

## 3. The Goal Setting Method

During the semester of my Senior Recital, I had to learn four new pieces in 6 weeks: two movements from a Beethoven Sonata, a Bartok piece, and a Chamber piece. In order to learn all these in time, I had to be super organized, with every second of practice time as *focused* and *efficient* as possible. So I developed a 6 Step System to stay laser focused, my “Goal Setting Method”, and it has worked wonders for me. I’ve been using ever since to learn songs in the shortest amount of time possible.

### How to Use the Goal Setting Method

Have you ever had those practice sessions where you kinda just futzed around but didn’t really get anything accomplished? By setting goals and planning you can eliminate all that wasted time and zero in on *exactly* the sections and spots that need the most work. 90% of wasted practice time comes from playing through the parts you already know well. So before each practice session set some goals and plan *specifically* what you’re going to be practicing, AKA the spots you don’t know well. Here’s the best method I’ve found to set goals:

#### *Step 1: Break Your Piece Into Sections*

Before you even touch the piano, look through your piece and organize it into sections with A being the first section, B the second section, and so on. Break it into logical pieces so that the beginning and end coincide with the beginning and end of phrases. It helps a lot to listen to the song as you go through it so you can hear the logical places to end sections.

As for the length of each section, that depends on how difficult it is. You want to set it up so each section takes about the same time to learn. So difficult sections are going to be smaller and easier sections are going to be bigger. Personally, my sections average about 8 bars, but they could go anywhere from 2 bars to 16 bars or even longer.

If you’re playing by ear, you can print off the lyrics to a song and just mark your sections there. It’s important to have a visual anchor to help you organize your song.

#### *Step 2: Plan Your Week*

The most efficient way to plan your practice session is to use a weekly chart. It’s amazing how much better results I get when I use a chart and actually write my plan down than when just “wing it.” And it only takes about 5 minutes to do, so it’s totally worth it!

Take out a piece of paper and start creating your practice plan for the week. If you want to, create a document on your computer with the outline and print off a bunch of copies so you have planning sheets when you need them. Create a grid with the days of the week as the rows (start with the day after your lesson) and label the columns “Sec (short for “Section”), Goals, Strategies, and Results”, you can look at the example below to see what I mean:

	Sec	Goals	Strategies	Results
Wed	W			
	D			
	E			
	B			
Thu	W			
	D			
	E			
	B			
Fri	W			
	A			
	FG			
	C			
Sat	W			
	A			

I don't usually type this out, I just sketch it on a sheet of paper but it's easier to show on a computer when I can take screenshots.

Now write in the sections you plan on practicing each day. Always start each day with a "W" in the "Sec" category, which stands for warm-up. If you set goals with your warm-up as well as your piece your scales and overall technique will improve drastically. Then move on and fill in the chart with sections you plan on working on that day. Each letter stands for a certain amount of time practicing each section. I use 15 minutes as my time interval, meaning if I work on four sections a day, I'll spend a total of an hour practicing. I would suggest starting with a smaller interval (like 5 minutes) and working your way up.

You can also put more than one section together in a time block if they're shorter or easier (look at the section with F and G together). I do that a lot if there's a section or two that only need a couple minutes to smooth over. That way I can spend as little time as possible on the easy section and have the rest of the time for the hard section.

Put the hardest sections early in practice sessions (that way you'll have more mental energy to work on them) and put them most often. These sections are going to take the longest to learn, so you're going to have to put the most time and energy into them. So in this example, section D is a difficult section and section B is an easier section.

Also, try not to practice a section more than three days in a row. Your brain needs a break from a section to let it sink in, so it's more efficient to let on section "rest" while you practice other sections. Also, make sure you take one day completely off a week. This'll help you stay injury free and prevent burnout.

You can also use the "?" symbol to indicate you'll fill in that section later. I usually put some of these towards the end of the week because I'm not sure which sections are going to need a lot of work at that point and which sections will be fine.

Also, if a section is too long or difficult to improve on in a day, you can write "1/2 A" which means, "Learn the first half of section A." Then the next day you could set a goal for "2/2 A" which means, "Learn the Second Half of Section A."

### *Step 3: Set Your Goals for Today*

Now it's time to plan your practice session for today. You'll be doing this every day, so get into the habit! Look at the sections for the day and think of some manageable goals you could accomplish within that time period. There are three main types of goals:

## 1. Completion Goals

Completion Goals are achieved when you can play something without mistakes. It doesn't matter how slow you need to play it as long as you keep a steady tempo. An example of a completion goal would be "Learn Section B Hands Separate". These will be the main goals you'll use when you start learning a piece.

## 2. BPM Goals

BPM (Beats Per Minute) Goals are goals that are achieved when you are able to play a section at a certain speed with little to no mistakes. You'll need a metronome to keep track of the tempo (we'll talk about metronomes in a later chapter). An example of a BPM goal would be "Play Section C at 120 BPM". These are the types of goals you use after completion goals, when you're trying to speed up a section.

## 3. Memorization Goals

Memorization Goals are exactly what they sound like; you achieve them when you can play a section without looking at the music. If you're playing by ear, a Completion Goal is the same as a Memorization Goal. Also, if you're planning on performing with sheet music you won't need to set any memorization goals.

