

Ten Minute Tech

A (VERY) brief introduction to improvisation

A lot of new players (and indeed experienced players!) are terrified when asked to improvise for the first time. But it really is not that complicated, and once this is understood, improvisation can become one of the most exciting and fun aspects of being a musician.

To paraphrase the amazing bass-player and music educator Victor Wooten-

When you speak with anyone, you are improvising! You have not written down what you plan to say, you are not following a script- you are making it up as you go along based on the language that you and the other person both know. That language is made up of words & sentences which follow certain rules so that they "make sense". By changing the order of the words, we can create different sentences.

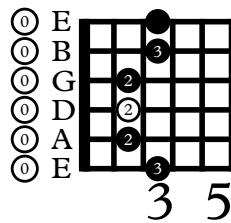
Music is exactly the same.

We will take the E minor Pentatonic- if you play the notes from this scale in any order, the chances are it will sound good and make musical "sense". The more we try this, the more we can predict the results, and the more pleasing it is as we create new melodies and ideas with greater and greater ease.

And most importantly- **HITTING WRONG NOTES IS ABSOLUTELY O.K!**

When we hit them, they will sound "off" and it will reinforce not to do it next time!

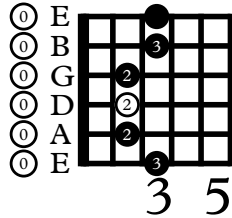
Below is the E Minor Pentatonic scale that you should all be very familiar with now. Look to the next page to see how we can make our lives easier when improvising!



E Minor Pentatonic

Musical notation for the E Minor Pentatonic scale. The notation shows the scale in 4/4 time, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The scale is written as a sequence of eighth notes: E4, B3, G3, D3, A3, E4. Below the staff is a guitar tablature showing the fret numbers for each string: Treble (T) and Bass (B) strings are shown with fret numbers 0, 3, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 3, 0, 3.

So- when we talk, we do not use ALL of the words in the English language, in fact we use very few- just the ones we need to get the idea across! So this brings us onto my favourite aspect of improvisation- LIMITATION! Instead of trying to create a melody with ALL the notes from the scale, we will just pick a few- In this example, just the ones in red.



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Limitation-

So now we can just concentrate on making an interesting melody without getting confused with all of the strings and loads of notes.

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Repetition-

If we like the idea we can repeat it, possibly changing the last note or two- this makes our playing sound deliberate and well-thought out.

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Development-

If we have a good melodic idea that we like- we can then "develop" it. For example as we did by changing that last couple of notes or-

Play the same idea higher or lower by moving it onto a different set of notes/strings (paying attention to stay within the scale of course!)

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To write about improvisation properly would take several books (and does!). This is just a few guidelines to help you get started on the life-long journey of improvisation! So, as well as Limitation we have-

REPETITION- Notice how in your favourite songs, the verses will have different words but will nearly always stick to the same melody? Notice how the chorus is nearly always EXACTLY the same words and melody throughout the song? Repetition is your friend. If you play a nice idea, repeat it, adapt and develop it (as we did by repeating the idea but moving it onto different strings).

And lastly I will leave you with perhaps the most important idea of all-

SPACE! - When you talk, you need to pause often in order to breath and to think about what to say next as well as to give the listener time to hear and understand what you have just said. Playing music is 100% the same!