

How to get better at guitar

Play In The Zone



Contents

Intro – Why just practicing hard isn’t the answer	2
1) What to practice for mastery	4
1.1 High-level goals: know where you’re going.....	4
1.2 Then map a path backwards from your goal.....	5
1.3 Choose the most important skills – bottlenecks.....	6
1.4 Choose the most important skills – mileage	7
1.5 Stick to a few things at a time	8
1.6 Track your improvement, but don’t be seduced by ease of measurement.....	9
2) How to practice – using your practice time.....	11
2.1 It takes focus to master guitar skills.....	11
2.2 Practice consistently for long-term improvement	11
2.3 Plan in advance	12
2.4 Measure how your skills develop	13
3) How to practice – go deep into the fundamentals	15
3.1 Really strong fundamentals sound amazing.....	15
3.2 The great guitarists draw their power from this.....	16
3.3 Overtraining gives you full control over what you play.....	17
3.4 How to get better at the fundamental guitar skills	19
4) What are the real fundamentals?	21
4.1 Importance of rhythm.....	21
4.2 The rhythm needs to be in YOU, not in your guitar.....	22
4.3 How you think drives how you play	23
4.4 Build on a strong foundation: rock-solid self-belief	25
4.5 You’re moving faster than you realise	26
4.6 You’ll need motivation & determination	27
4.7 Remember the importance of taste.....	28
4.8 ...and don’t wait to get creative	29
5) What else do you need?.....	30
5.1 Get help – you don’t have to do this on your own.....	30
5.2 Tap into sources of inspiration	31
5.3 Design your approach and environment for enhanced learning.....	32
Overall summary and recommendations	34

It's no secret that you need to put in some work if you want to get better at guitar.

The good news is that you CAN make rapid progress whatever your current level. Even if you don't have a huge amount of time to practice.

The bad news is that most guitarists go about things in the wrong way. They waste their effort. Or decide that they just don't have what it takes.

Bottom line? Finding a better way will move you from being stuck to achieving more than you thought possible (saving you time and effort in the process).

And in this guide I'm going to show you everything you need to massively improve your guitar playing. Including the vital – but less obvious – things that most people overlook.

Let's get right to it.

Intro – Why just practicing hard isn't the answer

If you've looked for advice on how to master the guitar then you were probably told that the answer is "lots of practice".

Immediately followed by a dive straight into the details of how to work on your technique.

If you're lucky, you might also have heard that **what** you choose to practice is important too.

Look.

That advice is solid. But it's incomplete.

And without the missing pieces it can even be unhelpful.

We need to stop and rewind a bit. We've already walked straight past some of the most important fundamental aspects.

If you're not aware of them then you're handicapping yourself.

Yes, this guide covers practice and technique. But you're also going to see some wider concepts – and very few people realise just how important they are.

Just be aware that the guide starts with a reasonably “narrow” view, then gradually zooms out to cover wider issues. Like how the key fundamentals that make a great guitar player go **way beyond** physical technique.

These are **really** important. A few lucky people tick these boxes by chance, but most guitarists overlook them – crippling their progress.

Don't be one of those. Make sure you stick around to the end to learn what they are, and how to address them.

With all the pieces in place, you'll have an unfair advantage over everyone else.

1) What to practice for mastery

Before you dive straight into the hard work, you need to make a careful choice of what you're going to work on.

Pick the wrong topics and all that effort you put in will, at best, only be partially effective. Or it might not move you forward at all.

Time spent choosing the right areas to focus on is time well spent. And you'll want to review these choices from time to time too – to check you're still on the right track.

1.1 High-level goals: know where you're going



To maximise your progress, you need to you practice the things that are most relevant for YOU.

Yes – there are some basics that everyone needs to know.

But, once you have a decent foundation, there are lots of different paths you can go down. And it's quite possible to achieve mastery in a couple of areas while leaving others almost completely untouched.

To choose the right path, you need to have an idea of where you want to get to.

Exactly what sort of guitarist do you see yourself being in your visions of the future? What style of music do you play? Do you mainly play acoustic or electric guitar?

Are you a technically brilliant lead guitarist? Are you a rock-solid rhythm player? Are you in a band with a clearly-defined role? Or are you playing solo guitar and so need to cover all the bases yourself?

