

*Marko Zirkovich - AdvancingMusician.com*

# *The Power Of Setting Limits*

15 "Disadvantage Exercises" To Help  
You Reach The Next Level



# Disclaimer

The world we live in can be quite crazy and people (might) get the weirdest ideas.

For example, they download a free e-book on how to maximize their musical potential via setting limits. Enthusiastically, they take one of those powerful disadvantage exercises and go berzerk with it. They practice it for endless hours, lose all their friends after becoming a reclusive hermit, develop tendonitis and go crazy in the process. As a result they spend their final days in an asylum for the mentally ill and destitute.

Obviously, I don't want this to happen to you. So, practice in a sensible way, taking breaks and all that ... Also know that you are responsible for your results.

Hopefully, no other disclaimers are needed. :-)

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The Power Of Setting Limits  
15 "Disadvantage Exercises" To Help You  
Reach The Next Level In Your Playing  
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# Introduction

Marko Zirkovich - AdvancingMusician.com

This is the PDF-supplement to the AdvancingMusician.com [disadvantage exercises article](#).

Thank you for downloading this cheat sheet. You'll find a quick summary and enough disadvantage exercise suggestions to keep you busy for a long time.

So, continue reading at your own risk. ;-)

## *Quick Summary*

You create disadvantage exercises by placing (temporary) limitations on yourself in order to gain valuable new insights you would **not** notice otherwise.

Best of all: it's not as complicated as it sounds.

## *Benefits Of Disadvantage Exercises*

- They are interesting/fun to practice.
- You focus on **one** area of your musical development.
- Therefore, there is less danger of feeling overwhelmed.
- The change of perspective leads to a gain of new insights.

## *Mindset*

From my personal experience, the best approach is to view disadvantage exercises as experiments or short-term challenges. Don't approach them with a set outcome in mind or a specific goal you'd like to reach. Actually, this would be counterproductive to some extent. Let's face it, nobody cares how many minutes you can play using only two fingers or if you use only one playing technique exclusively.

Rather, ask open-ended questions with no attachment to a pre-determined outcome. Questions are truly valuable, and that's why you'll find my suggestions in this PDF in the form of a question.

When you keep a playful attitude while practicing disadvantage exercises, there might be lots of new ideas showing up in your playing.

And this could be quite interesting, both to you as well as your audience.

## *Where To Start?*

Keep in mind that not all suggestions will be practical on all instruments or will apply to your musical goals. That's ok and to be expected.

Simply use what speaks to you at the moment. Six months down the road you might find completely different exercise ideas calling you.

With that disclaimer out of the way, here are some suggestions to get you going ...

# Disadvantage Exercises - Idea Starters

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## *Question 1 - What If I Change My Playing Position?*

Experiment with changing your normal playing position. If you sit while practicing, stand up and vice versa.

- What standard techniques become impractical?
- How can you compensate?
- What new approaches do you discover?

Notice how this change affects your posture, your feelings and how it might even influence your thinking process while playing.

## *Question 2 - What If I Hold My Instrument Differently?*

Change the instrument's direction or the side you hold it.

Upside-down violin, left-handed positioned guitar as a right-handed person, snare drum on the right side of the kit etc.

You could use a strap or some other contraption for holding the instrument in place. Or get rid of such a device, if it's the "regular method" of keeping your instrument in position.

- Does it feel like a completely different instrument to you?
- What can you learn from this?

At the very least you'll appreciate the regular way more and might realize why it actually has become the standard in the first place.

### *Question 3 - What If I Only Use One Hand?*

- What technical challenges are you confronted with when playing with one hand only?
- What solutions do you come up with to compensate?
- How much music can you create by using one hand only?

### *Question 4 - What If I Only Use One Finger?*

The old, ingrained muscle memory patterns and licks don't work so well anymore, right? ;-)

Try recreating them and notice the difference in feel. Then go for completely new ideas by embracing the limitation and discovering the beautiful, uncharted territory in front of you.

Slides, glisses and "jumping around" on your instrument are your friends.

Also, slowing down increases the rhythmic value of each note. It literally counts more and this could (and should) influence your note choices.

### *Question 5 - What If I Only Use One Combination Of Fingers?*

Like with suggestion #4, you won't be able to go on auto-pilot and play what you always play. The limitation will "force" you to play differently and come up with something you would not have considered otherwise. And that's a good thing.

## *Question 6 - What If I Only Use One Register/Region Of The Neck/Keyboard/Instrument?*

We all have our fav places we like to hang out, musically speaking. That place on our instrument that we are familiar with and that we call home.

Guitarists and the 5th position, I'm looking at you. ;-)

Nothing wrong with that. But exploring those other regions won't hurt either. Familiarize yourself with the registers you've neglected so far.

- What do you need to change in your playing to make those registers work for you?
- Do you need to play differently - slower, faster, using a different technique?
- What are the unique characteristics you'll actually **only** find in that register? Those qualities could turn into a useful asset in your musical toolbox, enriching your palette.

## *Question 7 - What If I Only Use One String/Valve/Drum/Sub-Part Of The Instrument?*

- What new and hidden nuances do you discover by focusing on such a small part of your instrument?
- Are there different, unusual timbres that you notice?
- Are there particular playing techniques that are especially advantageous to use?
- Do you think differently while playing due to this limitation? Ask yourself how, what and why for some interesting insights!

## *Question 8 - What If I Only Use The White Keys? What If I Only Use The Black Keys?*

This question is specifically directed at keyboard players.

