

2 Ways to Skyrocket Your String Playing Overnight

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Where To “Aim” Your Fingers

This is an issue that has plagued beginners for centuries past, and sometimes may creep up on the unsuspecting intermediate or even advanced player.

Knowing where to keep your fingers on the fingerboard is a simple task, but the execution and actually KEEPING them in the best place is harder.

This is one of the basics. My violin teacher used to tell me to “bite” the fingerboard with my fingers. Keep them in a “C” shape over the fingerboard, instead of having them too straight or facing upward.

When placing your hand in playing position, it’s crucial that your fingers are over the fingerboard and held in a way that they’re ready to quickly press a string, and able to REACH the notes they have to play as well. If they’re not, then they won’t only take long to hit a note, they’ll also be unable to stretch far enough to reach some of them – a horrible issue for some scales on string instruments.

One other tip that can help here is remembering that you need to keep them relaxed – even though they’re bent. Think of it as a way of keeping them curved, but not vigorously bent over. If your fingers aren’t relaxed, then the tension will cause a plethora of annoying drawbacks, such as taking too long to hit a note and slowing your playing speed, causing pain after extended play, and reducing your playing fluidity. Fluidity is important for many reasons – including the basic enjoyment of playing the instrument. Not to mention, if you aren’t fluid, you’d be unable to correct yourself if your intonation is ever off.

Your wrist also plays a part in the angle of the fingers to the fingerboard. The way you use the wrist to your advantage is by keeping it straight – or bending the wrist toward your body. In other words, *avoiding the “lazy wrist” is crucial to you having a good hand posture.* Violinists across the world – beginner, intermediate and even (but rarely) advanced players are guilty of letting the “lazy wrist” sneak into their playing and affect their positions and playing quality. The better you get at this and the more you remind yourself of this, the less it will happen.

The reasons for keeping your fingers in a “C” shape are almost innumerable because of the unbeatable impacts it can have on your playing.

First, having your fingers in that shape allows speed because they’ll be “on standby”, technically. Your fingers would be positioned to easily attack almost any note, no matter the placement of the note or distance from the finger – even if you’re a beginner. One of the reasons why this topic is significant is because speed is something everyone wants, and being flexible with your speed is always a sign of mastery or comfort with the instrument. Plus, having more speed will allow you to play more up-tempo selections. It should be noted that having your fingers in this position also allows you more freedom with faster-paced freestyles. Another reason why finger positioning is significant is because you now have more control of the notes you are able to play.



Second, having your fingers curved widens your range horizontally and vertically. First off, it allows you to be able to hit more strings at will. That means you can go to your G string, hit your A and E strings, then if you feel like going to the D string, it’s within reach too. You’ll be free of inconsistencies and unwanted obstacles just because some strings might have been far from your reach. Many people blame their lack of reach or speed on themselves, saying they have “small hands” or some other violin-related personal impediment. While it’s true that those things can adversely affect the options you have when it comes to note-reach and timing, most of the possibilities lie in the positioning you use. Your vertical reach will also be greatly impacted by this. You’ll see an enormous difference. The further notes, that may involve stretching your 4th finger further than usual will become almost normal for you – and eventually unnoticeable.

Key Takeaways:

- Keeping your fingers arched over the fingerboard is always a good choice, as it keeps you ready to hit a note.
- Speed is also increased by arching your fingers over the fingerboard.
- Your finger reach range is widened by keeping them arched while playing.
- Be sure to keep your fingers relaxed, as having a rough, rigorous hold will only decrease your speed – along with making you tire more quickly.

Hand-Neck Contact

Hand to neck contact is usually covered when telling anyone how to hold a violin. “Contact the first joint of the index finger with the neck of the violin, blah blah blah.”

It’s good advice – very good advice, in fact. Actually, it’s borderline invaluable. The reason for this is that your violin NEEDS a good stable place to rest on where your hand is concerned – and it has to be positioned in a way that you can still comfortably play, with ease and versatility.