These are the sort of questions you need to ask yourself to get an idea of where you're aiming for. The answers could all point you in slightly different directions.

I remember attending a workshop with [Mike Moreno](#) – an internationally-renowned jazz guitarist. He studied at a top music school and several of his classmates also went on to become big names.

But plenty of them didn't.

Mike pointed out that the musicians who went on to make it big weren't any more talented and didn't work harder than the ones who didn't. What they **did have** that the others were missing was a crystal-clear idea of where they were going.

And don't worry if you're not planning to make it to the very top. Whatever level you're at, a clear idea of where you're going means faster progress.

1.2 Then map a path backwards from your goal

Once you've got a vision together, it's going to help you pick the right things to work on. *[And don't worry about getting the vision perfect first time round. You're allowed to change your mind later]*

Identify the big skill areas you need to develop to meet that vision. Then you can create a roadmap for how you're going to

acquire each one. There will probably be several steps along the way to get to each of the big skills you're aiming for.

When you work backwards from where you want to get to you've got a much better chance of mapping out the most effective path.

If you just try and head forward from where you currently are then you're likely to hit some dead ends, try things before you're ready for them, and wander off in completely the wrong direction several times.

Be strict with yourself.

Get really clear about what skills you **don't** need, or what's **less important** (you can add that later). Focus just as much on what to **avoid** spending practice time on as on what to prioritise.

There isn't time in life to learn everything so choosing what to leave out is one of the keys to rapid progress.

It's all too easy to get excited about learning a flashy new technique, or the next shiny object, and then later realise that it hasn't actually moved you forward.

1.3 Choose the most important skills – bottlenecks

Another key to rapid progress is to identify the bottlenecks in your playing.

At any one time there will be one or two little issues which stop all your other skills from being used to their full potential. Glitches in one area which then limit what you can do across the board.

These are your bottlenecks.

They're small things that have a disproportionately large impact on your playing now. And how you improve in the future.

Solve one of these, and your guitar playing will take a huge leap forward. Solve another issue (even if it's still something on your roadmap) and you only move a small way.

For example, if your fretboard hand speed and precision is holding you back, then increasing the speed you can pick at will have almost no impact on your playing. But if you focus on improving what you can do with your fretboard hand then the speed you can play at will go up instantly – without working on your picking hand at all.

It's important to be aware, though, that these bottlenecks often (maybe most of the time!) won't have anything to do with technique at all. Later sections of this guide cover other vital things which might be bottlenecks for you.

1.4 Choose the most important skills – mileage

As well as whether a practice topic fits with your goals, think about how much you'll actually use it.

A flash lick that you've spent ages working on might get used once in an entire gig. Other, less sexy stuff will get used all the time.

At the end of the day, it's the overall package that counts.

Maybe you nailed a difficult lead break in one song. But if you spent the rest of the gig playing sloppy rhythm guitar without much of a groove, then you're in trouble.

The audience probably won't remember your one shining moment – just that the bulk of your playing was mediocre.

Pay special attention to skills which can improve several areas of your playing at once.

Improving your picking accuracy on one tricky single note run will lead to gains for other single note playing as well; learning a new exotic scale isn't likely to improve your knowledge of other scales.

1.5 Stick to a few things at a time

You make much more progress in the long-term when you stay with one topic for an extended period of time. This is much easier to do if you work consistently on a relatively small number of topics – rather than always jumping between a hundred different things.

You'll still want to have a couple of different skills you're working on at any one time. The variety will help with your motivation. And switching away to something else for a while then coming back later can help with long-term learning.

Just don't go overboard.

If you're going to restrict yourself like this, then the flipside is that you have to be willing to let other things you'd like to practice go. At least for the moment.

This takes discipline, but it's well worth it. Don't get overwhelmed by all the things to learn and by all the amazing players out there – take small steps and trust that you'll get there in the end.

Choose to play a few things well, rather than trying to learn how to do everything.

Later, when we look at fundamentals you'll see how – if you choose wisely – learning just a few things can still open the door to infinite possibilities if you go really deep.

1.6 Track your improvement, but don't be seduced by ease of measurement



Tracking your progress is important. You need feedback on how you're improving.

But be wary of spending all your time on things which are easy to measure. And ignoring equally important topics where it's harder to track your progress.

