

Smetana Piano Studio

The Practice Journal: Promoting Independent and Artistic Practice

Are you practicing - or just playing?

When you sit down to practice, do you go on auto-pilot? Set the timer, play through the piece a few times? Maybe stop and go back once or twice when you get to a tricky spot, then move on to the next piece?

This type of “practicing” may eventually lead to progress, but it will take a long time and, frankly, it’s so BORING!

A Better Way

Keeping a practice journal is a great way to encourage active, engaged practice. It can be a spiral-bound notebook of any size and color you like, or it can be a fancy blank book. You can even add a divider tab and some lined notebook paper to your current 3-ring binder and keep your practice journal there.

You’ll know you’re ***truly practicing*** when songs sound better each day and practicing feels like a rewarding adventure (most of the time)! You’ll find that practicing this way leads to greater improvements in less time, and lessons will be even more fun because you’ll be learning more new songs!

Step 1: Prepare for Success

- Set aside a consistent time for practice. (In the morning before school? In the early afternoon? After dinner? Right before bed?)
- Make the piano area pleasant (clean, well-lit, comfortable temperature, etc.) and keep your music and some colored pencils out so you’re ready to go!
- Stay focused - no distractions! Develop the ability to stay focused and on-task for longer periods of time.
- Look over your whole assignment sheet. Which pieces do you love? Which ones are hard? Are there any that you haven’t started yet? What do you want to accomplish today?

Step 2: Get it Done

- **Choose a focus for each piece:**
 1. The Basics: notes, rhythm, and fingering
 2. Next Steps: dynamics and articulation
 3. The Cherry On Top: tempo and mood/character
- Ask yourself:
 1. **What is one way I could improve the rhythm?**
Possible answers: tap and count, Rhythm Dance Revolution, sing the words while I play, plus many more!

2. **What is one way I could improve my note reading?**

Possible answers: look for 2nds and 3rds, review landmark notes, practice one hand at a time, really look at the page, practice a small section, plus many more!

3. **What is one way I could make the piece come to life?**

Possible answers: find out what the title means, speed it up, play with more dynamic contrast, listen for a smooth legato slur, play really bouncy staccatos, plus many more!

Step 3: Write It Down

So, what do you actually write in your Practice Journal?

1. **For each piece, write one or two things you did WELL.**

a. *Example: Drum & Bugle: great forte on line 2!*

2. Then, ask yourself: **what one thing could I do tomorrow that would make a big difference?**

a. *Example: tomorrow work on the last measure; the LH move is still tricky.*

3. **Finally, draw an emoji (or give yourself a sticker) that sums up today's practice.**

a. *Example: 😊*

IMPORTANT: This shouldn't take much time - just a minute or two. Complete sentences are not required! Simply recognize what you did well, identify ways to improve tomorrow, and rate the effectiveness of your practice.

The next time you sit down at the piano, read what you wrote in your Practice Journal. Feel proud of all you accomplished, and start working on the next steps! Soon, new songs will feel like exciting puzzles to solve and your playing will become more musical and expressive. Your parents might even notice they don't need to remind you to practice anymore!

These practice journal ideas are both developed from Cathy Smetana's own practice and based on the work of Noa Kageyama (bulletproofmusician.com) and Jason Selk (enhancedperformanceinc.com).