When you play the white keys keep in mind that you still have 7 different modes at your disposal. It's not just simply the C-major scale. There's D Dorian, E Phrygian, F Lydian etc. for you to explore as well.

And you could treat the black keys (F#/Gb major pentatonic) as 5 distinctly different modes as well.

Either way ...

- Do you notice the difference in sound?
- How does it **feel** differently?
- Using the white keys, do you lose orientation when suddenly there are no black keys allowed anymore?

## *Question 9 - What If I Only Use One Scale/Mode?*

How about limiting your improvisations to exclusively one scale/mode?

Don't switch scales. Don't add chromatic notes. Stick to one color and really explore it. Dig deeper into the characteristic sound of the mode. Try to capture the essence.

- Is it a specific note that gives you that modal sound?
- Is it a note combination like a resolution from one note to another?
- What is it that gives you the mood of the scale/mode? Notice how even the words for "mood" and "mode" are related and try to clarify that connection for yourself.



## *Question 10 - What If I Don't Play Different Notes, But Rather One Note Only?*

This is the perfect time to focus on your rhythmic phrasing to keep things interesting, since you don't have to think about your note choices.

Why not use the opportunity to (finally) work on some "odd" rhythmic values like quintuplets and septuplets? Those could come in handy occasionally, don't you think?

How about combining different sub-divisions for interesting rhythms?

Also, many players totally neglect their starting placement of notes. They always start their phrases on beat 1 of a measure. Obviously, this gets old and predictable fast.

Experiment with starting your phrases on different parts of a measure, like on the "fourth 16th of beat one" or on "two and". This way, you'll gain a lot of flexibility that will add variety to your phrasing.

If that's not enough for you already, you can also add dynamics (playing soft, playing loud, getting softer and getting louder) as well as articulations like staccato, marcato and legato into the mix.

## *Question 11 - What If I Only Use One Rhythmic Value?*

Play only triplets or only 16th notes or only whole notes. It's up to you - and the tempo you've chosen.

Actually, this simulates a common practice for Jazz instrumentalists who like to play 8th notes exclusively when practicing Jazz standards. This approach lets them focus on making the changes and is a great technical exercise.

You just have to be careful to not get stuck in playing single-rhythmical phrases when improvising for real. But as an exercise it does have a lot of benefits.

## Question 12 - What If I Only Use One Playing Technique?

Here are a few suggestions presented as a simple keyword list. Choose something that's applicable to your instrument and exclusively use this one technique.

- alternate picking
- legato
- sweeping
- tapping
- slapping
- spiccato
- triple-tonguing
- side-slipping
- tremolo
- circular breathing

I'm sure you'll be able to find lots of other techniques you can play around with.

Ask yourself:

- What challenges do you have to overcome when sticking to one technique?
- Do you get tired physically?
- Do you get bored quicker?
- Do you use the same patterns repeatedly (due to lack of vocabulary)?

## Question 13 - What If I Only Play Every 2nd Measure?

*"Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the advancing musician. His/her exercise-duration mission: to explore strange new emptiness, to seek out new phrasing options, to boldly go where no shredding guitarist has gone before."*

My apologies to all die-hard Starship Enterprise fans. I know it's blasphemy, I just couldn't help it.

However, it does serve a valuable purpose. Space and breathing room is an important component of music. You need to learn to control it and this exercise will help you develop a feel for when to simply "shut up" and let your music breathe.

### *Question 14 - What If I Use No Vibrato Or Other Note-Embellishing Techniques?*

Vibrato is such an important component of a musician's individuality and personal style. Most often, both singers as well as instrumentalists don't even think about it anymore. At least not consciously.

For this very reason this disadvantage exercise is actually more difficult than it sounds.

It "forces" the subconscious use of vibrato back into the spotlight of your consciousness. You'll really have to focus on **not** using vibrato - and you'll fail in the beginning, because vibrato will sneak in. You'll use vibrato at the end of a note/phrase before catching yourself doing it.

Just to get the point across ... In no way or form am I saying that vibrato is bad. What I'm suggesting with this exercise is to become more aware of it, to rethink your use of it, the frequency of when and where you tack on vibrato.

The more control you have over it, the better you'll be able to use it and the more impact the musical effect will have.

### *Question 15 - What If I Do Use Vibrato Or Some Other Embellishing Technique On Each Note?*

In this final exercise suggestion I want you to focus on all the different attributes of vibrato.

The more time and effort you put into this, the greater the rewards will be.

- width
- speed
- shape
- variety
- starting delay before vibrato kicks in
- technique used to produce the vibrato

Think about ...

- How are you able to connect different notes?
- Are there difficulties involved?
- Is there a speed limit meaning at 120BPM you're unable to use vibrato on every 16th-note because the individual notes are too short and they are basically over before you have a chance to apply any kind of vibrato?

# Final Thoughts

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The bad news is that there is not one single way or method to do these exercises. Therefore I can't make a claim like "practice these exercises for 30 minutes a day for 6 months and you'll solve all your musical problems".

That's not how it works.

However, consistently working with disadvantage exercises will help you improve.

Practicing each idea for a week would keep you busy for almost four months. Extending the time frame to a month per exercise would mean a year and three months of new challenges and growth experiences.

And ...

I'm sure you'd find your own additional topics to explore.

Another thought for when you are done with this list: how about starting all over again? You might discover even more insights by going deeper in the second round.

Who knows what and where this might lead to musically ...

Let's find out!

# *Feedback Welcome*

I hope the exercises and suggestions have been helpful. And I'd be thrilled to hear about your experiences and results.

Looking forward to your input!

[Join The Discussion](#)