This is normal human behaviour. You assign more importance to things where information is easily available. This leads to a really backwards approach (seen a lot in business) where you end up rating things as most important simply because they're the easiest to measure.

It needs to be the other way around.

Decide what's most important and THEN work out ways to measure it.

It can be tough to stick with something where you only have a vague way of measuring it. But the alternative is to work on something relatively unimportant that you can measure perfectly.

This **feels** good, but it will never make you a great guitar player.

Speed is a classic example. In fact, when guitarists talk about technique they usually just mean the ability to play fast.

But there's much more to good technique than that.

Speed grabs most of your attention because you can instantly and easily check it with a metronome. Other important topics which lack that obvious measuring stick struggle in comparison.

A quick list of important technical aspects that are harder to measure would include:

- Your ability to play accurately in time
- Your rhythmic feel – i.e. your groove
- Your control of dynamics
- Articulations like slides, bends, and vibrato

There are many more.

All these things have a massive effect on how much an audience enjoys your performance. Don't neglect them.

Your time and groove are particularly important. So much so, that we'll cover them in more detail later.

Summary and resources: What to practice

1. Have a vision of where you're going – time thinking about this is well spent
2. Map your journey backwards from there – this lets you see what you need to work on, and what to avoid
3. Work on your bottlenecks – the areas where a little step forward in one place will allow your playing overall to take a leap
4. Stick to one or two main topics at a time – and spend longer on them than you think you need to
5. Track your progress, but don't be seduced by the things which are easiest to measure

[Check out this article for in-depth stuff on bottlenecks](#) (but be aware that it deals mainly/exclusively with TECHNICAL bottlenecks).

2) How to practice – using your practice time

If you're serious about getting good at the guitar then you can't rush to get there. You need to give plenty of time to your playing and practice.

How you use that time is important, though.

It's not as simple as counting up the hours you spend in the practice room. The **quality** of that time is vital too.

2.1 It takes focus to master guitar skills

Practice is only really effective when your concentration is solid.

Thirty minutes of practice where you're really focused will do more to make you a better guitarist than three hours where you're constantly getting distracted by other things.

So short sessions are often better than long ones. If you want to practice for a long time, you can always spread lots of short bursts throughout the day.

A great answer to the question: "How long should I practice for?" is: "As long as you can stay focused".

2.2 Practice consistently for long-term improvement

You need to show up and do the work on a regular basis.

Little and often is better than doing nothing for long periods and then bingeing with a mammoth practice session.

This is a marathon, not a sprint. Make sure that you pace yourself and that you have the stamina to stay the course.

You're going to need to get stuck in day after day. Habits are a great way to minimise the effort required to achieve this.

Link your practice to a routine activity – as soon as you finish that activity every day, then it's time to practice. This helps make sure it happens. Having ONE specific time for it helps get around the temptation of saying you'll do it later and then never doing it.

Another small thing that has a surprisingly big impact is to keep your guitar out where you can pick it up instantly. This often makes the difference between whether you practice at all or not on days where you're not feeling motivated.

And starting is often the biggest obstacle. Even if you tell yourself you only need to practice for five minutes, you'll often find that, once you've started, you just feel like keeping going.

2.3 Plan in advance



You make best use of your practice time when you've decided what you're going to work on in advance. It helps you get into useful work immediately. And it helps to ensure that you're actually spending your time on something that's really important.

Your high-level goals and roadmap should already have given you the big themes that you want to work on. This is about translating those wider areas into a few specific exercises that you're going to do on a given day.

If possible, I like to work out my plans for tomorrow's practice sessions the night before. This way you're committing yourself but it's pretty painless – you don't have to do any actual **work** until tomorrow. Then, when practice time comes around it's much easier to pick up the guitar and get on with it because you've already made that commitment.

A great way to manage this is to keep a practice log. [Check out this video where Mike Outram shows you how to make a really effective one](#), and gives you some great tips on how best to use it.

As well as nice chunky exercises that you can really get stuck into, try and find a couple of things that you could usefully do if you just have five minutes free to practice.

Or if you only have one minute, even.

That way, you can use any short spaces of time productively. Or, if you **really** don't feel motivated, you've got something easy you can do and still feel you've achieved something.

