

Discipline and focus in instrumental lessons

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Introduction and overview

This resource gives practical advice in maintaining discipline and focus with small-group and one-to-one teaching. It will help you prepare and set up your lessons to encourage focus, give tips on maintaining discipline, and advise what to do if things go wrong.

The two key ideas are **positivity** and **prevention**. Be positive in how you deal with your students: set up situations where focus and discipline flourish, and avoid getting stuck in fire-fighting mode. Prevent bad behaviour by understanding and responding to your students better and encouraging good behaviour whenever you can.

Nothing is plain sailing. Remain calm and confident in your abilities to deal with discipline problems that may occur. Be honest with yourself, open to assistance, and learn from your experiences.

Before you begin

Know the school guidelines

Get to know the school's guidelines and procedures for rewarding behaviour (eg house points) and punishments for dealing with problem behaviour. Make sure you know what you have the authority to do, and which staff members you should liaise with.

Establish regular contact with relevant schoolteachers and administrators

If students are aware that you have a working relationship with the school staff, this can reinforce your status as someone to be respected, and helps them see you as part of the wider school structure. Discipline will be harder if you seem isolated and have no meaningful connection with the school or back-up from the other staff.

Set up the room to encourage focus and avoid problems

Make sure the room is as tidy and organised as possible – if it looks like a mess, this will promote a lack of focus and poor behaviour.

If students tend to distract each other, arrange the chairs and stands in a way that separates them, with you in between.

Make it as easy and clear as possible how students can put down bags and coats and set up their instruments: perhaps designate a clear table or chair for their instrument cases, and establish the same layout and routine for each session.

Arrange the room to give you everything you need quickly to hand (ie do not rummage around your bag to locate a book or pencil during the lesson). Try to face the students at all times. Maintain close enough visual contact, especially when you're writing notes or accompanying from a keyboard.

Your planning paperwork needs to be detailed enough to give you confidence and a sense of structure for each lesson. If the students can see you know what you are doing, they will give you greater respect and more focus.

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First steps: tips for initial lessons with new students

Get to know your students

- ▶ Name: knowing their names and spelling their full names correctly on reports or other documents is important!
- ▶ Get to know their school year, interests and subjects: if they are older students, for example, are they studying music for GCSE or A level? Connecting the lessons to other schoolwork and grades can encourage focus and commitment.
- ▶ Are there any special educational needs, medical issues or diagnoses, eg autism spectrum disorders, dyslexia? The school will have this information.
- ▶ Personality: find out what they respond to and need, eg a repeated structure to each session, flexibility, slower or faster pace, an exam or performance to work towards, ensemble playing, music that they have chosen or composed, etc.

Give students ownership of the learning process

Use part of the term's first lesson to ask them what they want to achieve during the term or year. Ask if they want to work towards a grade exam, learn a particular piece or style or technique (eg improvisation, playing by ear) or be able to join an ensemble or play something with friends or family. The more they can express their own motivations and aims, the better chance they have of committing to it. This is also a good way of finding out about their interests, and should inform your medium- and long-term planning.

Set boundaries

It can be beneficial to outline in a formal way what you expect of the students in the lessons when you first meet the student. Make it positive and friendly, but clear. Include what they can expect of you too, to encourage a sense of fairness.

You may want to formalise it into a simple agreement:

These lessons are to help you become a better musician. My job as the teacher is to work with you to make them as enjoyable and useful as possible.

I will expect you:

- ▶ to arrive on time with your instrument and books.
- ▶ to listen and follow instructions carefully in lessons.
- ▶ not to play or talk when I am talking.
- ▶ to respect me and respect your fellow students.

It's then important to stick to these boundaries, and refer back to them if needed.

Keeping focus: tips for further lessons

Make a good start

The beginning of each lesson is your golden opportunity to establish a good focus and draw the students in. In shorter lessons, the start is even more crucial in establishing your authority and a good atmosphere.

Acknowledge students warmly as soon as they arrive. As they unpack or set up their instruments make sure you engage with them *immediately*. Ask them about their day, what they've enjoyed working on this week. Are they proud of achieving something during practice at home? Remember to give them a quick overview or goal of what you plan to do in the lesson. Make sure your lesson plan gets them doing something engaging early on – usually music making as soon as possible – and keeps a sense of momentum.

If there's an issue with students becoming chatty or disruptive as they arrive and set up, consider asking them to listen to something you play to them as they enter the room.

Establish clear rules for students not to disrupt previous lessons when they arrive, eg always knock before entering, do not talk if other people are still finishing their lesson, etc.

Be creative

Use a visual stimulus, technology, rhythm games, percussion instruments, singing and so on as a way of breaking out of a cycle of poor behaviour or lack of focus. Try to mix up the experiences for the students in the lessons and find things that they particularly respond to or skills they didn't realise they had.

