[**Seven habits of highly effective beginners**](http://bretpimentel.com/seven-habits-of-highly-effective-beginners/)

# [Bret Pimentel](http://bretpimentel.com/)

November 8, 2010

[](http://www.flickr.com/photos/aboyandhisbike/2372510236/)

Photo, [Michael @ NW Lens](http://www.flickr.com/photos/aboyandhisbike/)

A few weeks ago I wrote about [seven habits I’ve observed in my most successful university music students](http://bretpimentel.com/seven-habits-of-highly-effective-music-students/). The popularity of that article has been gratifying—to my surprise, it even briefly displaced my [list of woodwind doublings from Broadway shows](http://bretpimentel.com/woodwinds/doubling/shows/) as the most popular thing on this site.

What I wrote was about university music students—students who, generally, have at least half-dozen years of playing experience behind them, and who are planning to pursue a career in music. But I think it’s also worth considering the musical beginner (child or [adult](http://bretpimentel.com/6-advantages-of-adult-students/)). Students who get a good start with their instrument have a better chance at success, no matter their goals.

Here are some habits that are characteristic of successful beginners, plus a bonus tip for woodwind doublers:

1. **Get a teacher.** This is the best money you can spend or your (or your child’s) new musical pursuits. And the sooner the better—don’t assume that you need to struggle on your own for a while before a teacher will take you on as a student. A good teacher can guide you through purchasing or renting your instrument, teach you good playing and practicing habits, troubleshoot problems, and model excellent playing. And you may be able to get good instruction cheaper than you think. Contact a teacher of reputation in your area and find out what they charge, and, if it’s more than you can spend, ask if they can recommend one of their top students as a beginning teacher. I’m a university music professor, and I charge more than some beginners would be willing or able to pay, but I’m pleased to recommend my advanced students who are anxious for some teaching experience, who work cheap, and who will teach you the same things I’m teaching them.
2. **Get good advice on equipment purchases.** See habit #1 for the best solution to this. Be extremely wary of advice from mail-order catalogs, internet message boards, eBay sellers, and commissioned music store salespeople who don’t play your instrument. My beginning woodwind students who start with inferior or poorly-adjusted gear often develop poor playing habits in an attempt to compensate for the instrument’s/mouthpiece’s/reeds’ shortcomings, and are far more likely to get frustrated and quit. You don’t need a fancy car to learn how to drive, but you do need working brakes, steering, and signal lights.
3. **Practice smart.** Be aware that practicing on your own is essential—you cannot learn to play a musical instrument well if you only play during a weekly lesson or a school band rehearsal. I advise my beginning woodwind students to shoot for about a half-hour a day, which can be broken up into smaller practice sessions. (Motivated students will quickly graduate to a slightly more intensive schedule.) Figure out the 20% of your practicing material that is the most difficult for you, and spend 80% of your practice time on it.
4. **Listen.**Learning a musical instrument is a little like learning a foreign language: a book can teach you some basics, but you won’t speak like a native until you have really absorbed the language’s unique sounds. Acquire some recordings of your instrument that you enjoy, and listen to them often. Attend concerts, too, if you can. Ask your teacher to demonstrate good playing in your lessons. Try using your instrument to imitate what you hear. Listening and imitating is the most effective, efficient, and enjoyable way to improve your playing.
5. **Be patient.** Musical skills are developed over the long term. Take the time to thoroughly learn your scales, exercises, and other practice material; spending time to really get this right will accelerate your future progress. If you find yourself getting frustrated with a particular passage, slow down and take it one note at a time. Consider keeping a practice journal, so you (and your teacher) can identify what’s working for you and what isn’t, and so you can see your improvement over time.
6. **Filter “information” from questionable sources.** The internet is full of ideas from well-meaning people whose advice may or may not be accurate or appropriate. I frequently cringe at advice offered to beginners on music message boards. Sometimes the most enthusiastic advisers are beginners themselves, or are parroting bad advice they heard somewhere else but haven’t tested. More advanced players sometimes offer advice that is useful for someone who plays at their own level, but that doesn’t apply to a beginner in the same way. Pedagogical approaches change over time, as well, and what was considered good advice a decade ago may reflect an approach that has fallen out of favor today.
7. **Play for somebody.** Music is a sharing thing. No matter your ability level, jump on opportunities to expand your comfort zone as a performer. As a brand-new beginner, your first audience might be a patient family member or even a well-behaved pet—this is a good start! Butterflies in the stomach or a few missed notes are par for the course, and the more you perform, the smaller the problems will get.
* **Bonus tip:** To woodwind doublers (or aspiring doublers) who are learning a new instrument don’t forget to **be a beginner** on each new instrument. Even if you play another instrument or instruments at a very high level, it’s worthwhile to establish each of these habits with each newly-acquired axe. Study your new instrument with the focus, discipline, and patience you wish you had used when you learned the first one. Shortcuts don’t work.

Have fun and practice every day!