One of the keys to massive progress is to get small wins every day!

2.4 Measure how your skills develop

You also want to make sure you track your progress.

This will allow you to course correct if it looks like the exercises you've chosen are not moving you towards your big goals.

When things are going in the right direction, though, it really fuels your motivation when you can see the progress you're making.

To do this, when you decide to work on an exercise, make sure you have a clear idea of exactly what you're looking to achieve.

Keep the goals for each practice session really small. Make it something you can definitely achieve if you put in the effort – rather than holding yourself hostage to whether you happen to have a really good day or not.

Each time you play the exercise, you want to be able to give an objective “yes” or “no” answer to the question of whether you achieved your aim. Subjective judgements (e.g. how “good” you thought your playing was) aren't helpful here. Rather go for something that's black or white – e.g. did you hit the root of the chord on the 1st beat of every bar.

Finally, record yourself. Getting feedback on exactly where you are is hugely important. And being able to review it again in a few months time will show you how far you've come.

Summary: Using your practice time

1. Be focused when you practice – if you lose focus take a break, or call it a day
2. Consistent practice – little and often turns into giant leaps over time
3. Aim to get started, even if you only intend to practice for 5 mins – you'll often find yourself doing much more, and even small chunks move you forwards
4. Stay with a concept for longer than you think you need to
5. Plan what you're going to work on ahead of the practice session itself
6. Track your progress – this checks that your practice is moving you in the right direction, and also helps with motivation

3) How to practice – go deep into the fundamentals

Once you've identified the areas that you want to work on, go deep rather than wide.

Possibly the most common mistake I see people make is to move on to new material too soon. I know I've been guilty of that many times myself.

There are no shortcuts to getting good at the guitar. It may look like others have sped ahead of you at times – but the long way round is ultimately where the best learning happens.

Work out what the fundamental building blocks are and spend a lot of time with them. Much longer than you think you need to.

Whenever I'm lucky enough to learn from a world-class musician, they mostly talk about fundamentals. I'd almost say that the better the player, the more they seem to focus on fundamentals rather than "advanced" material.

What look like amazing advanced skills often turn out to be fundamentals which have been completely mastered – to a level way beyond where most guitarists stop.

If you're like most guitarists, then you probably underestimate how much you'd improve your playing if you just strengthened your fundamentals.

3.1 Really strong fundamentals sound amazing

I can still remember the experience which hammered this home for me, even though it was many years ago. It's stuck with me ever since in a way that purely theoretical knowledge never could.

I was studying with an excellent guitarist and teacher – [Chris Allard](#) – and we were working on a basic way of playing the

chords for any jazz tune. Chris played a quick example to demonstrate the sort of thing I should be aiming for.

It was awesome – but I wasn't that excited yet. Chris had clearly blended some extra techniques in with the basic concept he was demonstrating.

After I'd fought my way back home through the rush hour, I loaded up my recording of the lesson (I **highly** recommend that you record lessons so that you can review them later). And, because I'd liked that example a lot, I spent a few minutes listening back to see what Chris had **really** been doing.

My jaw dropped.

Chris had used that basic and limited concept **and nothing else**.

Because he'd totally mastered it – both the technical aspects and its musical application – he could turn it into something incredibly musical and natural-sounding. In my hands – even though I knew it well enough to pull it off “correctly” – it sounded like the forced repetition of one idea over and over.

When you've mastered even something simple to that depth, your listeners will feel as though there's some seriously advanced material involved.

3.2 The great guitarists draw their power from this

Think about what makes your favourite players so good.

Chances are they've got at least one thing going for them that makes them unique. An area where they shine brighter than everyone else.

Lots of great guitarists are awesome at sounding like themselves but would struggle to copy others.

Take, for example, [what Brian May said about one of Nuno Bettencourt's solos](#):

"That's colossal. I could never do that. No way in a month of Sundays could I learn that solo. It's Nuno's own thing. It's a stupendous thing."

This is often not a weakness, but their true superpower. They've had the courage to put ridiculous amounts of time and effort into one or two areas that are most important to them – and let everything else slide.

Take a leaf out of their book and spend the time you need to really master the fundamental skills in a couple of areas. You'll sound much better than if you've learnt lots of things to a mediocre level.

