

24 ESSENTIAL PRACTICE STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

	STAGE	PRACTICE STRATEGY	EXPLANATION
1.	1st Stage and continues through the 3rd Stage	Play-Prepare Variation: First Beat Practice	This practice strategy is for any leap, jump, or move of any kind in a work. Initial step: one beat is played – this could be a chord, or even one note. Then the student stops, looks to where they need to move to, and then quickly moves to the new position. They prepare their hands and place the correct fingers on the next notes. This is done 5-10 times correctly so that the student is completely confident about notes/chords they will play next. First beat practice is playing only the downbeats of every measure and watching/singing the beats in between. Both practice strategies used for complete accuracy.
2.	All four stages of learning	LearntoListen (pedal, phrasing, balance, etc.)	Listening is the key element in learning how to play the piano well. In order to help students listen more attentively, focus on something that can be better in a piece. Play this specific part of the work in two different ways. One sounds and feels better while the other is less effective. Then have the student evaluate which is better and why. <i>A note about pedaling – this skill is best added in the 2nd stage of learning a piece. See below: #22 Practice Strategy.</i>
3.	1st and 4th Stages	Blocking	The notes in the measure which create a chord (tonic, dominant, etc.) are played simultaneously in a harmonic formation to help the student see and feel the patterns of the piece as well as to hear the harmonies. Wonderful for learning theory.
4.	2nd Stage of learning	Or namentation	It is important to add the ornaments to a work after accuracy is achieved in the 1st stage of learning a piece – notes, fingering, rhythm, articulations. <i>[See Succeeding with the Masters®, Volumes 1 and 2, and Succeeding at the Piano® Book 5 for specific practice strategies.]</i>
5.	1st Stage and continues through the 3rd Stage	Evenness Metronome Practice *	All technique is based in an even tempo. Metronome work is used in specific and different ways in each stage of learning a piece.
6.	All four stages of learning; however, “Chain linking” is 1st Stage	Unit Practice * Variation: Chain linking	A “Unit” refers to a segment of one measure plus one downbeat. The unit is repeated. Repetition begins when a unit is played correctly. The number of repetitions should be counted so that they become a habit. Once a unit is learned, other units can be practiced. Then add two units together, and then more. A unit becomes a segment, and the segments together become a section. “Chain linking” means to play only one beat, and then add on the next beat. Stop and repeat, then add on the next beat. These short links on the chain will slowly become a “unit”. Used for challenging sections of a piece, or for slow readers.
7.	2nd and 3rd Stages of learning	Slow vs. Fast *	Play a unit very slowly three times, then once at performance tempo. Each slow repetition must be the exact same in tempo, physical gesture, and dynamic level. Using a metronome is a good idea. This means that we are overloading the short-term memory first, in order to be able to play spontaneously up to tempo. This is a far better and more efficient way to play a piece more quickly, rather than by using the metronome and slowly getting faster with it.

