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Piano Practice Troubleshooting Guide

Fixes For Common Practice Problems

This guide includes seven practice habits you can use to solve the most common problems you run into in the practice room. It is designed to be a practical PDF you can keep on your music stand or tablet. Each page walks you through a common practice problem and suggests specific habits you can try in your next session.

Inside this guide, you will find strategies that help when:

- **You're stuck on a challenging passage**
- **You keep forgetting what you learned**
- **Things fall apart under pressure**
- **You struggle to play expressively**
- **...and more!**

How to use this guide:

Read through each page to find the sentence that best describes what you are struggling with right now, then try the suggested solution in your next practice session.

The Piano Practice Troubleshooting Guide was created to accompany the video **"How Serious Pianists Actually Practice: 7 Habits to Steal"**
Each habit is on its own page, and includes a linked timestamp that enables you to jump straight to that section of the video. At the bottom of each page, you will also find links to **other related videos** for each habit.

You can watch the full playlist of all videos mentioned in this guide at:
thepianoprof.com/practice-playlist



If we haven't met, my name is Kate Boyd. I am a classical pianist and Professor of Piano at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana. I have performed in venues including Carnegie Hall, and my students have gone on to thriving careers as musicians and music teachers. I am passionate about helping pianists take their playing to the next level. You can learn more about me here: **thepianoprof.com/about**

Troubleshooting Index: Where to Start 🧐

Use this index as a quick check-in when your practice feels stuck.
Find the statements that you can relate to, then go to the habit listed beside each category and try those strategies first.

1. Note learning & accuracy: Habits 1 and 7

- “I can’t retain the correct notes.
- “Hard spots make me stop or slow down.”
- “It takes me forever to learn a new piece.”
- “I feel overwhelmed when I start a new piece and don’t know where to begin.”
- “I improve a passage for a minute, then it falls apart again right away.”
- “My playing is messy and I miss a lot of notes.”
- “I get impatient when I practice and play fast most of the time.”
- “I keep practicing the same wrong notes by accident.”
- “I feel tense or panicky and often have to correct notes as I practice.”
- “When I try to fix something, I just end up repeating the same wrong version.”
- “I end up having to relearn passages later because I baked in errors early.”

2. Transitions, flow & continuity: Habit 2

- “I can’t play my piece all the way through.”
- “I play each section in a different tempo.”
- “I get confused when the texture changes.”
- “I get nervous approaching certain spots and I’m not sure why.”
- “I restart a lot because I always stumble in the same places.”

3. Speed, evenness & fast passagework: Habit 3

- “The passage I’m playing is uneven.”
- “My tone is uneven in fast sections.”
- “Even with a lot of practice, I can’t get it as fast as I want it to go.”
- “My fingers trip over themselves in fast passagework, even though I can play it slowly.”
- “One note in each group of fast notes is always late or weak.”

Troubleshooting Index, part 2 🧐

4. Understanding & memory: Habits 4 and 5

- “I don’t understand the piece I’m playing.”
- “I feel like it’s all ‘just notes’ to me.”
- “I can’t start in the middle of a phrase.”
- “I don’t understand the form, and don’t have an inner concept of the piece.”
- “When I have a memory slip, I don’t know where to jump back in.”
- “It’s fine when I’m practicing just for myself, but it falls apart when I play for somebody else.”
- “I feel like I don’t progress from one day to the next.”
- “I zone out while I practice and don’t realize it until later.”
- “My memory feels unreliable unless I’m at the keyboard.”
- “I can’t clearly hear or feel the passage in my head away from the piano.”
- “Before a performance, I have trouble picturing how the piece is going to go.”

5. Musical expression, sound & contrast: Habit 6

- “My teacher keeps telling me there’s not enough contrast.”
- “I recorded myself and it sounds flat and boring.”
- “I keep forgetting to follow the dynamic markings in the music.”
- “My melody doesn’t project over the accompaniment.”
- “Articulations disappear when I speed up.”
- “Everything sounds the same from phrase to phrase.”

🎥 Want to go deeper?

You can watch the full playlist of all the videos mentioned in this guide by clicking the link below or using the QR code to the right.

www.thepianoprof.com/practice-playlist

Habit 1: Practice in little chunks 🧩

Watch this habit in the video: [1:00]

If this sounds like you...

- “I can’t retain the correct notes.”
- “Hard spots make me stop or slow down.”
- “It takes me forever to learn a new piece.”
- “I feel overwhelmed when I start a new piece and don’t know where to begin.”
- “I improve a passage for a minute, then it falls apart again right away.”

...do this!

- Identify the smallest musical unit that is actually causing trouble. That might be one beat, one bar, or a short musical gesture.
- Practice that tiny chunk slowly until you can play it several times in a row with no hesitation and no extra tension.
- Add the next tiny chunk and overlap by at least one beat so you are never stitching together two weak edges.
- Once two chunks feel easy, link them, then continue extending the passage in overlapping units until the whole phrase is reliable.
- If the passage is fast or awkward, repeat the same process hands separately first, then practice the chunks hands together.

