

Practice Tips

1. Sit high enough so that your elbows are no lower than the height of the keyboard. This helps to channel weight into the keyboard rather than down, away from it. You should sit far enough back so that your elbows just clear your torso as you move each hand up and down the keyboard.
2. Keep the hands as relaxed as possible, as often as possible, during your playing. This can be understood, in part, as "letting go" of the hands and letting them "find their way" around the keyboard on their own without your conscious interference. This does not mean to not think about where they are and what finger is playing. On the contrary, concentrate intensely on the position of the hands and fingers as you play. However, do not try and physically force a finger to reach for a key, or press a key with more force than is necessary. The keyboard is played not by pressing keys so much as by touching them. Keys will descend with a minimum of force (1 to 2 ounces).
3. Relaxation itself needs to be practiced, and will not occur automatically. Breathing deeply is always helpful. Try not to concern yourself too much with mistakes. They are a natural part of the process and give you the feedback that you need to find the correct notes.
4. Watch for and relax any tension in the stomach, shoulders and wrists. Breathe into the piano bench to relax any tension in your stomach. Let your shoulders hang freely; when they are in the correct position, they fall to their lowest point, slightly forward of your neck. Wrists remain supple and relaxed so that if they are lifted from below while you are playing, they bend (the hand would form an angle downward in relation to the forearm rather than remain straight).
5. Try not to look at your hands when you are playing, regardless of whether the music is memorized or you are sight-reading. This is really important! This may sometimes result in more mistakes, but your overall ability at the keyboard will be enhanced if you develop your *tactile* sense (the feel of the keys and key relationships) and your *kinesthetic* sense (your sense of motion and of distances that the hands travel in relation to each other and your body).
6. Always learn and practice your music *slowly*, and try to maintain an even, steady tempo. Although you will eventually practice the piece at the tempo it is meant to be played at, periodically return to slow practicing.
7. What matters most is not how "strong" the fingers are, but where they are positioned. Accordingly, while some exercises that develop finger strength and coordination may be useful, the most effective practicing results from the mental work that accompanies a constant awareness of the position of the hands and each finger in relation to the keyboard. Similarly, although exercises that stretch the hand are an important aspect of technical development, stretching the hand to take in two or more notes with minimal hand movement (this creates tension) is a habit that is best avoided. Rather, gently guide the hand so that each finger is positioned above the key as each note is played.
8. Although the hand moves in many directions during a piece, including lateral (left-right) motion, piano keys descend only vertically (downward, perpendicular to the floor). Accordingly,

any sideways force or effort during a key descent is unnecessary and best avoided. This is why it is a good idea to practice movements and leaps to keys without striking the key. Moreover, once a key is played, if it must be held, an absolute minimum of pressure is necessary to keep the key down. An awareness of this will help to reduce unnecessary tension.

9. One useful technique is to simply ask yourself how something would be played (or how it would "feel") if it were as easy as possible. This may provide some feedback on how to eliminate tension. Overall, it is valuable to view all music as easy to play, and that if it seems hard to play, you haven't yet found the simplicity in it.

10. Remain grounded aurally to the piano. There are a number of ways to maintain this aural connection. First, if you are a beginning student, practice playing and singing (play, then sing) white key intervals above middle C (you can sing any C that is in a comfortable register). These include C to D, C to E, C to F, and so forth. Work your way up to the octave. Once these intervals are relatively easy to sing, work on other intervals such as C to the black keys, and white key intervals down from C. Eventually, practice all intervals from C to an octave higher, and C to an octave lower. More advanced students can practice playing short phrases and singing them, and singing short phrases (that are made up), and playing them. Most important, practice singing the phrases that appear in the pieces you are playing, particularly when the music is melodic in nature.

11. Move to the beat. Perhaps one of the most important and useful techniques you can use to play rhythmically consistent is to move either your head, or your torso, to the basic pulse established in the music. I have seen many students undergo remarkable transformations in their ability to keep the piece moving forward when they allow their body to feel the basic rhythm. Keep the movements small; they might even be barely visible.

12. Stay in touch with the emotional quality of the music you are playing. Every musical phrase has an emotional quality to it, but it is often easy to neglect this emotional content when—as often happens—rote, mechanical playing creeps into your practicing. You can "will" yourself to feel what you play by focusing on the expressive, emotional aspects of the music. The value in this is that what you learn becomes more pleasant to play, and remains more definite in memory than isolated patterns with little or no expressive content.