24 ESSENTIAL PRACTICE STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

	STAGE	PRACTICE STRATEGY	EXPLANATION
8.	2nd and 3rd Stages of learning	All Notes Detached and Thick*	In a difficult passage, each note is played slowly, detached and thick, with a good sound and a flexible wrist. Then one can play 2 notes in a row, detached and thick, or vary the repetitions by employing 2 note slurs. Backwards practice as well as regrouping also works wonders.
9.	All four stages of learning	Interpretation and Expression	Using note cards of descriptive terms, imagery, discussion of what the composer was intending, visual art, etc. 1st and 2nd Stages for physical gestures/overall technique. 3rd and 4th Stages of learning for bringing the piece to performance ready.
10.	2nd and 3rd Stages of learning	Impulse* Variation: "Stop and Check"	For any part of a piece that needs to be played quickly, such as scales, arpeggios, fast passage work. An impulse is playing only 2-3 notes at a time, quickly. Then the impulse is elongated to a few more notes. Have the student use body friendly technique so that the notes are even, the sound is excellent, and there is a physical gesture at the end of the impulse to release any tension. Variation: "Stop and check" – Students stop on any beat, listening and observing.
11.	All four stages of learning	8X's to Perfection*	Practicing with correct repetitions is one of the most important aspects of learning how to play well. When students are young, playing a piece or a section of a piece 3X's correctly is a goal. When students are older, then 5X's would be a goal. Then 6X's, then 7X's, and when a pianist is advanced, 8X's in a row correctly. Then sets of 8. The repetitions must be the exact same every time in sound, use of physical gesture, tempo, and articulations.
12.	3rd and 4th Stages	80% Tempo	Playing at 80% of the desired tempo helps students to calm down, and focus on playing complete sections and entire pieces in a calm, non-critical manner. Observing ones' physical gestures is crucial for the sound and ease of playing.
13.	3rd and 4th Stages	Go for Contrast Variation: Find places to stop in the middle or ends of phrases. This is good for memory work and keeping focus	Dynamic contrasts are practiced by playing to the end of a specific dynamic that is marked in the score. Then stop. When the teacher claps or says "go on" then the student plays the next section that is in a different dynamic level. The time in between playing, when the student is waiting, is spent thinking about the impending sound they wish to create before actually playing.
14.	3rd and 4th Stages	Regrouping	Start in the middle of any phrase and play. Starting at different places in the music helps a pianist to be completely absorbed in the music and practice beginning at any place. This is a great aid for memorization.
15.	3rd and 4th Stages	Back to Front, and Backwards Practice	"Back to Front": start at the end of the piece, playing the last few phrases. Then work backwards to the beginning of the piece. "Backwards" practice is when one plays a short pattern or phrase of the music in one hand backwards, note by note, slowly. Then when one plays these patterns as written, the patterns are so much easier!
16.	2nd Stage	Change the Register	Move from one octave to another on the piano, playing specific sections of the piece. Students hear the sections with better clarity, and further helps cultivate muscle memory much easier!
17.	All four stages of learning	Rhythmic Discipline as well as the importance of "slow tempo" practice	This is a term which implies that the student practices with complete focus for producing utmost rhythmic clarity, confidence and poise. This occurs especially at the ends of phrases when students tend to rush. "Slow tempo" practice is one of the most important practice strategies of all.

24 ESSENTIAL PRACTICE STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

	STAGE	PRACTICE STRATEGY	EXPLANATION
18.	3rd and 4th Stages	Rubato	A term which began in the Romantic era that means to “rob” the tempo. This means that when one slows down the tempo, then it must be followed by a returning of the tempo. Sing the phrases to feel this naturally. If it is not natural to the student, then listen to great singers singing Romantic era music to understand.
19.	2nd through 4th Stages	Voicing	To bring out a specific note or musical line in one hand when there are other notes in the same hand that are not to be brought out. [See <i>Succeeding with the Masters</i> ®, Volumes 1 and 2, and <i>Succeeding at the Piano</i> ® Book 5 for specific practice strategies.]
20.	4th Stage	Do You Have it Memorized? • Play LH, Ghost RH • Play RH, Ghost LH • Play LH on Thigh, Sing/Play RH; then reverse	As Listed – for complete attention to details and sound, and for memorizing.
21.	2nd through 4th Stages	Balance Between the Hands: • Play the hand that needs to be louder more quietly than the other hand. Then switch the dynamics. Listen to the change. Which one is better and why? Teacher plays section of the piece standing behind student and plays on their shoulders, so that student feels the different weight of the arms. • Use Imagery – Characters, stories, etc. to connect with the sound. • Have students play sections with the opposite articulation than marked, listening to the clarity/difference/etc.	As Listed – for complete attention to details and sound. Balance between the hands is when one focuses on bringing out the melody over the harmony. The melody is often in the RH, but many times the melody is in the LH. In more advanced music, the melody may be embedded in the inner texture.
22.	2nd Stage of learning	Pedaling	Pedaling is one of the most important skills the piano student learns. It is based on the sound one is creating, the piano, the room in which a person is playing, and when a piece of music was written. Starting the pedal in the second stage of learning is ideal after the 1st stage elements are learned: notes, fingering, rhythm, and articulation, at a slow, thinking tempo.
23.	2nd Stage of learning	Determine the Phrase Shape	Determine the phrase shape by listening, singing, using “count” or “contour” phrasing.
24.	1st Stage Continue as needed.	How to Practice Chords	Go to www.HelenMarlais.com Over a thousand teaching videos on this site!
25.	To be discussed at Webinar if there is time.		

* Besides the 24 Essential Practice Strategies, what other practice strategies are good for Muscle Memory?