there already is. If you can’t produce a good sound with just your guitar and amp alone, effects won’t make you sound better.

Therefore, make sure to spend a decent amount of your practicing time playing clean with no effects at all (no distortion!). All that stuff tends to mask your sound making it more difficult for you to develop a good sound by just using your guitar and fingers.

So what do you have to do? First of all keep your ears open when you play. Don’t only judge your playing from a technical perspective but think about if you like the sound that you are hearing. A different hand position or a better sounding setting of your amp might force you to play different or more precisely and therefore slow you down a bit but that’s totally worth it! If in doubt, always choose the way it sounds best, not the way it plays easier.

If you can, record yourself regularly (with a laptop, loop-machine, mobile phone...) and listen to it. Do you like it? Does it sound the way you want it to sound?

If you have a “guitar hero”, a player whom you really like, try to emulate his sound as close as you can. How does he pick a note? What kind of vibrato does he use? Does he use distortion? How much distortion?

Muting

Every time you play a note on the guitar you also have to stop some other strings from ringing. This is something most players overlook first. Understandably, you are more concerned with playing the notes you *have* to play instead of the notes you have to avoid. After all, TABs only tell you which notes to play and not which notes *not* to play.

Try this: play a lick or riff you know well and listen carefully. If you hear any noise coming from your guitar other than the notes you are actually playing, your technique needs a little improvement there.

So how do you reduce unwanted notes and noises? As the headline suggests you have to dampen or “mute” all strings you don’t play on. You do this by using both hands (fretting and picking hand).

The more volume and distortion you use, the more important a good muting technique becomes. It is essential in styles like rock and heavy metal.

Grab your guitar and play a note at the 9. fret of the g-string (use your index-finger). Play the note and immediately dampen the g string with a finger of your right hand (don’t touch the other strings). As you will notice the g-string will stop ringing *but all the other 5 strings are ringing, too, although you didn’t play them!* Now try the same with distortion and more volume. Quite some noise, eh?

Again fret the note in the 9. position (with your index-finger) but don’t pick the note yet. While keeping the fingertip on the note flatten the finger and use its underside to mute all higher strings by slightly touching the b- and e-string.

Now dampen all lower strings (d-, a-, e-string) with the palm of your right hand. Now play the note again and check if the unwanted noises are gone.

This might feel like hard work at first but if you always stay aware of your damping technique it will soon work without you having to think about it.

Especially on higher volume settings (if you play with a band) you will need to always dampen the strings you are currently not playing on. Otherwise you will add a lot of noise to your playing. Even worse, if you dial in a lot of volume and distortion, strings that are not properly dampened will start ringing by themselves, producing nasty feedback.

More tips about sound

One thing you will notice if you are playing with a band is that most amp and effect settings that sound really good at home don’t work in a band context. Often less is more, especially with effect settings.

High amounts of overdrive or distortion might make it easier to play your favorite tapping lick at home in your bedroom but if you use the same setting on stage with a band, chances are good nobody actually will hear what you are playing. Distortion adds a certain buzzy quality to your sound, and with all the other instruments in the band this buzziness makes it very hard to distinguish the actual pitch of the notes you play. High distortion-settings also make you loose attack in your sound (the moment that you hit the string is called “attack”) making it sound a lot weaker (and you added distortion because you wanted it to sound heavy!).

High distortion combined with higher volume settings (that you need if you play together with a drummer) also increase the risk of nasty, uncontrollable feedback. If you play with lots of distortion and volume you have to remember three important things:

1. Always turn off the volume of your guitar at the moments you are not playing. If you watch guys like Dimebag Darrell from Pantera, he even turns his volume knob to zero in breaks as short as half a bar.
2. Keep some distance to your amplifier if you play. The closer you are to your amp, the more easily you produce feedback.
3. Be extra careful to mute all strings you are currently not playing on.

If you do all this and still have problems with feedback, you have to lower the volume and / or distortion setting.

One more thing about distortion

There are two kinds of distortion. The first is generated by the pre-amp (the tone-shaping part of your amp with the Bass, Mid, and Treble knobs). It has a more fuzzy characteristic that you will know if you ever dialed in a lot of distortion on a low volume setting. The second one is done by overdriving the power-amp (the part of the amp responsible for the overall volume level). This one normally sounds better, more musical, and your guitar responds much more natural than with the first one. In short: guitar amps sound best if you turn up the volume. That also means that you need an amplifier that produces a *useable* amount of volume when you crank up its volume. If you buy a nice Marshall stack with 100 watts but never turn the volume higher than 1,5 it is like driving a Ferrari with the hand-brake still on. Better buy a small, low-powered amp with a 10" or 12" speaker. That's totally enough for a normal band and stage setting. In fact lots of the big rock guitar solos you hear on records have been recorded with a tiny amp in the studio, because they give you a great sound at a low volume. Most rock and metal bands have a wall of Marshalls on stage, but this is only because it looks cool. Often there aren't even speakers in the cabinets and the amp you actually hear is placed somewhere under or behind the stage with a microphone in front of it!