And, as an added bonus, this will also help you develop an individual style.

It takes huge amounts of discipline and self-restraint but it's well worth the sacrifice.

3.3 Overtraining gives you full control over what you play

There's more.

Playing the guitar is hard – it requires huge amounts of your brain power.

When you know something just well enough to do it correctly, that takes up all your mental bandwidth. There's nothing left over for anything else. Most guitarists stop when they reach this level.

If you go further, though, new possibilities open up.

When your knowledge of a fundamental is deeper, cognitive effort decreases. You play better, easier, and with more expressive control. You can treat these fundamentals like lego blocks and combine them on the fly in any way you like.

You unlock an infinite range of possibilities.

To get to this stage you need to go way past just knowing things theoretically. You're aiming for what's called "unconscious competence" – where you can play something perfectly without having to think about it at all.

Most guitarists stop at the stage before that: "conscious competence". This is where you can play it correctly – but only if you think about it. It's a necessary step on the way, but it's not the end of the journey.

When you learned to talk, you didn't stop at a couple of years old – as soon as you could just about be understood.

You carried on getting better and better until you could express whatever you wanted perfectly and naturally without having to think about it. That's less about learning a million new words, and more about having absolute command over the basics.

Likewise, you have to keep "talking guitar" until you're fluent in it.

There are hordes of guitarists who achieve conscious competence in many different areas and then wonder why they can't bring everything together into something wonderful.

What they need to do is **go further** in each area they already know. Unfortunately, they usually make the mistake of thinking the answer is to **add new areas** where they'll just about achieve conscious competence. This is never going to get them where they want to go.

And if you want to play and sing at the same time then going way beyond the point where you can just about play something is non-negotiable.

3.4 How to get better at the fundamental guitar skills

The key is to start at the most basic level.

Don't be tempted to rush ahead to the furthest point you can manage. There's great power in building patiently from the ground up so that your foundations are rock solid.

You'll move more slowly to start with. But, eventually, you'll leave everyone else behind in the dust. They won't realise that the reason they're stuck is because their foundations are shaky.

Watch one of my favourite guitarists, [Mike Walker](#), demonstrate it [halfway through this video](#). He starts with the minimum (just one note per chord) and stays with this long after a lot of guitarists would have started adding in more notes. I've seen him take a room full of pro guitarists through the exercise in exactly this way. The result is that the foundations are **really** deep. Everything you add on afterwards will be that much stronger as a result:

As well as starting with the basics, make things simpler for yourself in other ways:

- Play slower
- Play shorter sections
- Use simple rhythms
- Only one concept at a time

As you get those simple beginnings really solid, you can gradually get more complex with the concepts you're learning.

But, once the basics are solid, then it's also really valuable to start combining the concept with other things. For example, you might take an arpeggio exercise you initially practiced on one chord and apply it to the chords from a song – also adding a specific rhythm. Immediately, you're training the arpeggio, your knowledge of the song, and your rhythmic playing at the same time.

Integrating different areas like this will make your practice time more efficient. More importantly, though, it develops your ability to bring different concepts together.

The information goes from being something sterile – that just exists as a disconnected thing – to a living part of your toolbox. Something you can apply in any context as you desire.

Summary: Go deep into the fundamentals

1. Go deep rather than wide – identify the most important concepts and stay with them for much longer than you think you need to
2. Strong fundamentals sound amazing
3. The great guitarists have all done this – different choices on exactly where to dig deep give them their individual sounds
4. Don't be afraid to start with the basics and go slowly – it pays off in the long run

Integrate everything you learn with other concepts – develop your ability to combine things in creative ways

4) What are the real fundamentals?

So far, we've talked about fundamentals as though they're only technical.

That's just the tip of the iceberg.

Whether others consider you to be a great guitar player depends purely on the music you make in performance.

Anything which contributes to that – or anything that blocks it – is important. These important things are all fundamentals in their own right, and so many of them go a lot wider than just technique.

Something that holds a lot of guitarists back is that they concentrate too intently on the technical aspects and don't give enough time to these wider fundamentals. If you strike a better balance, then you steal a march on everyone else.

Let's take a look at some of the other things you want to dedicate time to improving.

4.1 Importance of rhythm

Pay particular attention to your time and groove.

