

Time management in instrumental lessons

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Introduction

This resource is intended to help visiting music teachers improve their time management in 20- to 30-minute lessons, teaching individual students or small groups.

In relatively short lessons, time can seem to run away from you. If not properly managed, this can become a stressful experience both for you and your students. This can be avoided with good planning and preparation, however, focusing on a clear, positive approach with your students and being realistic about what is achievable within the time you have.

Managing lesson time begins before the lesson starts. We will first consider timetabling, paperwork, preparation, setup and suggestions for dividing up the session time. The second half of the resource looks in more detail at how to manage the lesson time itself successfully, hit the ground running at the start of the lesson, use warm-up tasks, move on to the main teaching section, and finish off with a plenary activity.

Before the lesson

Timetable

Good timekeeping begins with setting up your timetable. You may not have much choice over timetabling, but where possible, try to establish a timetable where you can do the following:

- ▶ Put together groups of pupils that can work well together. Consider instrument, ability and personality. For example, would a more advanced pupil enjoy 'mentoring' a beginner even though they are at different stages?
- ▶ Factor in adequate breaks and a sufficient lunch break.
- ▶ Establish times that don't need too much tinkering once you've started the term's teaching. Think about which pupils require lunch/break-time lessons. This probably involves liaising with school administrators.
- ▶ Make sure you have enough time to travel between schools.

Establish clear and consistent ground rules for how to deal with lateness and absences. Are you going to send for the pupils? How is it best to do this? This will be greatly helped by establishing a good relationship with receptionists and school administrators. Find out the school protocol for contacting pupils or sending runners.

It's important not to let pupils who are late or ask for last-minute timetable changes affect other pupils' lessons. Accommodate them as much as you can within the timetable, but be firm about not affecting other pupils' lesson time.

Make sure you're clear about how to make any changes with the timetable, and how that is communicated with the school and the pupils.

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Paperwork

Good time management can be helped enormously by effective paperwork, planning and record keeping. This could be on paper or in digital format – whichever is easiest and more time-efficient for you.

For lesson plans and schemes of work, you may have templates to use from your music hub or other source. I would suggest having a double-termly work plan (one page) for each individually taught student or student group, with additional more detailed lesson plans where needed.

Design or adapt it to suit you, making it as easy and quick to use as possible, so that you can use it and fill it in efficiently during the lesson.

Paperwork tips

- 1 Set up a system, with clear, simple symbols and abbreviations to record progress.
- 2 Establish a system where you don't have to write things twice.
- 3 Consider how it will feed into end-of-year report writing.

Your paperwork for each double term should include:

- ▶ pupils' details and instruments.
- ▶ previously passed exams, date taken and result.
- ▶ list of pupils' books.
- ▶ a plan for the (double) term's work.

Make your plan as specific as possible without being overly detailed. Outline the pieces, scales, techniques and other areas you want to work on. If applicable, note which grade students are working towards and when they are due to take the exam. Note down when you asked them to buy a book or new equipment (eg reeds), as well as upcoming performances or school activities that could affect what you do in the preceding lessons.

Set up rows for each lesson that include:

- ▶ lesson date.
- ▶ objectives for the lesson (in as few words as possible).
- ▶ outcomes and progress (include here what the student should work on at home).
- ▶ a progress score to keep track of how much practice the student has done (between, say, 1 and 3) which could also be a box to mark absence or lateness.
- ▶ 'Notes' to put down additional information for that week.