Level up this habit:

- Overlap your chunks. Let each new chunk begin at least one beat before the old one ends so you never create weak seams between sections.
- Reverse-chain the passage. Build from the end of the phrase backward, adding one new chunk in front each time, so the end is always the most secure part.
- Alternate slow-motion practice with fast bursts. Do several extremely slow, accurate reps, then play it near performance tempo so the passage starts to feel easy at speed.

🎥 Want to go deeper?

- 5 Things To Do Before You Start a New Piano Piece
- My 6-Step System for Learning Any New Piano Piece
- The Best Way to Learn a New Piano Piece Quickly

Habit 2: Practice the transitions ↔️

Watch this habit in the video: [2:47]

If this sounds like you...

- “I can’t play my piece all the way through.”
- “I play each section in a different tempo.”
- “I get confused when the texture changes.”
- “I get nervous approaching certain spots and I’m not sure why.”
- “I restart a lot because I always stumble in the same places.”

...do this!

- Scan your score and mark every place where the texture, register, dynamic, or accompaniment pattern changes. These are your transitions.
- Treat each transition as its own practice section: start 1–2 measures before the change and play to 1–2 measures after it, repeating that span several times in a row.
- While you repeat, keep the tempo and character consistent as you move through the change, so the new section doesn’t feel like a separate “island.”
- If a spot makes you nervous, look at the bars just before it to find exactly where the transition is, then isolate and drill that shift until it feels predictable.

Level up this habit:

- Practice transitions slightly under tempo, then at tempo. First make them rock solid a notch slower, then bring them up to performance speed so the transition feels easy rather than scary.
- Once individual spots are secure, practice from one transition to the next without stopping so the whole structure of the piece feels connected.
- Once a transition feels solid, test it with a “no looking down” rule at performance tempo. If your eyes drop to the keyboard, slow it back down and reinforce the spots where you were not sure.

🎥 Want to go deeper?

- How to Play the Piano Without Looking Down
- Eyes on the Music: How to Play the Piano Without Looking Down
- Slow Practice at the Piano

Habit 3: Practice in rhythmic variants 🥁

Watch this habit in the video: [5:30]

If this sounds like you...

- “The passage I’m playing is uneven.”
- “My tone is uneven in fast sections.”
- “Even with a lot of practice, I can’t get it as fast as I want it to go.”
- “My fingers trip over themselves in fast passagework, even though I can play it slowly.”
- “One note in each group of fast notes is always late or weak.”

...do this!

- Choose a passage of fast, running notes (for example, sixteenths) that feels uneven or out of control.
- Practice the passage in rhythmic variants. For a group of four notes, first hold the 1st note longer and play 2-3-4 quickly, then hold the 2nd note and play 3-4-1 quickly, then the 3rd, then the 4th.
- When you pause on the long note, think ahead to the next three notes and only continue when you are sure you’re about to play them correctly.
- After each variant feels secure, return to the original rhythm and notice how much more even and smooth the passage has become.

Level up this habit:

- Vary the articulation. Practice some variants legato, some non legato, and some with very crisp staccato. This will help you learn to refine finger control and clarity.
- Vary accents. Instead of holding a note longer than the others, put an accent on the 1st note of each group of four, then repeat the passage accenting the 2nd note, then the 3rd, then the 4th.
- Apply the same variants to your scales and arpeggios. This will help you learn to play your scales and technical exercises with more ease and at a faster speed.

🎥 Want to go deeper?

- This Practice Strategy Makes Fast Piano Passages Easier
- Why Alberti Bass Feels So Hard (and How to Fix It)
- How to Trust Your Fingers in Fast Piano Passages

Habit 4: Analyze the music 🔍

Watch this habit in the video: [7:57]

If this sounds like you...

- "I don't understand the piece I'm playing."
- "I feel like it's all 'just notes' to me."
- "I can't start in the middle of a phrase."
- "I don't understand the form, and don't have an inner concept of the piece."
- "When I have a memory slip, I don't know where to jump back in."

...do this!

- Spend a few minutes with the score away from the piano before you practice.
- Look for repeating themes, texture changes, new tempo marks, cadences, and obvious high or low points so you can form a mental roadmap of the piece.
- Divide the piece into clear sections and give each one a short label (A theme, transition, sequence, chorale, coda, etc.).
- When you practice, choose specific sections from your roadmap and start there, instead of always beginning at bar 1 and learning only note by note.

Level up this habit:

- Mark structural landmarks. Label cadences, key changes, sequences, climaxes, and returns of the main theme directly in the score so you see the architecture at a glance.
- Outline the form on paper. Write a one-page overview with measure numbers. Tuck it in your score and update it as you learn more.
- Connect your analysis to shaping. For each section, decide on its character and goal (tension, release, transition, arrival) and let that shape your phrasing and dynamics.
- Use your roadmap when you memorize. Practice starting from every major landmark in your outline so you can recover quickly if you have a memory slip.