If you're going to be a great guitarist then other musicians have got to want to play with you. The way to make that happen is to ensure that other people find making music with you a really uplifting and enjoyable experience.

And probably the most important thing that makes playing with someone else enjoyable is when they have an incredible groove.

It's going to improve the audience's experience too. Great notes played with poor rhythm usually sound worse than mediocre notes played with great rhythm.

And you'll enjoy yourself much more as well. It can be hard to describe in words, but you'll probably have had an experience like this if you're a committed guitarist:

You find yourself getting into the music really deeply. You start to connect with its core essence rather than any technical and theoretical surface details. The more you engage with the groove, the less things like notes, keys, and theory matter.

When you think back afterwards you may realise that you played technically "correct" notes. But they came from your intuition and connection with the music – not just your head.

There's more than just rhythm involved in that experience. But it usually starts when you lose yourself in the groove.

4.2 The rhythm needs to be in YOU, not in your guitar



Ok.

I know that some of the aspects of playing rhythm need technical ability on the guitar.

But what's really important is your inherent knowledge of rhythms and your time feel. You need to have this in you even when you're away from the guitar.

Some of the most important exercises to do are without the guitar – get the rhythm in your body first, **then** put it on the guitar.

Clapping your hands and tapping your feet. Playing drums or percussion. Singing rhythms and grooves. These all help.

Use a metronome to help you with this, and to make sure that you're not cheating yourself. But you also need to be able to do all this without any external support.

As well as a great **sense** of rhythm, you also want to have a vocabulary of interesting rhythms that you can call on. And you need to use that vocabulary rather than default to playing a constant stream of notes.

One of the biggest things guitarists struggle with when they can't understand why their playing doesn't sound good is that they're not using interesting rhythms.

Improve your rhythmic knowledge (and actually USE it when you solo or accompany someone) and you'll kick your playing up a notch just like that.

Without having to do anything else.

4.3 How you think drives how you play

Here's what it comes down to.

As you work to get better you've got two basic goals:

1. Improve your guitar skills (and your music skills more generally)

2. Improve your ability to execute these skills when you perform

They might seem like the same thing. But they're separate abilities.

And the second goal depends on how you've developed your mental skills. Skills that go much wider than what we usually associate with guitar practice.

The movements of your body produce the physical sounds that the audience hears.

But the music doesn't really come from your body. The body is controlled by your mind – it's your thoughts and intentions that are where the music really starts.

So, even when you've drilled the physical technique, there's still the potential for your mind to step in and sabotage the process.

You need strong mental skills as well as solid technique if you want to be a great performer. Without them, you'll find you fall well short of your potential.

And they won't only help your performance – they'll make your practice more effective as well.

Although they can seem fuzzy, know that these skills CAN be trained. It's just that most people don't realise it's possible – or don't make the effort.

This actually works in your favour. If you put in the work to develop them when others don't, then you've got a significant advantage. It can seem almost unfair.

Here at [Play In The Zone](#) you'll find lots of resources to help with this. Here are a couple of suggestions to get you started:

Recommended reading – Developing Mental skills

Some of the areas you'll want to work on include:

- [Understanding performance anxiety - and how to deal with it](#)
- [Simple actions to boost your confidence when you perform](#)
- [7 reasons you play better in practice than performance](#)
- [How to switch to a performance mindset when you need it](#)

4.4 Build on a strong foundation: rock-solid self-belief

Your mindset is a vital part of becoming a better guitarist.

So many guitarists fall by the wayside because they lack self-belief. They sabotage themselves by inventing reasons why they can't get good at the guitar.

Know that you have the ability to do this if you want to.

You may be worried that you don't have enough time to practice, that you don't have natural talent, or that you're starting the journey too late.

These are all just excuses.

If you're determined to become a better guitarist, then you can make it happen.

Talent is not the issue – progress comes from focused practice. And, no matter how much time you have, or when you started, you can always make progress if you're willing to keep taking the next small step.

The key is to relax about your progress.

Trust that if you do the work, then results will follow. Forget your eventual goal for a second and give the best of yourself to this moment right now.

When you're purely in the moment you won't be overwhelmed by thoughts of how long it will take to master the guitar. Instead, you just keep putting one foot in front of the other.