EQ

The Bass, Mid, and Treble knob on your amp are called equalizer (or "EQ"). You use them to make certain frequencies in your sound louder or softer. Think of a complete band with drums, bass and guitar. The low sounding instruments (like the bass drum and the bass-guitar) are in the bass-part of the spectrum. The higher, treblier sounding instruments (the cymbals of the drums for example) are on the other side of the spectrum. If you want the audience to be able to hear your guitar solo, there is not much sense in just raising the overall volume of your guitar. If for example your sound has a lot of bass in it, it will just blur into the sound of the other low instruments mentioned earlier. The result is just a rumbling mix of low frequencies, but no one will be able to really hear the notes you play.

What you have to do is to look for the part of the spectrum the other instruments in the band don't need. This is exactly what sound engineers do in the studio when they mix a track. Instead of only changing volume levels they most of all change EQ settings to find the perfect spot for each instrument. For guitar this spot is somewhere in the midrange (because this part of the spectrum isn't occupied by the other instruments in the band). So if you want your solo to stand out of the other instruments, dial in a decent amount of Mid! It might sound a bit honky when played at home on your own, but on stage your solo will cut through the mix like a hot knife through butter (sorry for the cliché expression). And best of all, the rest of the band will also still be heard clearly.

While this is true for solo (=melody) playing, you need a different setting for heavy-style riffing. Bands like Metallica raise the Bass and Treble and cut away the Mid. This sounds really good if used in the appropriate places, but bear in mind it occupies a lot of

frequencies normally reserved for the bass-guitar. Remember it only works in riff-based contexts where bass and guitar more or less play the same.

For rhythm playing in funk music use a thin sound with only little bass and mid. In funk, the rhythm-guitar is more an extension of the drums and doesn't stand so much in front of the overall mix.

Tone controls

This is completely overlooked by a lot of players. There are so many tonal variations you can achieve by playing around with the volume and tone knobs on your guitar. If your amp is on an overdrive setting the volume knob doesn't so much affect the volume of the sound but much more the "fatness" and amount of overdrive itself. If you turn the volume nearly completely off you will find a great clean sound, in many contexts even better than the one your clean channel will provide. Lots of blues and heavy rock players just leave their amp on a distortion setting for the whole gig and do the rest with the volume knob.

The same trick works with a clean tone. If you back down the volume a bit you often get a more clearer, woodlike sound without nasty treble or booming low frequencies. Here is a little trick: If you are playing fast single note runs on a clean setting, lots of treble can easily expose some weaknesses in your playing. By rolling off some of the treble (with the tone knob) your playing will sound much more clean and perfect.

My hands just can't do it!

Sometimes it can be frustrating if your hands just don't do what you want them to do. You really try to keep your fingers close to the strings but they just don't. Or your pinky does all kinds of weird, unnecessary movements but you cannot help it. Or you want to play a scale with three notes per string but the stretch is just too big for your hands.

Sounds familiar? Well, here are some facts about your hands that you probably didn't think about while playing:

If you think about what you can do with your hands it is pretty amazing. Evolution spend some million years in making them perfect. However, something nature probably didn't have in mind was you playing guitar, and this is where things get complicated:

1. Your fingers are designed to work together, all fingers of one hand moving in the same direction at the same moment. On guitar every finger has to move individually and in opposite directions.
2. Every finger has to be able to do the same movements, with the same strength, speed and accuracy. Take a look at your fingers: they are all very different! You cannot expect your pinky to work the same way as your index finger without doing some training first.
3. Your hands are designed to do bending movements most of the time. This is the movement you need to grab things. On guitar, bending and stretching movements are treated equally.
4. On guitar all movement patterns are linked to the tempo of the piece. This often requires extremely quick and precise movements. If you play 16th notes at a speed of 116 bpm and slow down every note for 3 ms you already dropped the tempo to 112 bpm.

5. There are tendons in your hand connecting the fingers. Close your hand to a fist and then try to spread your second and third finger in this position. You can't because there is a tendon keeping your fingers close together. Although this comes in pretty handy when you fall from a tree and quickly have to hold on to something to avoid falling down, it really makes some common movements on guitar difficult.

It should be clear that by playing guitar (and a lot of other instruments) we are forcing our hands to do things they are completely not designed to do. It needs practice (and some time) to train and stretch the necessary muscles in your hands. It is like sport, like acrobatics for your hands!