

85

# DRUM TIPS

to make you a better drummer

DRUM LESSONS IN LA.COM



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## 85 Drum Tips to Make You a Better Drummer

These tips about practicing, playing, and tuning the drums were compiled from the weekly [Drum Set Bulletin](#) newsletter. Some of these are basic things that not everyone implements, and others are a little more inventive. Don't feel like you have to read or try these all at once. If you are either a beginner or a more experienced drummer, there is something here for you to make your drumming journey a little easier and more fun.

### PRACTICING TIPS

1. Use words to help with odd time phrasing. For example if you're playing in 5, think of a 5 syllable word or phrase like *hippopotamus* while playing.
2. Say it, then play it. A great way to internalize a new rhythm or drum fill on the drums is to say it out loud first.
3. It is a good idea to develop co-ordination and control with our feet just like we should with our hands. A good place to start is to practice all of the rudiments with your feet.
4. Dynamics are important in playing music. Practice playing everything at various dynamics from very soft to very loud.
5. Videotape yourself playing drums. You will be amazed at what you can learn from this. Everything from your setup to the look on your face.
6. One thing that's frequently overlooked when playing is posture. You can tire very quickly when playing with bad posture. Make sure you are sitting up straight and that your weight is balanced.
7. Making time to practice will usually involve the cooperation of others in your household. Whether its a significant other or room mates, let them know your goals and how important your practice time is to your improvement and try to come to an agreement on when you can have uninterrupted practice time.

8. Check your local library for drumming resources (DVDs, instruction books, etc).

9. There is a difference between practicing your instrument and playing your instrument. Many drummers start their practice sessions practicing for a couple of minutes and then spend the remainder of time playing what they already know how to play well. I definitely think time spent playing your instrument is a good thing, but you will improve the most through focused, consistent practicing.

10. Be honest with yourself about how much you practice. A half-hour practice session can turn out to be 10 minutes in reality because of disruptions, phone calls, and snack breaks. There is nothing wrong with any of these things; just don't include them as practice time.

11. Spend the first few minutes of you practice time warming up. Strenuous practicing without warming up can be dangerous, causing damage to your muscles and tendons.

12. One way to spark some creativity in your playing is to give yourself some limitations. Play along to songs with just your snare drum or try playing songs with just a kick, snare, hi hat and nothing else. You may come up with some good stuff.

13. Holding the drumsticks about a third of the way up gives you an optimum balance point, allowing for the most rebound. To find this balance point, hold the stick with the fulcrum (thumb and finger) and dribble the stick with your other hand (like you would a basketball).

14. If you have trouble playing with a metronome, it may help to think of it as an instrument being played by another musician, like a cowbell, in perfect time.

15. If you feel stuck in a creative rut with your playing, one thing that may inspire you is to move your drums and cymbals around. Change the order of your toms or take away or add things to your kit.

16. Set aside specific time for practicing. Try to have your practice sessions at the same time of the day if you can. We are creatures of habit. If we make practicing a habit, we will come to expect it.

17. Often times when we are busy with other things or when we just don't feel like practicing, it's easy to skip it all together. I find that if I just get started, even if I only have a few minutes, I tend to want to keep on practicing. The trick is to just get started.

18. You are ten times more likely to achieve your goals if you write them down and review them often. That's a true statement in general but it also applies to drumming and music. Write down specifically what you want to achieve (for example: be able to play paradiddles around the drum kit at 160 bpm, or to play The Staples Center within the next five years).

19. Improper stick technique can cause calluses on your hands when practicing for long periods of time. Work on your grip and motions to avoid unnecessary problems.

20. Practice the rudiments along to music. It makes practicing them more fun. Find songs at different tempos to keep challenging yourself.

21. If you can't seem to find the time to practice regularly, try writing down everything you do in a day. That may give you insights into things that you can replace with some practice time.

22. If you still find it difficult to find the time to practice, try this. For one month, make a commitment to practice for just 5 minutes-5 days a week, for the whole month. (Most likely you can find 5 minutes to practice and you will usually want to play longer). After you have made a habit of doing it consistently for a month, increase the time to 10 minutes-five days a week, for a month. Then 20 minutes, then 40 minutes, and then 60 minutes or as long as you can. If you can practice specifically targeted material consistently, you will definitely see improvements.