Example of layout within a termly plan

Date	Progress (1-3)	Objectives	Outcomes & Progress	Notes
27/4	2 (late)	Warm-up: D min scale (2 oct) Understand dotted rhythms: clap & play examples Greensleeves: learn first half	Lower oct ✓ - Get upper oct confident + memorise ✓ ✓ Increase speed & fluency	Buy AB scales book
3/5	3	Warm-up: Call & response game using upper D min scale (from memory) GS: first half: improve phrasing/legato. Learn line 3	Dm Scale memorised ✓ upper oct ✓ Grad increase speed + legato More work on legato fluency Improve tuning & tone	

Lesson preparation

Prepare the outline of the lesson. Be clear about what you want to achieve with specific, measurable objectives. Have a syllabus or list of the requirements for any grades you are working towards readily to hand. Consider listing all the grade pieces and scales/arpeggios on your planning record for each student to save looking them up each time.

Equipment

Make sure you have the equipment, books and resources you need and can quickly bring them to hand. This will probably include:

- ▶ paperwork and/or laptop.
- ▶ instrument(s), stands and spare bits and pieces (reeds, valve oil, etc).
- ▶ teaching books, syllabuses, piano accompaniments, aural tests, etc.
- ▶ manuscript paper.
- ▶ a good set of pencils and erasers.
- ▶ whiteboard pens if applicable.

Consider how best to carry around your resources, paperwork, equipment and instruments. It might be worth investing in suitable bags and cases. You could also have a checklist to make sure you have everything you need for that day's teaching.

Your students should each have some sort of practice diary where you or they can write down feedback, what they need to work on each week, and any new books to buy. This is also a useful place for notes to and from parents/carers.

Always think about what you can prepare beforehand to save time in the lesson. For instance, print out slips with the names of books to buy, or print an A4 list of requirements and handy tips for the exam. Make sure you keep these in a logical place on your computer, to make it quick and easy to locate, edit and reprint.

Setting up the teaching room

- ▶ Is the room likely to be full of equipment or mess that will need to be tidied away?
- ▶ Where are the students going to put their bags and set up their instruments?
- ▶ Have you thought about the lesson change-over, ensuring there is enough space for students to pack away while others set up?
- ▶ Set up your instrument, keyboard (if being used), resources and paperwork – make sure you define clearly where your space is and where the students' is. This will avoid any unnecessary faffing, safety issues or damaged equipment.
- ▶ Position the music stand at a good height and in a good place – make sure the pupil is playing *into* the room with a good source of light.

Dividing the time

Even with a short lesson, dividing time into distinct sections is important. Here are examples of how a lesson could be structured:

20-minute lesson

- ▶ 3 mins: students set up their instruments, books and practice diaries. Outline lesson aims.
- ▶ 2 mins: warm-up, leading into...
- ▶ 10 mins: main teaching activity.
- ▶ 5 mins: plenary, complete paperwork & pack away.

30-minute lesson

- ▶ 3 mins: students set up their instruments, books and practice diaries. Outline lesson aims.
- ▶ 2 mins: warm-up, leading into...
- ▶ 5 mins: an activity to reinforce and build on last week's tasks.
- ▶ 15 mins: main teaching activity.
- ▶ 5 mins: plenary, complete paperwork and pack away.

Tips

- ▶ Be realistic about how much time each activity takes.
- ▶ Build in flexibility and room for the unexpected.
- ▶ Not every lesson is going to be structured in the same way. Perhaps you'll need to dedicate more time to feedback, or structure it as a 'mock exam'.
- ▶ Whatever the structure, make sure students can identify the aims of the lesson, what they have learnt and what to do next.

The lesson

Starting the session

Arrival or lesson change-over

Establish a routine of how and where to set up everything in the room. The better your setup routine, the more time you will save. Have a designated space to put bags and coats, a chair to put the case, etc. Make sure you take time to train students how to properly and efficiently set up and pack away their instrument. This will save time in the long run. Being able to set up and care for the instrument, as well as understanding its construction, is an important part of learning. Students will often take pride in being able to achieve this, so don't rush it with beginners.

Engagement

Get students engaged and feeling positive as soon as they enter the room. Smile. Thank them for coming. Talk to them about their music making while they set up. Do not to make the questions or comments too judgemental or pressurising. Good starters would be:

- ▶ Did you enjoy looking at that piece?
- ▶ Do you remember we did x last lesson?
- ▶ So, I'm looking forward to working on x with you today.