You'll learn to enjoy the journey – find ways to enjoy what you're practicing NOW rather than needing it to get somewhere to be enjoyable.

4.5 You're moving faster than you realise



One extra caveat. The more you know, the more you realise that you **don't** know.

If you're not aware of this, you can feel like you're not making progress. What's really happening is that you **are** moving forward – but you keep shifting your goal further and further away as you uncover new problems with your playing.

When your view is fixed on the horizon of what's possible you feel like you're standing still because the limits of your vision move forward at least as fast as you do. Be aware that this can be the case and trust that you're making progress.

4.6 You'll need motivation & determination

Any progress you see in your playing probably won't be easily visible on a day-to-day basis. If you stick with the important work over periods of months, though, you'll notice huge leaps when you look back.

You need to be determined enough to keep going. And to keep doing things properly rather than looking for shortcuts. As Rudyard Kipling said:

"If you want something and don't get it, there are only two reasons. You either really didn't want it, or you tried to bargain over the price."

Know what you're getting yourself in for. It's going to take a long time – so be prepared for that.

As well as that, tap into the power of love. It's why you started playing guitar in the first place.

Constantly remind yourself of your love for music. Also, try and feel love for the people you play music WITH, and love the people you play music FOR. All these things will feed your motivation to get better at guitar.

Think back to your high-level goal to remind yourself of what you're aiming for. And remember why it means so much to you to achieve it.

Finally, hard work is important if you want to improve your skills. But it's no use if you burn out and don't stick with it.

Balance serious work with things you enjoy doing. Reward yourself for a good practice session by allowing yourself some time at the end to play just for fun.

4.7 Remember the importance of taste...

Don't get so caught up in the technical and "achievement" side of learning the guitar that you forget the art.

It's easy to get sucked into following what sounds impressive. But the greatest musicians have never been afraid to play something simple when it's the right choice.

And you do want to be a great **musician** as well as just a great guitarist, right?

Don't forget that music is as much about the silences between the sounds as the sounds themselves. Make sure you know how to leave space in your playing. *[If most of the exercises you work on are full of notes, it's surprisingly easy to forget this!]*

Don't be in thrall to technique – embrace emptiness. As Thelonius Monk said,

"Don't play EVERYTHING (or every time); let some things GO BY. Some music just IMAGINED. What you DON'T play can be more important than what you DO."

Listen to what really sounds right to you. Express **yourself**. Be sincere, authentic, and play from the heart.

Be uniquely you – you CAN'T be exactly like someone else. Embrace this and enjoy the things which make you different.

One more Thelonius Monk quote to help you stick with following your own path if you get into doubts, "A genius is the one most like himself".

4.8 ...and don't wait to get creative

Remember that music is about expression and creativity. It's never too early to start making music with what you're working on – even if it's a technical exercise.

If it's a composed piece or excerpt, put some feeling into it as soon as you know the notes (rather than having the only thing you're striving for be not making any mistakes).

If it's material to improvise with or compose with, then do just that. No matter how simple a use you put it to.

Even if you've only got 1 or 2 notes to play with (if you only learn a small part of a new scale to start with; or maybe you're just working on learning all the root notes to a chord progression).

If you can't make something **musical** out of what you're working on, then you're not doing things right. Don't move on and work on something else until you've unlocked the music in what you're working on now.

Summary: The wider fundamentals

1. Rhythm is vital – make sure you can groove just as hard without a guitar as with one.
2. You need performance skills just as much as technique – train your focus and ability to play under pressure
[\[Start Here for more resources on this\]](#)
3. Get your self-belief in place – it's the foundation for all your progress in the practice room, and on stage
4. Get clear on what your motivation is – this makes it much easier for you to stick with the journey in the long-run

Never forget that music is about expressing yourself creatively – go beyond the plain notes and rhythms and put some feeling into everything you do

5) What else do you need?

There are a few other things that will really help you along the way.

It **is** possible to become a great guitarist without them. But you're making it unnecessarily hard for yourself if you don't sort these out.

5.1 Get help – you don't have to do this on your own



My number one suggestion is to take regular lessons with a good teacher. There's more than enough **information** out there in books, DVDs and on the internet.