🎥 Want to go deeper?

- 10 Piano Practice Secrets That Actually Work
- This Technique Will Make Your Piano Playing Smoother
- Stop Practicing Piano Without a Plan (do this instead!)
- How to Organize Your Piano Practice and Learn Music Faster

Habit 5: Do Mental Practice 💭

Watch this habit in the video: [11:15]

If this sounds like you...

- “It’s fine when I’m practicing just for myself, but it falls apart when I play for somebody else.”
- “I feel like I don’t progress from one day to the next.”
- “I zone out while I practice and don’t realize it until later.”
- “My memory feels unreliable unless I’m at the keyboard.”
- “I can’t clearly hear or feel the passage in my head away from the piano.”
- “Before a performance, I have trouble picturing how the piece is going to go.”

...do this!

- Take a short passage you have already worked on. Play it once, paying attention to both the sound and the physical feeling.
- Step away from the keyboard and imagine it clearly in your head, hearing every note and feeling the motions in your hands as you follow the score with your eyes.
- Go back to the piano, play it again, then repeat another mental run. Do several cycles like this.
- Notice where your mental picture gets fuzzy or you lose track. Those are the places that are not truly secure yet and need more focused work.

Level up this habit:

- Do full mental run-throughs. Once a section is familiar, try “playing” the whole thing in your head away from the piano, in tempo, without stopping.
- Practice in odd places. Use spare moments (on the couch, on the bus, in a practice-room hallway) for short mental runs so the piece lives in your mind, not just under your fingers.
- Mentally rehearse performances. Picture walking on stage, sitting down, and hearing/feeling the opening of your piece in your mind before you ever play a note.

🎥 Want to go deeper?

- How to Practice Piano Without Touching the Keys
- Mental Practice Works… So Why Do We Avoid It?
- 8 Piano Practice Habits That Make a Massive Difference

Habit 6: Drill dynamics and articulation 🎵

Watch this habit in the video: [14:47]

If this sounds like you...

- “My teacher keeps telling me there’s not enough contrast.”
- “I recorded myself and it sounds flat and/or boring.”
- “I keep forgetting to follow the dynamic markings in the music.”
- “My melody doesn’t project over the accompaniment.”
- “Articulations and/or dynamics disappear when I speed up.”
- “Everything sounds the same from phrase to phrase.”

...do this!

- Choose a spot where the balance, dynamics, articulation, or voicing are not coming out the way you want. Decide which of those four parameters you are going to fix first.
- Practice that one expressive parameter deliberately: for example, only the balance between the hands, only the legato touch, or only bringing out the top line.
- Pay attention to how it feels physically to produce the sound you want. When you get it right once, repeat it correctly 3–7 more times so the new version sticks.
- Record yourself and listen back to confirm that what you hear matches both what the score asks for and what you imagined.

Level up this habit:

- Exaggerate, then refine. In drills, overdo the contrasts (very soft vs. very loud, very legato vs. very crisp) so the difference is unmistakable, then dial it back to a tasteful level.
- Use the time signature. Feel where the strong beats naturally fall in the meter and phrase your dynamic and articulation choices toward those beats so the phrase has direction.

📽️ Want to go deeper?

- To Play Piano Musically, Stop Thinking One Note at a Time
- How to Use the Time Signature to Play More Musically
- How to Bring Out the Melody on the Piano

Habit 7: Don't Make Mistakes 🎯

Watch this habit in the video: [17:55]

If this sounds like you...

- "My playing is messy and I miss a lot of notes."
- "I get impatient when I practice, and so I play fast most of the time."
- "I keep practicing the same wrong notes by accident."
- "I feel tense or panicky and often have to correct notes as I practice."
- "When I try to fix something, I just end up repeating the same wrong version."
- "I end up having to relearn passages later because I baked in errors early."

...do this!

- Remind yourself that some mistakes are normal, but lots of wrong notes usually mean you are going faster than your hands are ready for. Slow down enough to avoid wrong notes in the first place.
- Choose a tempo where you can play the correct notes several times in a row without tension. This will almost always be slower than you think.
- In the note-learning phase, allow small pauses in order to find hand positions and movements instead of plowing ahead and guessing.
- When you do miss a note, stop, figure out exactly what went wrong (fingering, reading, jump, etc.), then play the passage correctly a few times from just before the trouble spot.

Level up this habit:

- Use a "three-in-a-row" rule. Only increase the tempo when you can play the passage three times in a row with no mistakes and no extra tension.
- Diagnose the mistake. Each time something goes wrong, ask: Is this a reading issue, a fingering issue, or a coordination issue? Choose your next drill based on that answer.

🎥 Want to go deeper?

- What to Do About Mistakes When You Practice Piano
- This Book Will Change How You Think About Piano Mistakes