

Ten Tips & Shortcuts to Make Playing More Fun
From Bill Evans, author of *Banjo For Dummies*
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1. Listen Actively Actively listening to your favorite banjo music on CD or to other musicians at concerts and jam sessions makes you a better player. Before you even start to work on a new song, find a recorded version of it first and try to pick up the song by ear. As you listen to great playing, you're internalizing what the banjo is supposed to sound like, the finer details of the style you're learning, and how the instrument fits in a group setting.

2. Set Goals Setting short-, medium-, and long-range goals keeps your practice routine on the right track and helps you to assess your overall progress. Your goals are unique to you. Your long-range goals (where you want to be one to three years out in time) determine your medium-range goals (6 to 12 months out in time). These medium-range goals help you to focus on what you should be practicing in the next one to two weeks (your short-term goals). Adjusting your goals every once in a while is fine.

3. Practice Regularly Regular daily practice, even if each session is for a short amount of time, leads to quicker progress than cramming in long sessions on your days off from work. Keep in mind that the more skilled you are as a player, the more practice time you need to advance to the next level. Take the banjo out of its case and keep it on an instrument stand in your practice area. Then, when you're ready to spend a few minutes playing, your instrument is right there waiting for you.

4. Warm Up Athletes warm up with stretching routines, and you can do the same in your practice sessions. You can devise warm-up exercises to isolate and work on specific right-hand picking patterns or left-hand techniques apart from songs. Your warm up is also the time for you to focus on your tone, your rhythm, and the clarity of your left-hand fretted notes, making adjustments when necessary. Although some players may need to warm up for only a few minutes before they're ready to move on (which is the case with some experienced players), you may want to stay in this warm-up mode for up to 30 minutes or more. Practicing "within your zone" is better than wasting time playing things that are too difficult for you.

5. Use Tablature Sparingly Although *tablature* (written music) is a wonderful resource that allows quick access to hundreds of tunes and also allows you to study closely the subtleties of a master player, use it in small doses. Tablature is great for showing you the left and right mechanics of how something is done, but don't confuse the ability to read and play tab with really being able to play banjo. Try to internalize the *sound* of what you're playing as quickly as possible so that you're concentrating on what you're hearing.

6. Get the Right Hand First For adult learners, one of the most difficult aspects of banjo playing is putting the right- and left-hand techniques together and using both hands at the same time to play smoothly without interrupting the even flow of notes. If you're also experiencing this problem, try playing the right-hand part by itself on the banjo's open strings. After you have the rhythm and the mechanics of the right hand down, begin to add the left-hand techniques, bit by bit if necessary. When playing with others, staying in rhythm is much more important than getting every note fretted

correctly. Great players spend a lot of time working on right-hand technique. If you do the same, you'll be a great player some day too!

7. Gradually Increase Your Speed Playing slowly until you master a technique or song is a tough guideline for banjo players to remember, because they all want to play as fast as they can as soon as possible. However, if the song doesn't sound right when played slowly, the tune isn't going to get any better when played fast (trust me on this one!). After you're warmed up, use your practice time more efficiently (and enjoy it more in the process) by practicing at a slow enough speed where you're still in control of what you're playing. Keep in mind that this tempo could be different for each piece you're working on.

After you're comfortable playing at a slower pace, you may decide that you want to crank the speed up a notch. Regular practice with a metronome can help you to play faster.

8. Take Songs One Measure at a Time If you're learning from tab, play the first measure or two over and over until you've got it without looking at the tab. If you're learning by ear, you want to be able to play these measures by hearing them first in your head. Listen to the sound of several measures played together and try to identify the musical phrases of your song. After you've mastered the first phrase, move on to the second phrase. After you've got the second phrase down, spend a few moments playing the first and second phrases together, remembering not to rely on the tablature. You'll likely encounter some repetition along the way, so after you have the first sections of a tune down pat, the later section usually takes less time.

9. Play the Right Repertoire If your goal is to play music with others, work on the tunes that they like to play. Luckily, almost all bluegrass and old-time musicians learn a basic shared set of tunes at one time or another. The musicians at your local jam session may also play a few personal favorites, including some tunes that may be unique to your part of the country. Keep in mind that more advanced players share a different set of tunes than beginning-level players, bluegrassers have a different repertoire than old-timers, and younger musicians may play some different tunes than the older folks play. After you've mastered a few basic pieces and you feel you're ready to try a beginner's jam session, find out what tunes these musicians like to play. Attend the session and make a list of the songs you hear or (with the permission of the other musicians) bring a tape recorder along to record the pieces you don't know, so that you can work on them at home.

10. Keep Track of Your Progress Most players keep a tune list in the front pocket of their music notebook. Some players group by key or tempo, while others create a list of tunes they already know, a list of tunes they're working on right now, and another list of tunes they want to learn in the near future. You may also want to maintain a practice diary where you can keep some brief notes about some of the things you worked on that day and also remind yourself about what needs more work the next time you pick up the banjo.

Now get practicing!

All the best,

Bill Evans