Benefits of improving hand-neck contact:

- Allows you to improvise with more freedom and responsiveness.
- Makes it easier to slide up and down the neck, into different positions with more tonal accuracy – this way you don’t slide into the wrong note.
- Makes it easier to play in different violin positions, so you can transition from a side hold to a front hold and even a downward or diagonal hold. (One example of this is [Bran Fitzy](#) and his freestyle violin playing). This helps with more body-oriented freedom when playing live, moving around and being physically active and multitasking while playing.

Here’s the catch, though. Most people do NOT tell you **exactly** where the best place for the first finger and neck contact is, from my experience and many others’. I usually refrain from telling people **exactly** how to position or to do a certain thing, but in this case it’s important and applicable enough to do so.

It’s right under the first knuckle, a bit under the lowest joint. This varies from person to person on finger length, I’ve realized. Typically, it allows a lot of finger freedom, since no part of the active finger is jammed against the neck of the violin. Then, this allows you to play with more speed since the finger is free, and as a result, it lets you have more reach as well.

I tend to keep the contact point as low as possible – for the sake of playing freedom, and speed. I recommend the same, no matter how long your fingers may be.

Nevertheless, experiment and augment as much as you may need to, to find your ideal posture and position.

Holding the neck well can be simple, and very impactful.

I see violinists struggling with their holding of the neck so often, yet it's something that should never persist as a problem with any violinist.

Working on hand-neck contact has helped me a great deal when it comes to playing live, playing in different positions, freestyle play (improvisation) and just general versatility.

I had a friend who started playing the violin the same time I did. He was great at theory, but had a problem with a specific skill that seemed like the bane of his existence. He contacted as many violinists as he could that he knew personally. Every violinist had some type of valuable advice to give to him that helped them in their playing journey. My friend practiced, studied and improved his play in incremental amounts with each piece of advice. I took a look at his posture periodically, and made little adjustments to whatever positioning he used. After about a week of doing this, I told him to let the lower side of his knuckle (something he'd never heard before) contact the violin neck. The next week, he was improvising fluently.

Hand to neck contact is one area that I wouldn't call dynamic. There is a very clear "ideal" way of positioning your hand, and it doesn't change much.

However, it revolves more around how you actually feel, than what this seems like on paper. You shouldn't feel like one of your fingers is jammed against the fingerboard and has to work to hit a note.

You should never have to do work to hit a note.

A friend of mine, who is also a great violinist, gave me some personal advice on this that I think was spot on. He strongly emphasized the importance of being able to leave fingers fully relaxed. He said that **when fingers are not needed**, they are always in the best condition falling limp, just as the average person is when they're about to fall asleep.

I thought this was great advice, because many beginners and intermediates keep their fingers stiff – especially their index finger. They do that because they're putting (and sometimes jamming) their index finger against the neck, but subtly putting the wrong part of the finger against it, restricting it.

The more interesting part is that since they're restricting their index finger – one of their most important fingers, if not the most important one. Such restriction results in a big slowdown on all of the other three fingers. Avoid that at all costs.

The Vibrato Factor

Vibrato. It's a thing that people absolutely LOVE to hear, LOVE to do, yet struggle to master. I've seen countless violinists stumble on even understanding the idea of vibrato. Many even struggle with understanding how to move their wrist at the same time they move their bowing arm. Unusually, some people catch on extremely quickly and make no mistake when it comes to the execution of good quality vibrato. When I ask them what allows them to understand it so quickly, they have a simple response.

"Vibrato isn't something hard. You need to think about it as a spice rather than an action. It's not something that you're actively engaging in, it's something that you're using to add a slight variation to what you're already engaging in. It's an enhancer." It can be a bit of a complicated reply to some people.

So, I ask them what they mean by that. "Vibrato is easy because you have to NOT think about it. If you think about it, that's when it starts becoming difficult." That was the response of 5 of my students who were the best at vibrato, and as I think about it, I realize it's the truth.