Be decisive and clear

Students will pick up on a lack of decisiveness or direction in your teaching. As mentioned already, make sure you have a clear plan and idea of what you want to do in each lesson. You will always need flexibility, and often have to change tack or respond to what the students do to maintain momentum and focus during the lesson. Be honest with students if you make a mistake or your plan isn't working and you need to change it.

It's important to give students the chance to suggest ideas, feel relaxed and able to express themselves. This must be balanced with maintaining your role as the leader of the session and the final arbiter. Always keep control of the situation and explain clearly what you want to happen. For example:

- ▶ 'I want to work on that scale again today as it will really help you learn that new piece in G minor, but do you want to play me your favourite piece from last term first?'
- ▶ 'I love how keen you are to play your whole part up to speed! Let's play the first four bars together slowly as a group, then we'll see how far you can get on your own.'
- ▶ 'I understand you're frustrated with this new song. Let's try a different approach on a new section for a few minutes and you can sing that other piece you suggested at the end of the session.'

Be fair and consistent

Students need to know that you treat all of your pupils the same, and that what you say one week will apply to the following weeks. Here are specific ways to make sure you are being fair and consistent.

Make sure that you follow through with what you say, *no matter how small or informal*. For example, if you say, 'We don't have time today, so let's hear your piece next week', make sure you allocate time to this in the appropriate session. It's easy to forget, so use your lesson plans to quickly note down any activities you've promised for coming weeks.

During group teaching, give students equal opportunities to play, comment and receive feedback. This doesn't mean all students do the same tasks all the time: you will often need to differentiate tasks or give students different roles in lessons. However, you should make sure all students have a chance to demonstrate their learning and have an active role in each lesson.

Don't show favouritism or continually single out certain students for criticism. If one student tends to dominate or demand more attention in lessons, set up ways to mitigate this:

- ▶ Design a variety of activities that involve everyone equally and play to different students' strengths.
- ▶ Make sure there is more formal 'turn-taking' in lessons.
- ▶ Direct specific questions to specific students, involving the quieter ones equally.
- ▶ Give the dominating student a more complex role, eg a more difficult line in an ensemble piece, composing an original accompaniment, conducting the other students.
- ▶ Ask the dominant student to 'mentor' the other students, especially if they are more advanced. This could be teaching a specific technique or giving constructive feedback. Over-eager students often thrive when given more responsibility.

Give positive feedback in every session

Students behave better when given constructive, positive, practical feedback. This is vital in maintaining the student's commitment to lessons and a good attitude to learning. A positive comment can be about the smallest improvement or achievement.

Different ways of giving feedback

- 1 Spoken encouragement during the session.
- 2 Self-reflection in discussion with the tutor.
- 3 Ticks or colourful stickers in books.
- 4 Doing a 'mock exam' or performance followed by verbal or written feedback.
- 5 Asking other students to give constructive feedback during the sessions.
- 6 Written comments in the student's practice diary or notebook.
- 7 End of term/year reports.

Connect with parent and carers

This can be through practice diaries that parents can access each week and write comments to you if appropriate. Involving parents and carers adds another layer of accountability for the student and encourages discipline in the sessions.

Know when to move on

One of the most difficult aspects is knowing when to move on to a new piece or activity. Students can get bogged down and lose motivation if they spend too much time on one project. On the other hand, moving too quickly on to new pieces without learning any of them properly can make the students feel that they are not achieving anything.

As you teach, you will get to know what feels the right time to move on. While some students relish spending time tackling a long-term project, it's usually a good idea to have some new material every week or so. This can be a new section of the piece, a new scale or exercise to master, or a short tune to learn alongside their main piece. If you are spending a long time on one task, poor behaviour and lack of practice can be a sign you need to move on.

Always make sure you have:

- ▶ **A sense of progress:** make sure both you and the student are aware of progress week by week, however incremental. If you find yourself writing the same thing in their practice diaries each week, this is a sign you need a change of approach.
- ▶ **Clear aims:** each task should have a way of designating that the aim has been achieved. An aim could be a performance (in public or just to other students in the lesson), passing an exam, ticking off when they can play it without stopping, or making a recording of it.

Recording

Making an audio recording can be an excellent way of creating a focal point to a lesson. It can immediately give a sense of excitement and concentration. A recording demands quiet and attention, calming a rowdy group. It gives students an extra incentive to get the piece right. It can give a sense of achievement, signify the completion of a goal, and can be listened back to in the lesson to discuss together with the student as a feedback tool.

Be aware of safeguarding issues with this. Only make audio recordings, not videos. Make sure you are using a suitable device to record (perhaps an audio-only digital recorder rather than a phone or laptop) and one that is consistent with school policies. It's sometimes possible for older students to make audio recordings on their phones or a school tablet, but check students are allowed to use their phones in school.