23. Repetition is an important part of learning. When you work on something, make sure you repeat it enough to have it mastered before you count it as done. That doesn't mean you can't work on something else until you perfect it, but come back to it until you can play it without having to think about it too much.

24. It's a good idea to keep your practice space and materials organized so you know where everything is located. It will save you time and will also make it easier to get started if you don't have to do too much just to get going.

25. While you warm up, take notice of your grip. Make sure it's relaxed and balanced (the sticks reach the same rebound height).

26. When you practice for long periods of time without stopping, your muscles will develop and you will start to feel it in your forearms, hands, and/or shins. This is a good thing (assuming you are using proper technique) but don't play into the pain for too long. Take regular breaks when you start to feel discomfort.

27. If you find yourself with some sticks in your hands and nothing to practice on, turn them upside down so the tips hit your forearms. Don't play too hard.

28. To get some drumming ideas, play phrases from your favorite songs on the drums. For example, work out the guitar lick on your drums.

29. When playing odd time signatures, it can help to break down the count in groups of 3s, 2s, and 1s. For example, think of a measure in 7/8 as a group of 3 and two groups of 2. (1-2-3, 1-2, 1-2)

30. Practice things only as fast as you can play correctly. Make sure everything lines up in time and that you can play comfortably before you play it faster.

31. Keep a journal of your practicing. It will keep you on track and increase your rate of learning.

## **TUNING TIPS**

32. If you are having snare buzz problems, check your tuning, extreme high and low tunings encourage snare buzz. Also check the snares themselves that they are not bent or loose. Remember though, that the drum set is one instrument and that some snare buzz is to be expected.

33. If you have tonal problems with your toms, it is most likely due to the tuning relationship between the batter and the resonant head. Make sure the heads are in good condition and experiment with the tuning. Also, try replacing the resonant heads with coated ones. This will cut down on overtones.

34. If you have multiple toms in your set up, consider their pitches and how they sound in relation to each other to make you tom fills sound musical.

35. I recommend keeping your snare side head tuned kind of tight for articulation. For a looser snare sound, use the tension adjuster on the throw off to get the feel you want.

36. Dents on your drum heads can make a drum difficult to tune. If you are having trouble getting a good tone out of a drum, check for dents and replace the drum head if that is the case.

37. Make sure the snares on your snare drum are evenly seated and tensioned. If the snares are uneven, the drum can sound choked or even out of tune.

38. When recording drums for a song with a tom groove, tune the toms to the root, third, and fifth of the key of the song; starting with lowest tom. When the toms are an integral part of the song and not tuned properly, it can make the bass guitar sound as if it's out of tune.

## **SETTING UP TIPS**

39. To save time when setting up your drums (and to ensure you set them up the same way every time), use memory locks on your stands or mark off the height and angles on your stands. If memory locks are not available, use hose clamps. You can get those at any hardware store and they are not expensive. Also, use a drum rug and mark where all of the stands go. A drum rug will also ensure that your bass drum does not slip away from you when you are performing. When a drum rug was not available, you can use the floor mats from your car.

40. If you have many stands that you set up and break down, it can save time to color code or number the separate parts so you know which part goes where.

41. When working with a sound engineer (whether recording or playing live) and they ask you to play certain drums for a line check, just strike that drum repeatedly so they can get a good signal for recording or amplification (so they can make you sound good). Avoid the temptation to play bombastic solos or to show off. If they ask you to play a beat, try to incorporate every drum and cymbal in that beat so they can get a nice balanced signal out of all of the microphones.

42. When playing to pre recorded music at an audition or gig, make sure you can hear it well. Playing to tracks feels different than playing with live musicians. Make sure you have a monitor nearby or bring headphones that you can plug into.

43. If your snare cord breaks (the part that holds the snare wires to the snare) and you don't have a spare, you can cut another one out from a used drum head. You can also use a drinking straw.

