

# Segment Practice and Performance Practice

How to eliminate technique issues on the guitar. (This really works)

1. **Choose a small segment of music you can learn in one 10-15 minute sitting.** This is typically one measure plus one note/chord. If the segment takes substantially longer than this to learn at  $\frac{1}{4}$  tempo, divide the segment into smaller sub-segments.
2. **Write in the fingering for both hands, including all pivot and guide fingers.** We are not really training the fingers, we are training the brain to select the fingers we need to play this segment. Advanced players should also choose dynamics, articulations, timbre, and fret board position to reflect compositional intent and personal expression.
3. **Commit the segment (including fingering) to short term memory.** Worry about memorizing (long term memory) at a later date. Take your eyes off the music and ...
4. **Check both hands for technical errors.** For now, practice without regard to the rhythm. Play as perfectly as you can. This is the stage where the brain “downloads” the motor skills to the cerebellum and playing becomes automatic. In other words, habits are formed here. Ask yourself, “Is this the way I want to play this segment for the rest of my life?”, because that is what is happening. The brain will form habits (good or bad) *regardless of how fast you play!* This is the “Great Big Secret” to playing guitar well. Be wise. Play slow. Play great.
5. **Add the rhythmic element.** Play as slowly as you need in order to play perfectly. Segments transfer from piece to piece, so you are not just practicing this tune, but all the future tunes that have this segment as well. I haven’t counted but I believe there are about 125 segments you need to learn in order to play at the intermediate level. So learn them carefully, take your time. “Practice Makes Perfect” *is a lie!* “Practice Makes Permanent” is the truth.
6. **Bring the segment up to tempo.** I consider a segment learned when I am able to play it five times in a row *without errors* at 12 clicks above tempo. The great guitarist Christopher Parkening considers his standard to be seven times in a row without errors. Maybe this explains why he is a concert artist in with a mansion in sunny California and I am not.
7. **Stitch the segments together into musically meaningful phrases.** Once you can play all the phrases, usually 4 measures long, at 12 clicks above tempo without mistakes (five times in a row), you are ready for performance practice.
8. **Performance practice is playing the piece from beginning to end *without stopping*.** Too many guitarists skip some or all of the 7 steps of segment practice and go immediately to performance practice. We all know guitarists who can play the opening licks to a tune but can’t play past the first 30 seconds. Learning can be mind-numbingly frustrating if you play a few measures and then stop (crash), then begin again and stop (crash) one note later, and so on *ad nauseum*. In my youthful ignorance, I learned many songs this way and the endings were always insecure, or just plain bad. By continuing to play these old tunes I was rehearsing old habits. Years later I had to retire all those great songs because I needed to fix my technique in order to improve the quality of my playing. Be sure to use segment practice. Choose a slow tempo that will allow you to play the entire tune without stopping, because if you stop (crash) in performance practice, you are practicing to stop (crash) in performance.