When things go wrong

Disruptive or aggressive behaviour

If you work for a music hub, they will have behaviour management policies in their safeguarding guidelines where a child has specific needs in regard to challenging behaviour. This may involve a plan, including an assessment of risk, drawn up by the Designated Safeguarding Lead.

As already mentioned, prevention is far better than cure when it comes to disruptive behaviour. If there is a persistent problem, communicate this problem calmly and clearly to the student, school staff and parents. Make sure the student knows why you are not happy with their behaviour, refer to your agreed boundaries and explain the consequences of their behaviour. Always try to find a positive solution:

- ▶ Reinforce good behaviour.
- ▶ Encourage a 'fresh start'.
- ▶ Design the lessons to avoid the opportunity for disruption.
- ▶ Remind the student of what they can achieve if their behaviour improves.

In a group situation, it's tempting to give disruptive students the majority of your attention and neglect the other students. Be aware of this and maintain a sense of fairness and consistency as much as you can. Focusing positively on other students may help diffuse an awkward situation and lessen the disruptive behaviour. Other students can become good role models. Never be vindictive and always leave any punishments as a last resort.

If there is aggression, make sure you and the students are safe, eg leaving the space, getting other staff to assist you. Keep calm and never lose your temper. Refer to school guidelines and, if applicable, your employer's guidelines, particularly in regards to safeguarding.

Poor attendance

A lack of discipline can be linked with poor attendance. Let the school and parents know quickly about students not attending lessons. Keep and maintain notes about attendance for each student.

Students may request last-minute changes of lessons or swapping times. As ever, fairness and consistency is key. Set up your own rules for this depending on the school and teaching context. Make sure you accommodate students as much as possible without disrupting other students' lessons. Explain calmly but clearly to students if you are unable to change their lessons or make up a missed lesson. Try to emphasise a positive approach by giving tips on remembering lessons and guiding them in what to practise at home to make up for any lost time.

For pupils who consistently disorganised, give them ways of getting better:

- ▶ Write all the term's lesson times in their planners.
- ▶ Set a reminder on their phone or watch.
- ▶ Ask them to inform their teacher at the beginning of the class if they need to remember to leave for their lesson.
- ▶ Rearrange the lessons at more regular times to make it easier for forgetful students.

Getting to the root of it

Identify the root causes of the poor behaviour. Try to think of the situation from the pupil's perspective using the information you have. Don't assume they think and feel in the same way as you or other students.

Possible Problems

- 1 The physical environment: it's easy to miss very simple, practical explanations for a lack of discipline and focus. Is the room too hot or cold? Is the sun in their eyes? Are they too cramped together? Are they hungry or thirsty? Are they feeling unwell?
- 2 Stress and frustration with not being able to do something.
- 3 Lack of self-esteem and confidence.
- 4 Lack of interest or commitment to the lessons.
- 5 Another student causing distraction and pulling focus.

There may be other causes and more serious concerns. These should be dealt with as safeguarding issues that are not covered in this resource. Again, always refer to and follow appropriate safeguarding policies.

Possible solutions

- 1 Adjust the heating. Open a window. Make sure the student has a drink of water if they need it, or advise them to have a snack at break before the lesson. If the student is feeling unwell, follow school safeguarding procedures, taking them to the school medical officer if needed.
- 2 Focus the lesson on a different task, or set up an 'easy win' for the student. Discuss their feelings of stress or frustration with a particular task and empathise with them.
- 3 Praise the student for achieving something, even if it seems very minor.
- 4 Increase the pace of the lesson and amount of practical playing to avoid distraction. Find out what would motivate the student more: learning a particular piece they know and like? A particular style of music? Composing their own music? Playing duets? Give them specific achievable goals to aim for.
- 5 Rearrange the student groups to split up problem pairings.

Final tips

Do not raise your voice and avoid empty threats

Never be aggressive or intimidating. Do not threaten anything you can't follow through with (eg detentions, stopping lessons). Instead be calm, firm and explain rationally the consequences of behaviours, for example:

- ▶ 'We won't be able to work on this fun new piece if you don't focus.'
- ▶ 'I really want us to work together to achieve your next exam/performance but we won't be able to if this behaviour continues.'
- ▶ 'We can't move on to the next task if you don't listen carefully. I'm afraid I will have to tell [class teacher] about this behaviour today.'

Use humour

This can be a great way of maintain an enjoyable, light atmosphere and avoid students getting too frustrated and lapsing into poor behaviour. Make sure the humour is appropriate and never at a student's expense. Avoid sarcasm or any kind of humiliating, negative phrases.

Set the example

You are the most influential aspect of your lessons. Your own sense of focus and self-discipline, as well as your enjoyment of and passion for the music should model the behaviour you want. Make sure the small details reinforce this, including body language, attitude, tone of voice, organisation, time-keeping, how you respect your equipment and resources, and how you interact and engage with other students and staff.