44. If the claws on your snare stand keep opening up when you play the snare, applying some plumber's tape on the threading just below the adjustment mechanism should keep it in place.

45. If you need to take cues from the band leader or other band members during a performance, consider arranging your cymbals so they have a clear view of your face. The other musicians may need to get your attention unexpectedly, especially if you're subbing for another drummer last minute and you and the band are not well rehearsed. It's understandable to want the cymbals exactly where you're used to playing them, but sometimes the flexibility of moving them is worth it.

46. Keep a tool kit with spare drum parts, drum keys, snare wires, etc. in case something breaks or goes missing and needs to be replaced ASAP.

47. While in transit, protect the hi hat pull rod (the part where the hi hat actually clamps onto) by extending the tubing all the way up. If that makes it too tall for your trap case, take the pull rod and the tubing off and store them together. Keep the hi hat clutch clamped on the top of the rod so they don't separate.

48. A good alternative for a hardware case is a golf club bag. You can get good ones with wheels used at garage sales and thrift stores.

49. You can protect your bass drum hoops from the foot pedal by putting a piece of bicycle tubing between the hoop and the pedal.

50. When you change your drum heads, write the date in small numbers off to the side of each new head. This will help you remember how long the head has been on the drum. (There is no specific period of time that a drum head should stay on the drum though. That should depend on how they sound, feel, how hard you hit, and how often you play.)

51. Invest in cases or bags for your drums and cymbals. Even if you're careful, little nicks and scratches are unavoidable when moving your drums. Cases can help your drums look great for years to come.
52. If you amplify your bass drum and the microphone cord hangs off of the drum head, it can stop the head from resonating fully. Consider clipping the cord to the drum hoop with a binder clip from an office supply store.
53. If your drum has a stripped tension rod and you don't have access to a spare, some plumber's tape wrapped around it can temporarily keep the drum in tune.
54. If you mike your drums (or anything else) and have problems with the mikes slipping from the holder, put a rubber washer or rubber band on the far side of the mike between the mike and the clip.
55. To save time when changing snare side heads, use some paint or nail polish to mark the position of the straps or wires that hold the snares, so you can put them back exactly where they were.
56. Try hanging your stick bag off of the snare drum. It might not work for everyone but it puts your sticks right in front of you for easy access.
57. Store the different parts of your gigging kit in one location. It's easier to make sure you have everything before you leave for the gig if everything is in one place.
58. It's a good idea to take a spare snare drum to your gigs. It is the drum we play the most and if the head should happen to break, you can quickly replace the drum between songs and continue the set.
59. If you have different sized sticks in your stick bag, consider marking the butt ends with different color marker or tape to distinguish the different pairs. This helps if you need to get to certain sticks in a hurry.
60. If you play cross handed (one hand crossing over to the hi hat) and your arms are getting in each other's way, try raising the hi hat or lowering the snare a bit to give you more room.



61. Don't tighten your wing nuts too tight on cymbal stands and drum stands. This can strip them out. You want to make sure they are tight enough to not come loose during a performance but wing nuts are designed to work efficiently with only moderate tightening.

62. Resonant drum heads (the bottom heads) will eventually lose their tone from constant vibration. You don't need to change them as often as batter heads, but if they've been on there a while, put a new one on and it will liven the drum up.

63. Cover your drums with a sheet or blanket when not in use. Dust settles on the drums over time and a blanket can help to keep the drums and cymbals clean.

64. Mother's Mag and Aluminum Polish makes a good cymbal cleaner. It does a great job and doesn't require much elbow grease. You can find it at most auto parts stores. As with any cymbal cleaner, test it out on a small edge of the cymbal first to ensure you don't get any permanent discoloration.

65. The chrome and metal parts of a drum kit can rust and be ruined by moisture. Wipe off the lugs and cymbal stands after you play in the rain or even after moving your kit from cold to warm temperatures.

66. Tilt your bass drum so that the beater strikes the drum head vertically (pointing straight up). This gives you just the right amount of momentum to make the stroke.

## **PLAYING TIPS**

67. If you play music that involves loops, make sure to treat the loop like a musical instrument. It's easy to fall into the habit of thinking of the loop as if it were there just for us to keep time, but the loop is conveying a feel and groove that we need to play with, not over.