Sure, there's muscle memory involved in vibrato, but that's not the real key to getting strong vibrato. Most people try different ways to move their finger back and forth – creating the vibrato-ish sound – and then they just stick with whatever seems to work for them. This isn't the ideal thing to do for a few reasons: One, you totally rely on your muscle memory. Two, there's very little technique involved, and three, there's almost no space for you to customize the type of vibrato sound you create.

Instead of blindly trying to move your finger back and forth and going with what sticks, there's a way to obtain the most effective traits of masterful, strong vibrato. I've studied many great violinists, and found what they all have in common when they execute great vibrato. We call them the foundational vibrato guidelines. I've used them myself, then gone on to teach it to my students, and observe how they improved with them. So far, many of my students have shown huge improvements from knowing these guidelines alone, whether they were already great at vibrato or just learning it.

Supreme String Secrets

Why does vibrato have guidelines?

By observing many of the world's greatest violinists and violists, you can always notice trends. The violin is a very free instrument – it has no frets and nothing to help you 'figure out' how to play it. That being said, there isn't an exact best way to play the instrument, but we can get closer to an ideal way. This 'ideal way' would be the way that get us the best-sounding results the easiest.

Since we can aim for an 'ideal way' to play, one of the easiest ways to build up that method would be to find things that successful sounding playing and techniques have in common. As we look for these cues, we can try them out ourselves. If they work repeatedly and prove to consistently have a positive effect on our playing, then we can start using them to improve at will. The foundational vibrato guidelines are simple, effective guidelines that won't force you to play differently, but will positively impact your playing.

We know that many violinists stick with the first thing that works for them when they try to learn vibrato, but simply knowing the wrong thing isn't enough. What should we do instead, then?

The first thing that is required when it comes to vibrato is knowing where to place your focus. Vibrato is a unique technique, because it cannot stand on its own like trills or pizzicato. Vibrato is a note enhancer, and it's never the main focus of your fingering hand.

If you focus on moving your finger back and forth too much, it will take up too much of your mental space. This will distract you from the rest of the piece, and cause your timing and rhythm to fall in quality. In addition to that, focusing on vibrato too much will also ruin your intonation if you're not careful.

Instead, focus as little as possible on the motion of your finger. It might seem like a bit of an empty piece of advice, but I can assure you that it's effective. You'll want to focus more of your attention on the note you're playing and your rhythm and timing. Keep your mind off of the vibrato. For reference, about 10-20 percent of your mind should be on vibrato. 30-40 percent of your mind should be on the notes you're going to play (or your sheet music) and the rest of your mind should be on the notes you are playing and your bowing.

The reason why this works is because of the role of vibrato. As a note enhancer, it's best performed intuitively, without much focus. Focusing less on it allows you to make the main note stronger as well as develop your bowing better while you're playing. (Ever heard someone's bowing get soft and scratchy when they're distracted from playing? You want to avoid that.) As your bowing and fingering is stronger, you'll want to then start the 'back-and-forth' finger movement – which we'll cover later on, and make that as easy as possible too.

For now, the first guideline of vibrato is to not focus on it. The more you mentally focus on vibrato, the weaker you make your playing. Instead, treat it as a muscular movement that you don't think about – like walking.

How many guidelines are there?

Four. At least there are four right now – we're always making more and adding to our list of things that makes vibrato easy and high-quality. A large part of vibrato depends on your playing posture. If your posture is off, you can forget performing vibrato well because your finger movement largely depends on your wrist position, fingering arm elbow position, and your hand-neck contact. The best way to internalize these guidelines is to work on them one at a time.

A simple way to practice keeping your mind off your vibrato is to practice your wrist movement while doing other things.

Flex your wrist forward (make your knuckles face you) and backward (make them face away from you) while doing things like watching TV, walking down the street, and other things. It'll gradually ease vibrato and the movement will become more ingrained – even if it's difficult for you. You can do this for other vibrato types too, and we'll discuss that soon.

The second guideline is all about posture. There's nothing that makes good vibrato more impossible than bad posture. However, some aspects of posture are more important to vibrato than others. Your wrist (which is a hugely important factor in your vibrato) cannot afford to be affected by bad posture. The same goes for your arm, elbow, and hand-neck contact. Wrist position, however, is by far the most critical and most often badly-positioned aspect of posture.