Introduction

Briefly outline what you hope to achieve in the lesson. Don't be overly ambitious or complex. One central aim is usually enough. If appropriate, ask the pupil(s) what they want to get out of the lesson today.

Warm-up

Get the student(s) playing as soon as you can. Be specific about what you want them to do. Wherever possible, link the warm-up in to what you are going to do in the rest of the lesson. It is also a good opportunity to get groups of students to play together – holding the notes of a chord, for example. With any non-advanced students, avoid saying 'Warm up, please' and leaving them to it.

Ideas and tips for warm ups:

- ▶ 'Please play a nice long low G. Now hold it for six beats. Well done, now a long high G but start *forte* and gradually get quieter. Great, can you make it even more gradual?' (This could link with working on dynamics or tone control in a piece.)
- ▶ 'The piece we're working on is in A major. Play a long A. Now play your A major scale.'
- ▶ 'We're going to work on tonguing today. Can you tongue six middle Cs in a row?'

No words

Consider establishing a 'call and response' game without saying anything to the students. Play a note and gesture for them to copy, repeat and gradually build up to longer phrases. This can be a quick and entertaining way of establishing focused listening.

Teaching in groups

The best way of maximising time with group teaching is to make sure all the students are engaged and learning through the lesson. Avoid splitting up the time to teach each student individually while the others sit and wait for their turn. Each student should have an active role throughout the lesson.

Teaching more than one pupil can be used as a positive way of managing time. Fellow students can assist each other and become an audience, offering feedback and advice. You could invite a student to demonstrate to the others, or ask them to teach something to another student while you work with another group member.

Managing time within group tuition is challenging when students are working on different material, of are of different standards or even instruments. Here are some ideas to help achieve this:

- ▶ Choose or arrange **ensemble pieces** that fit the different standards and instruments within the group.
- ▶ Give students the task of **listening** and giving specific (constructive!) feedback to the other students' performances. Make sure this is a clear, active task.
- ▶ Have a **mini-quiz** for the non-playing students to test aural skills: 'Tell me where student x plays the highest note of the piece' or 'Is it major or minor?' or 'Explain how the dynamics change.'
- ▶ Suggest an **accompanying part** to play by ear on their instrument. This could be holding the first note of each bar, joining in on a refrain, or playing an ostinato bassline. All the better if students can suggest or improvise something themselves.
- ▶ Ask students to **clap along** or **tap the beat** to assist the other player. This could even involve some repeated notes on piano or percussion if available. (I've taught a student who decided to do an interpretive dance to another student's performance!)

For more on group teaching, see two previous resources: Teaching a beginners' brass group (*Music Teacher*, September 2019) and Teaching a successful guitar group (*Music Teacher*, October 2019).

Maintaining a flow

Keeping a good pace and momentum to the lesson is a crucial skill to master. Learn to spot when students are flagging or becoming distracted, or need more time to consolidate something. Try to check in with them regularly. Ask them whether they understand the task, enjoy the piece, or need more time or information.

Here are some practical ideas of maintaining a good flow during lessons:

Be positive

Use positive comments to encourage, rather than negative comments to criticise. This is so important for many reasons, but can save time by helping to keep the students motivated, confident and moving forward with the activity.

This gives them the same information, in more detail, but doesn't make them feel negative and knock their confidence. Being positive tells them that you are working *with* them, not against them. It also keeps a sense of continuity: you are in a process of working on this passage *together* to improve it.

Looping

If you're accompanying on piano, and working on improvisation or a repeated phrase in a piece, keep playing the backing part on a continual loop. This could also be a pre-recorded backing part. Count in where you want them to start again or take turns. This keeps a sense of flow and continuous music-making. It also avoids distracting stops and starts.