But the sheer volume of this information can actually hold you back if it means you get overwhelmed by the multitude of possibilities, or if you pick the wrong topics to focus on.

An experienced teacher will be invaluable in providing feedback on what you need to work on and suggesting the best ways to go about it. There's no substitute for face-to-face lessons with an expert. A lot of pro musicians still go out of their way to fit in lessons with master teachers when they can.

If you can't find a good teacher near you then there are a couple of options on the internet which still provide some interaction.

My personal recommendation (providing you have at least a passing interest in jazz) is [Mike Outram's website](#). Mike's an amazing teacher who works with guitarists from those who are just starting out right up to the pro level. I've been a paid-up member of his site for years and have no plans to quit. You can get a 14-day free trial if you want to check it out.

Help from others doesn't have to be limited to a formal teacher/pupil relationship, though. There are so many great musicians out there with years of hard-won experience that you can tap into.

Talk to other musicians. And really listen to what they have to say.

Most of all, don't be afraid to ask questions.

Finally, look for ways to be your own teacher. Don't be afraid to experiment with things and see what happens.

And teaching others is a great way to clarify concepts for yourself. You have to really understand something to explain it to others clearly. Often, when you try and do this, you realise that you don't understand it as well as you thought you did.

5.2 Tap into sources of inspiration

Don't rely entirely on your own creativity. Get inspiration from all the fantastic music that's out there. And go wider than your favourite genres or just guitar music – listening to different styles is a great source of new inspiration.

Make sure you include live gigs as well as listening to recordings. You'll notice different things, and the live events are often more memorable and provide more inspiration.

And inspiration can go much wider than music. Legendary jazz guitarist Jim Hall found that going to art galleries rubbed off on his music. And countless classical composers have been inspired by nature.

Get out there from time to time and immerse yourself in anything that you find beautiful, interesting or awesome.

5.3 Design your approach and environment for enhanced learning

There are general things you can do which accelerate the rate at which you learn.

First, work from memory as much as possible rather than always looking at sheet music/tab/fretboard diagrams. When you make an effort to remember something, the information gets embedded that much deeper in your mind.

And don't wait until you've actively memorised something before you start with this. Right from the start you can challenge yourself to see how much you remember before you're forced to look at the music or your notes. Whether you remember lots – or none at all – it strengthens your recall for the future.

Make it a habit to start getting things off the page and into your head early on.

Set up your practice environment without distractions and with everything you need to hand. This will help you stay focused and allow you to use any short space of available time to the maximum.

Then there are all the things which contribute to high-performance in life generally.

In particular, get enough sleep! And don't trade more practice for less sleep.

There's loads more but not enough space to go into it all here. Exercise is a big one – vital both for maintaining a positive mood and for keeping you physically healthy for playing the guitar.

Summary & resources: What else do you need?

1. Get a good teacher – do you ever see a top athlete without a coach?
2. Get advice from other musicians – there's so much experience out there you can tap into
3. Get inspiration – from music, from art, from life
4. Look after yourself – enough sleep and regular exercise help you achieve the state where you'll learn fastest

If you want to dig deeper into high-performance in general, then [check out Allon Khakshouri's comprehensive guide](#).

Overall summary and recommendations

So that's it – we've gone through a huge amount here. Way more than you could tackle at once.

Don't try and do that.

You need to take action on this stuff if you want to see improvements. But don't rush.

Find one or two areas which speak most strongly to you – or where you're obviously missing something important – and start with them.

You can keep coming back to this over time and gradually implement more ideas. Don't try and move on too fast, though! Let the first things you tackle bed in and become solid habits before you add other stuff.

If I had to single out a couple of things that most guitarists overlook, though, it would be those wider fundamentals.

They're usually the best place to start because areas that you've neglected tend to be the ones where a little bit of work can make the biggest difference.

Remember just how important rhythm is. And don't neglect to inject creativity into your practice alongside exercises.

Most of all, though, people seem to underestimate the importance of mindset and mental skills – and they have no idea how to train them. That's where [Play In The Zone](#) comes in.

If you can see that you'd benefit from working on this, then have a browse around the site. Here are a few suggestions for good articles to start with:

- [9 things you must do in every performance to play your best](#)
- [Start each performance like a pro](#)
- [How to boost your performance confidence \(without doing any extra practice\)](#)