

## How to Build Speed

No doubt the most common question from players has to do with how to "get faster". It's a great question, and while simply being fast isn't the only element of what makes a "good" player, of course, it's still important to be able to play any and every idea that pops into your head, right? It stands to reason that some of those ideas are going to be at faster tempos, and you should be able to work them out and play them as conceived.

This is not something that just concerns beginners either -- in fact, the biggest "rut" intermediate and even experienced players face is in hitting a "wall", a maximum tempo that they just can't seem to surpass. This can be due to a variety of circumstances. It could be a need for more and better practice material. It could be a need for more consistent and/or better targeted practice habits. It could also be due to an ingrained inefficiency, a "bad habit" that the player needs to go back and "dig out" in order to get rid of a self-imposed mechanical obstacle. These issues are more common than most people might realize, especially among players that want to pursue a more technically oriented style of playing.

If you're serious about building speed -- or really, just serious about practicing at all -- it is absolutely critical that you use a metronome. You can get one for as little as [ten bucks](#), or more if you want the bells and whistles. If you don't have ten bucks, there's a great [free online metronome](#) you can use. The bottom line is that you must use a metronome, especially in the initial phases of developing speed and precision in your technique.

Of course, developing musicality is much more important than perfecting mechanical technique, but that doesn't mean that the mechanics aren't important. A huge part of developing speed involves breaking down playing mechanics to their bare fundamentals, using the metronome to assign a numerical value (top playing speed) to each of those mechanical motions, and then tracking their progress through consistent, focused practice.

There are three fundamental techniques that, once you have them mastered at higher tempos, will enable you to play pretty much anything that you encounter or create:

1. Picking on a single string.
2. Picking between multiple strings.
3. Position shifting.

Really, any exercise you find, here or anywhere else, will involve some combination of these three fundamentals, either 1 and 3 or 2 and 3, or any of them individually. The principles of building speed are the same, regardless of the mechanical aspect being worked on. The most logical place to start is with the simplest one, #1. Select a note, any note on any string. It doesn't matter if it's an open or fretted note (although fretting it will keep the note from ringing out at faster tempos). What we're going to start off with is testing the picking hand speed.

Picking the single note in standard (4/4) time, set the metronome to a slow, manageable speed. Once you are certain you can play 16th notes, steady and consistent, at the tempo you've chosen, bump it up a few beats per minute. The amount you increase the tempo will depend on where you started off; for example, if you started at 60 bpm and can play that easily, you will want to advance the metronome at least 6 and maybe as much as 12 bpm, but if you started at 96 or 108 bpm, you may want to move up in 4-6 bpm increments. Rule of thumb is that the faster the tempo, the smaller the increases will be.

Whatever the case, no matter the exercise, before increasing your tempo, be absolutely sure that you can play whatever you're practicing *perfectly*. At some point, you will eventually exceed your maximum tempo, which is fine; just dial it back, recheck the max tempo at which you played the exercise without any mistakes, and write down that number. That's your benchmark, which you will try to exceed with your practice sessions.

Make sure to start well below (50-60% at the most) your estimated maximum, and along the way, while you're still at slower tempos well within your control, observe all of your relevant mechanical motions. The most important thing is to identify any excess or

"wasted" motion in either your picking or fretting hand, and reduce it accordingly. This is much easier to do at slower, more manageable tempos than at high speed.

When we talk about wasted motion, we're talking about any movement beyond the absolute minimum required to pull off the mechanical concept being practiced. So for our fundamental technique #1 (picking on a single string), take the opportunity at slower tempos to observe precisely what your picking hand is doing. Is it going further up or down beyond the string it's hitting? How much further? Can that distance be cut in half, or more? For exercises utilizing the fretting hand, it's the same principle -- how far are the fingers lifting above the fretboard, from one note to the next? Can that distance be reduced?

Of course, we're talking about fractions of an inch here, but higher tempos will maximize these microflaws, and all those 1/16" excess motions that are manageable at 60 bpm will be compounded at 150 bpm to a point that might render the same exercise impossible to play. It's much easier to work on those excess movements at slower tempos.

Again, these principles apply across the board, on all the fundamental techniques discussed earlier, and any secondary or combination techniques that are derived from those basics. It's all about conserving motion and maximizing efficiency in both hands, together and separately, identifying inefficiencies along the way, and devising exercises to address them along the way.

Complex techniques are built from doing simpler techniques efficiently, so it makes sense that the better you have those simpler ideas nailed perfectly, the better the complex techniques will sound. The importance of quantifying and tracking progress along the way cannot be overemphasized; consistency and patience are essential in building solid speed and technique.