



5-Day Intro to Improv

PRACTICE PLAN

Intro to Improv: Day 1

Introduction:

Welcome to your first day as an improviser!

This 5-day plan is designed to be completed in just 10 or 15 minutes a day.

Much of the mindset will be established today, so this first day will introduce the format and explain the improviser's mindset. The subsequent days will be more like lists of exercises, with explanation when needed.

You may be tempted to go overboard, but it might actually be more effective to limit yourself to a short time period per day to let the subtle shifts in mindset and musical thinking simmer on the back burner of your brain.

Intention

First of all, begin with stating your intention for this practice session.

Say this (yes, say it *out loud* - it works better that way!):

"I'm going to spend a few minutes experimenting. I'm not expecting myself to be amazing and I'm certainly not expecting every note to sound amazing.

I expect some things will sound bad or wrong. I'm choosing to do something where I won't sound so polished and accomplished, where I expect to make mistakes, and that's part of the process.

That's how I'm choosing to spend my time for the next few minutes."

Discovery:

Many beginning improvisers must contend with their biggest fear:

"What if I play the wrong note?"

Let's begin by completely removing that possibility: today, we will work with one note.

Yes, just *one* note.

You may remember the concept of a "playground" from the podcast episodes. The playground establishes a "safe zone" with firm boundaries to play in. Yet playgrounds are not only for children - experienced improvisers work with them *all the time*.

So let's start with a very small playground - maybe even just one piece of playground equipment :)

Find the note "C" on your instrument or voice (if you're a drummer, start with one sound, say your snare drum).

One-Note Improv Exercise

Give it a go - improvise on C (no, changing octaves is forbidden!) until you really can't figure out what to do, then stop.

For some of you, that might mean three seconds - for others, maybe a bit more.

What did you notice about this experience? Jot down your observations.

Now what?

If you only have one note, what's left to *play* with?

The answer is... a lot!

Pitches are only one dimension of music. We also have rhythm, dynamics, articulation, form, structure, phrasing, and more. To these, we can add "intangibles" like emotions, pictures, moods, etc. Let's see how we can improvise with these dimensions.

Practice 1

Try the one note (C) exercise again, but this time as a series of **targeted 30-second dimensional explorations:**

- **Dynamics** - loud and soft
- **Articulation** - how you begin and end the note - sharp and detached notes, smooth and connected notes
- **Rhythm 1:** durations - short notes, long notes, in-between notes
- **Rhythm 2:** motif development - make up a short rhythmic pattern (or "motif"), repeat it five times, then continue to repeat but change it a little each time
- **Rhythm 3:** tempo - change the speed, faster and slower
- **Form:** call and response - pretend there are two C's, having a conversation

Extension

Make three lists:

1. Other musical dimensions that you haven't explored yet.
2. Moods and/or emotions.
3. Short scenes from your life or a movie or game - jot down some key words. These ideas can be valuable stimuli for your musical imagination as well.

Practice 2

Now focus on combining various dimensions and making your one-note improv more musical, communicating a message, emotion, or sequence of emotions.

It's very helpful at this point to create short time limits - 10, 20, 30 seconds. Better if you don't watch the clock, but simply look away when you start and check when you're done and see how close you can come. This helps you to think more compositionally, in terms of a beginning, middle, and end to your mini-solo.

Bonus Practice

- One-note improves on D and E
- Backing tracks - you might want to play along with a "backing track" on YouTube in C major or A minor.
- You might explore other notes. There are 12 possible one-note options in just one octave in the Western music system.

Intro to Improv: Day 2

Introduction:

Welcome to your second day as an improviser!

If you followed the plan on Day 1, perhaps you feel that you've only scratched the surface of the one-note improvisation - that's good! Many master improvisers come back to the one-note exercise again and again throughout their musical lives.

If you're feeling like, "Ok, that was boring"... well, that means you haven't done it enough! ;)

Remember, it only has to be a few minutes a day, and (paradoxically) the more you keep yourself within these constraints, the more improvisational freedom you will discover!

Intention

Begin again with stating your intention for this practice session. Say this (yes, say it again *out loud* - it works better that way!):

"I'm going to spend a few minutes experimenting. I'm not expecting myself to be amazing and I'm certainly not expecting every note to sound amazing.

I expect some things will sound bad or wrong. I'm choosing to do something where I won't sound so polished and accomplished, where I expect to make mistakes and that's part of the process.

That's how I'm choosing to spend my time for the next few minutes."

Discovery:

Today, we're going to multiply the improv possibilities exponentially. How?

By adding one more note.

Yes, just one!

Two-Note Improv Exercise

Without thinking about it too much, create a new improvisation on C and D (drummers, you know what to do!). Stop when it feels "done".

What did you notice about this experience? Jot down your observations.

Practice 1

Try the two-note (C and D) **targeted 30-second explorations** exercise again, but this time we have a 100% increase in our dimension of pitch, so let's target that dimension (the time constraints are approximate suggestions to help you think compositionally):

- Begin with a one-note improv on C for about 10 seconds before moving to the D.
- Now see what happens if you *just wear the C out* before moving to D.
- Do the same as above, but start on D.
- Now move frequently between the two notes for 10 seconds, then gradually focus more on C until it becomes a one-note improv on C.
- Try the same as above, but moving into the one-note D improv.