Bar by bar

If you're learning a new piece, establishing a repeating pattern of working can save time. Perhaps work bar by bar: establish a steady pulse and ask students to play back each bar after you. Repeat the bar a few times until they have it, then move on to the next one. Try to avoid stopping the sense of pulse. Encourage them to listen carefully to work out if you've moved on to the next bar.

Main teaching activity

If possible, have one main focus, for example an aspect of the piece, a section to improve, an element to master (for instance vibrato), or improvisation using a particular mode. You can involve other aspects, but it is usually best to have one central aim for the lesson.

Make sure you are prepared if students forget books or instruments, or if they haven't practised. Have a go-to duet with you, or a back-up improvisation exercise or composition activity, or a theory quiz.

Don't say: 'I'm afraid a lot of those notes were out of tune and the rhythm was wrong. You didn't practise it enough last week, so you'll need to do more on it this time. Start the piece again, please.'

Do say: 'Thanks, well done! This will be a good passage to practise this week. Can you play it again for me, please, and this time make the tuning in bar 8 as good as you made it in bar 4, and make the rhythm from bar 10 sound like this...'

Repetition for a reason

Repetition is important, but avoid just playing through something again and again without a sense of purpose. Every time the pupil plays something, make sure that they understand *why* they are playing it. Are they aiming to play it more confidently, faster, smoother, louder, with more vibrato, or a clearer sense of the dotted rhythms? The more a pupil understands what they are expected to do, the quicker they will be able to respond, and less time you will use up. Take the time to explain and clarify.

Using technology

Pre-recorded backing tracks or piano accompaniments can work well. Again, make sure the technology is set up and works effectively *before* the lesson starts. If the student is allowed to use their phone or a school device, encourage them to record things during the lesson to use at home. A recording of you playing through a piece for them on their phone can be a valuable tool to understand how the piece should sound when practising. You can build a lesson around making a recording of their playing – particularly of a piece they have composed.

Groundhog Day

Don't spend too many lessons going over the same piece in the same way. This will feel like a waste of time for you and the pupil. If they are not progressing, take a new approach, start a new section, clap it, sing it, analyse it, and so on.

Do you need to give them a more inspiring, enjoyable or manageable piece? Could you add in a quick 'easy win' activity to do alongside it, to keep a sense of momentum?

Plenary

Even with short lessons, it's important for students to identify what they have learnt. They should understand and put in writing what to work on for the next lesson in a practice diary. The last few minutes of the lesson are a chance to give feedback. Always identify a positive achievement in the lesson, however seemingly minor.

To make the best use of this time, structure the plenary around noting down outcomes in your planning paperwork as you verbally give feedback. Your students should have practice diaries. It can be effective to ask the students themselves to write down what to practise. This saves your time, gives them ownership of their home practice and helps them to remember what to do.

The plenary activity can be more ambitious and creative where appropriate. You may want to end with a group quiz, to ask the students to demonstrate one thing they have learnt, or to use ticks, smiley faces or stickers, particularly for younger students.

It's crucial to remember that most of the improvements should happen during the students' own practice away from the lessons, so make sure you are not trying to do in the lesson what needs to be done at home. Use the lesson time to teach the pupil techniques and to motivate them to work on the piece by themselves. The improvements made during the lesson help to model further improvements the students can make on their own. A small victory ('Well done! You can play that phrase better because you played it three times slowly and counted the rests carefully') will both motivate and model ways of achieving larger victories on their own.

The plenary is a chance to start planning for the next session. Your notes of what the students achieved and what they are working on for next time will feed into what you are planning for the following lesson. You may even have time to complete the plan for the next lesson during the plenary time.

An example of giving feedback and setting practise tasks:

'Well done today. You've learnt the notes of a D major arpeggio and improved the rhythm in the Andante. Let's all write down this week's aims: to memorise the D major arpeggio and make the first 12 bars of the Andante smoother, with even more dynamic contrasts.'