I'm quite sure you've seen violinists play with their wrist bent, up against the neck of the violin. You probably held your head down in shame or immediately pointed it out. You've also probably done it at some time, too. (I have too, don't worry I won't judge.) That's what happens when we allow laziness to take over. We let our wrist stop holding our hand up, and we let it slump down to the neck of the violin, where the violin lays on the limp wrist. There are many reasons why that's a bad habit to have your wrist bent like that, but one of them is that it absolutely kills your vibrato.

The reason why allowing your wrist to be bent back kills your vibrato is because vibrato depends on your fingers having space to move. Vibrato is created when your fingertip moves back and forth on a string, and the slight variation in pitch makes an alternating, vibrating sound. That being said, for vibrato to happen, we'll need your finger to be able to move. Your fingertip will have to be on the string, so that it can roll or pivot back and forth. When your wrist is bent back, it forces your fingers to lie to the side and contact the strings from a different angle. From that angle, your fingertip will likely not be the only thing touching the string, giving your finger less freedom and space to move.

To straighten your wrist, there are a couple things you can do. First, you can just remember it. **You can imagine there's a string pulling your wrist away from you constantly – which has proved to be a helpful enough cue for most people.** However, there is one other way that my students find extremely helpful: **move your elbow up. Just tilt your upper arm up, making your elbow move up or forward.** That forces your wrist to jam against the violin neck and helps you keep it straight.

“Bad wrist position is one of the biggest vibrato killers.”

Now it's time to dive deeper into performing vibrato. First, you should know that there are three types of vibrato – finger vibrato, wrist vibrato and arm vibrato. They're named after the part of your body that causes the 'back-and-forth' fingertip motion. The most popular type is wrist vibrato, then arm vibrato, and finger vibrato is the least performed – often because some people feel it's an incorrect type of vibrato (however it IS the most incorrectly performed type).

First, let's go into the next general guideline. No matter what type of vibrato you want to perform, this guideline will be front-and-center in your technique.

The goal of performing vibrato is to move your fingertip back-and-forth while it's on the string. What you want to avoid is putting energy into moving your fingertip backward and forward. **Instead, you want to use energy to move your fingertip forward (toward you) only, and then let it move backward by relaxing.**

Now let's see how this applies in each vibrato type. To perform finger vibrato, you press slightly harder on the fingerboard, and then relax the finger. Pressing harder is what causes a vertical 'forth' motion, and relaxing it causes the 'back' motion, which creates the sound of vibrato. It's the simplest type of vibrato, yet often misused because people either press too hard, curl their finger against the fingerboard or tilt their wrist while doing all of that.

To perform wrist vibrato, flex your wrist toward you (try to bring your knuckles toward your face) and then relax it – while playing a note. What that will do is cause the angle of contact of your fingertip on the string to change, resulting in the fingertip rolling forward and backward. That causes a smooth vibrato sound that is easy to control.

To perform arm vibrato, slightly pull your entire forearm toward you, then relax it, letting it return to its original position. This results in your fingertip's contact on the string to roll backward and forward, creating vibrato.

How to use each type of vibrato

Every type of vibrato has slightly different uses. Why? The reason why is because some types of vibrato naturally have different types of sound. Finger vibrato sounds the most abrupt and noticeable. Wrist vibrato sounds subtle and bold. Arm vibrato typically sounds the most gentle.

Generally, when you're playing at faster tempos, you'll want to use finger vibrato because it's the easiest to use quickly. It sounds great when used in small bursts, and it does not require much preparation in your arm or wrist.

Wrist vibrato requires very good wrist posture, and will be significantly more difficult if you have it in a sub-par position. You can use wrist vibrato any time you want, because it can be very easily varied and tailored to your desired sound. Arm vibrato is the most difficult type of vibrato. It's the hardest to control, and very often doesn't product the most striking sound. Arm vibrato is more suited to slow, emotional, subtle pieces of music.