Throughout, keep everything you learned yesterday in mind. Here are the dimensions from **Day 1** for reference:

Musical Dimensions

- **Dynamics** - loud and soft
- **Articulation** - how you begin and end the note
- **Rhythm 1: durations** - short notes, long notes, in-between notes
- **Rhythm 2: motif development** - make up a short rhythmic pattern (or "motif"), repeat it five times, then continue to repeat but change it little each time
- **Rhythm 3: tempo** - change the speed, faster and slower
- **Form: call and response** - pretend there are two C's, having a conversation

Extension

We doubled the pitch dimension and opened up a whole new world of possibilities! Go back to your lists from **Day 1** and think about how you can apply those moods and stories in a two-note musical universe.

Practice 2

Continue to focus on combining various dimensions to make your two-note improv more musical and communicate a message, emotion, or sequence of emotions.

Continue to stay within short time limits - 10, 20, 30 seconds. In this Practice 2 session, focus on thinking more compositionally, in terms of a beginning, middle, and end to your mini-solo. This has to do with the dimensions of form and structure.

Bonus Practice

- Two-note improvs following the instructions above for D + E, then C + E
- Try a C-D improv along with YouTube “backing tracks”:
 - G, C, F, Bb, or Eb major
 - E, A, D, G, or C minor
- In a 12-note octave, there are 66 possible two-note combinations!

Intro to Improv: Day 3

Introduction:

Welcome to your third day as an improviser!

Day 1 kept us on one note, Day 2 introduced a second pitch. Sometimes it's harder with two pitches, because once we introduce the possibility of changing pitches to our brain, it wants more! If you resisted the temptation, good for you! Your discipline will pay off!

If you didn't resist and wandered onto new notes, well, then... you were improvising! ;)

Today being Day 3 of the rest of your life as an improviser, let's celebrate with - you guessed it - a third note.

Intention

Begin again with stating your intention for this practice session.

Say this (you know how!):

"I'm going to spend a few minutes experimenting. I'm not expecting myself to be amazing and I'm certainly not expecting every note to sound amazing.

I expect some things will sound bad or wrong. I'm choosing to do something where I won't sound so polished and accomplished, where I expect to make mistakes and that's part of the process.

That's how I'm choosing to spend my time for the next few minutes."

Discovery:

One more note, many more combinations.

Three-Note Improv Exercise

Begin again with a "no extra rules" improvisation on C, D, and E. Stop when it feels "done".

What did you notice about this experience? Jot down your observations.

Practice 1

Try the **targeted 30-second explorations** for three notes (C, D, and E). Keep your musical dimensions in mind. Take note of the order of these steps:

- Begin with a 12-second-ish two-note improv on C+D, before adding in the E.
- Now invert: one-note improv on E, then to C+D.
- 12 seconds on C+E, then bring in D. Invert.
- 12 seconds on D+E, then bring in C. Invert.
- 20 seconds on C+D, then 10 seconds on D+E. Invert.
- Design several similar combinations of your own.

Throughout, keep everything you've learned so far in mind. Here are the dimensions from **Day 1** for reference:

Musical Dimensions

- **Dynamics** - loud and soft
- **Articulation** - **how you begin and end the note**
- **Rhythm 1: durations** - short notes, long notes, in-between notes
- **Rhythm 2: motif development** - make up a short rhythmic pattern (or "motif"), repeat it five times, then continue to repeat but change it little each time
- **Rhythm 3: tempo** - change the speed, faster and slower
- **Form: call and response** - pretend there are two C's, having a conversation

Extension

Go back to your lists from **Day 1** and think about how you can apply those moods and stories in a *three-note* musical universe.

Practice 2

Continue to focus on combining various dimensions to make your three-note improv more musical and communicate a message, emotion, or sequence of emotions.

Continue to stay within short time limits - 10, 20, 30 seconds. In this Practice 2 session, focus on thinking more compositionally, in terms of a beginning, middle, and end to your mini-solo. This has to do with the dimensions of form and structure.

Bonus Practice

- Try a C-D-E improv along with YouTube “backing tracks”:
 - G, C, or F major
 - E, A, or D minor
- In a 12-note octave, **there are 220 possible three-note combinations**. Imagine the possibilities!

Intro to Improv: Day 4

Introduction:

Welcome to your fourth day as an improviser!

Ready for note 4?

Surprise! **We're going to spend another day with the magical three-note combinations.** As you have seen, there's *plenty* of work yet to do there.

Intention

You know the drill: state your intention for this practice session.

But this time... improvise a new one! And *say it out loud.* :)

Discovery:

As you've seen, each time we add a new note, the number of possible combinations of notes and dimensions grows exponentially. The good news is that everything you discover in one day carries forward to the next.

Three-Note Improv Exercise

Begin again with a "no extra rules" improvisation - this time on D-E-G. Stop when it feels "done".

What did you notice about this experience? Jot down your observations.