68. If your band plays a song without drums, dis-engage the snare wires. Depending on how the snare drum is tuned, certain frequencies played by the guitars can rattle the wires annoyingly.

69. When recording, if you can't hear something that's important to what you're playing, make sure it gets turned up in your headphones before you start the take. Similarly, if a certain track is out of time or distracting in any way, ask to have it turned down.

70. In rock drumming, the beat is usually propelled by the bass and snare drum, so they are usually played a little louder than the hi hats or ride cymbal. In traditional jazz drumming, it's just the opposite- where the ride cymbal is what drives the beat and is usually louder in the mix than the bass and snare drum. This is something to take in consideration when working with different styles but it is more of a guide than a rule.

71. If you play really hard and have a problem with your snare drum moving around, try loosening the snare basket so it's not too tight. Also, make sure the stand's legs are retracted considerably.

72. When considering the tempo of a song, the vocals are a good guide. Sing the song to-yourself to make sure the lyrics don't sound rushed.

73. You can get some cool muted sounds from your acoustic drum set by placing a spare drum head upside down on top of your drums.

74. Get creative by playing with a shaker in one hand as well as a stick. It may feel awkward at first, but you can come up with some interesting rhythms.

75. Old chrome hubcaps can sound very musical. If you like the sound, drill a hole in the center of one and mount it on a stand just like a cymbal.

76. You can get some interesting sounds by inserting a long plastic tube into the vent hole of your floor tom and blowing air through it while you're playing.

## **GENERAL TIPS**

77. Write down the serial numbers of all of your drums and other equipment (and also take pictures) so if they should get stolen, you have a way for the police to identify them. This will probably be required if you have insurance on your equipment (also a good idea).

78. The sound of the snare drum plays an important role in the overall sound and feel of a song. The diameter, depth, shell construction (what its made of) choice of drum heads, and tuning all affect the sound of the drum. Keep that in mind when listening to music. The snare sound on a slow ballad will usually sound different than an uptempo rocker. Similarly, the snare sound on a ska or reggae song will sound different than in an 80s rock song. Go to your local music store and see if you can try out different snare drums.

79. Be careful not to store your drums in extreme weather. Extremely hot or cold climates can damage the drums if left there over a long period of time.

80. Each part of a cymbal's anatomy has an effect on its sound. Larger diameter cymbals usually have a lower pitch than smaller ones. Thicker cymbals are usually louder and have more sustain than thinner ones. Cymbals with a big bell will have more overtones and cymbals with a small bell will have more stick definition. Use this knowledge to pick the right cymbals for your situation but overall, let your ears make the final decision.

81. When playing side stick on the snare, you can use your fingers to play ghost notes.

82. Snare wire tension can change the characteristic of the drum sound. Busier and faster drumming can warrant a tighter wire tension but slower songs can benefit from looser tensions. Experiment and record to hear for yourself.

83. A duct tape roll makes a great drink holder. It helps prevent spilling when you place your drink on the ground when you play.

84. Use a can of compressed air to help clean out dust between lugs and places that are hard to reach with a cleaning rag.

85. Playing music often comes with criticism. It can come from another musician or from the general public. The best musicians get bashed. Listen to it with an open mind and assess where you can improve, but realize when people are just bad-mouthing or being negative and let it go.



*Drummer and educator Stefano Ashbridge has a passion for music that has taken him on an amazing journey of playing, teaching, recording, and touring internationally. He has spent the last 30 years developing a successful teaching strategy that has helped many drummers to improve quickly and have fun learning the music they love.*

*Stefano has studied drum set percussion with world class drummers such as Zoro (Lenny Kravitz, New Edition) and Mark Schulman (Pink, Foreigner). He also studies songwriting, audio engineering, and the music business.*

*Originally from Naples, Italy, he is now working professionally in Los Angeles. Some of the bands Stefano has worked with include Brad Wilson of Stone, Rakit, Alan Ritchson, and Grammy nominee Derek Jordan. He also took home the "Electronica Drummer of The Year" award at the L.A. Music Awards.*