Practice 1

Try the **targeted 30-second explorations** for three notes (D, E, and G). Keep your musical dimensions in mind. Take note of the order of these steps:

- Begin with a 12-second-ish two-note improv on D+E, before adding in the G.

- Now invert, one-note on G, then to D+E.
- 12 seconds on D+G, then bring in E. Invert.
- 12 seconds on E+G, then bring in D. Invert.
- 20 seconds on D+E, then 10 seconds on E+G. Invert.
- Design several similar combinations of your own.

Throughout, keep everything you've learned so far in mind. Here are the dimensions from **Day 1** for reference:

Musical Dimensions

- **Dynamics** - loud and soft
- **Articulation** - how you begin and end the note
- **Rhythm 1:** durations - short notes, long notes, in-between notes
- **Rhythm 2:** motif development - make up a short rhythmic pattern (or "motif"), repeat it five times, then continue to repeat but change it little each time
- **Rhythm 3:** tempo - change the speed, faster and slower
- **Form:** call and response - pretend there are two C's, having a conversation

Extension

Go back to your lists from **Day 1** and think about how you can apply those moods and stories in a *three-note* musical universe.

Practice 2

Continue to focus on combining various dimensions to make your three-note improv more musical and communicate a message, story, emotion, or sequence of emotions.

This time, try the same but instead of D+E+G, play this new combination: **E+G+A**.

You may feel comfortable with some longer time limits at this point - try breaking up 30 and 45-second solos with 5, 10, and 15-second sections.

In this Practice 2 session, continue to think compositionally, with a beginning, middle, and end to each of your creations.

Bonus Practice

- Try your new combinations with YouTube “backing tracks”:
 - C major
 - A minor
 - D Dorian
- Remember, in a 12-note octave, there are 220 possible three-note combinations. Imagine the possibilities! Jot down some ideas for future practice plans.

Intro to Improv: Day 5

Introduction:

Welcome to your fifth day as an improviser!

By now, you've learned quite a bit of the creative possibilities held within just a few pitches. But if you were hoping to move on to four pitches today, we hope you won't be disappointed when we move on to...

Five notes. Also known as the **pentatonic scale**.

Intention

State your intention for this practice session. With five notes, the risk goes up, but the five particular pitches of the pentatonic scale are very special - they always sound "right" together.

So much so, that almost every culture in the world has at least some music that uses this scale, or set of notes.

So this time, keep that in mind as you compose your new intention for today's session... And remember, *say it out loud*. :)

Discovery:

At this point, you have delved quite a bit into musical dimensions in an expanding playground of pitches. The pentatonic scale is an example of a musical pattern - a pattern that is common in music theory and practice - that will now expand our playground.

Pentatonic Scale Improv

Begin again with a "no extra rules" improvisation - this time on C-D-E-G-A. Stop when it feels "done".

What did you notice about this experience? Jot down your observations.

Practice 1

Explore the **targeted 30-second explorations** for the pentatonic (five-note) scale (C-D-E-G-A). Keep your musical dimensions in mind. Take note of the order of these steps:

- Begin by jotting down three different possible combinations of 1, 2, and 3-note improvs, based on your experience from Days 1-4. Practice them!
- Now, think about your experience and jot down two or three more new combinations. You may want to specify dimensions, or add a mood or a scene as well.

Extension

We've been calling this a scale, but if you've played scales before, you've probably repeated the bottom note on top at the end. So for the pentatonic scale: C-D-E-G-A-C.

The first note in a scale is called the "tonic". So far, we've been assuming that C is the tonic of this scale. But one of the beauties of the pentatonic scale is that when we move the tonic to a different pitch, we create a whole new musical universe with the same notes. One common example is the minor pentatonic: A-C-D-E-G-A.

Practice 2

In this session, improvise first with the major pentatonic scale - keep the tonic C in your mind, and return to it often at first, then less frequently.

Then do the same with the minor pentatonic (A-C-D-E-G-A). You may want to design combinations of 1, 2, and 3-note improvs within the scales to guide you.

You may feel comfortable with some longer time limits at this point - try breaking up 30 and 45-second solos with 5, 10, and 15-second sections.

In this Practice 2 session, continue to think compositionally, with a beginning, middle, and end to each of your creations.

Bonus Practice

- Try your new combinations with YouTube “backing tracks”:
 - C major
 - A minor
 - D Dorian
- Transpose the pentatonic scale to other keys.
- Explore other “modes” of the pentatonic scale by picking different tonics and repeating the Practice 2 exercise above.
- Invent plans, experiments, and combinations and see where they take you!

Intro to Improv: Day ∞

There you have it - five days, and you have established a solid musical foundation in improvisation. **Not only will these exercises last a lifetime, but as you do them, you gain a greater and deeper connection with your instrument, and start to hear what you want to play before or while you're playing it.**

Playing these kinds of improv games will have you "thinking music", in a way where you can create musical responses to your internal impulses and external surroundings in the moment.

You can also deploy these tools to help you learn any specific scale, passage, or technique on your musical journey - when you apply it in different contexts, the improviser's mindset will serve you well in getting more tools and options under your belt.

Yes, you are now an improviser! Go forth, and jam!