## 4. Expressive Goals

When you know a section well enough that you can focus on being expressive instead of concentrating on the notes, you have achieved the highest level of goals, and that section is completed. Expressive goals aren't quite as cut and dry as the other ones (they're a little more subjective), but you usually have a pretty good idea how well you know a section.

For each section, decide on a goal. The first couple days you practice a section you'll want to use mostly Hands Separate goals, and gradually work to hands together goals. Similarly you'll want to go from Completion Goals to BPM Goals to Memorization Goals to Expressive Goals in that order. So go ahead and write out your goals *only* for today. You don't write out goals for the whole week at a time because you're going to want to leave yourself flexibility in case you end up needing more than one day to complete a goal.

To make the goal setting process faster and easier, develop a shorthand system. Here are some common shorthand symbols I use:

### Common Shorthand I Use

- LH = Left Hand
- RH = Right Hand
- HS = Hands Separate
- HT = Hands Together
- mm7 = Measure 7
- @128 = At 128 Beats Per Minute
- Com = Complete
- Mem = Memorize
- Ex = Be Able to Play Expressively
- Ch = Chunking
- Rym = Rhythms
- Met = Metronome
- +M = Added Measures
- +N = Added Notes

So for example, “Mem D HS” means “Memorize Section D Hands Separately”, and “F @100 HT” means “have Section F at 100 Beats per Minute Hands Together.” You get the idea. Here’s an example of some goals I might set for day 1:

	<b>Sec</b>	<b>Goals</b>
<b>Wed</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>E Maj Scale @100</b>
	<b>D</b>	<b>Com LH</b>
	<b>E</b>	<b>Com HS</b>
	<b>B</b>	<b>Com HT</b>

So my goals for today would be the following:

- Get my E Major Scale up to 100 BPM
- Be able to play the Left Hand slowly for section D (since this is the difficult section I’ll probably only be able to learn one hand in the time period)
- Complete section E hands separate at a slow tempo
- 4. Complete section B hands together at a slow tempo (since B is an easier section, in this case I think I could learn it slowly hands together in the given time period.

*Step 4: Determine Your Practice Strategies*

Each section of your piece has a strategy that works well for it (the rest of the book is about these strategies so don’t worry if you don’t know what they are now) depending on what goal

type you’re working on. For example, if you have a tough left hand Alberti Bass pattern and you’re working on a Completion Goal, using Rhythms (explained in Chapter 4) would be a great practice strategy. If you’re going for a BPM goal, however, a Metronome Strategy (explained in Chapter 6) would probably be the best method.

So after you write out your daily goals, write in exactly which practice strategy you’re going to use to achieve them. Once you learn the fastest and most efficient ways to learn each type of section, you’ll be able to piece these sections together and learn entire pieces much faster.

Here’s an example of what your strategies might look like:

	<b>Sec</b>	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Strategies</b>
<b>Wed</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>E Maj Scale @100</b>	<b>Met HS</b>
	<b>D</b>	<b>Com LH</b>	<b>OL Ch LH</b>
	<b>E</b>	<b>Com HS</b>	<b>R HS</b>
	<b>B</b>	<b>Com HT</b>	<b>Ch HS, Ch HT</b>

So the strategies I would use to complete these goals are:

To get my scale at 100 BPM I would use a Metronome on each hand separately to ramp up the speed

On section D, I would use the Overlapping Chunks strategy on the Left Hand Alone to learn it at a slow tempo

On section E, I would use the Rhythms strategy on each hand separately to learn each hand at a slow tempo

On section B, I would use the Chunking strategy on each hand separately, and then the Chunking strategy on hands together.

### *Step 5: Follow the Plan*

Now is the time for actual practicing. Making a plan does no good unless you *take action* on it. Get a stopwatch or a kitchen timer. Choose a timeframe for each section. Start the clock and begin practicing that section using the strategy you outlined. Keep practicing that section until you have hit whatever time limit you have chosen for the sections.

For the time limit, you can use either a countdown timer or a count-up timer (like a stopwatch). I like using a count-up timer better. That way, if you're in the zone and really practicing a section well, you can go over the time limit a little and you won't be interrupted by the beeper going off.

When you first start using this method, stay pretty strict to the time limits. It's good to get into the habit of being disciplined and consistent with them. As you get better at it and more used to it, you can use more flexibility. For example, if you achieve a goal before the time limit is up, you might go to a different, difficult section of your song and work on that section for the remaining time.

#### *Can I Just Use the Stopwatch on My Phone?*

I'm HIGHLY against using your phone when you practice. In fact, I don't even like having my phone anywhere near the piano while I am practicing. Every time your phone goes off it will be a distraction and leech time and focus away from your practicing. Get a kitchen timer, it'll cost you like a dollar at Walmart.

### *Step 6: Track Your Results*

After you practice a section, write down the results of each goal of your practice session. If you completed the goal, just write "completed" for the section. If you couldn't complete the goal within the time period, write "not completed" or a note on what needs work. If you completed it, the next time you have that section you can move on to a different goal. If you didn't complete it, then you'll write the same goal for the next section.

This is also the place to write any comments or insights you have about the section. Here's what the "Results" section of your Goal Sheet might look like:

	<b>Results</b>
	<b>LH only at 92 BPM</b>
	<b>Completed</b>
	<b>2nd half still needs work</b>
	<b>Completed</b>

Whether or not you completed your goal, as long as you spent the time working on it, cross the letter off under the "Sec" category. Crossing off items on a to do list has been shown to boost motivation, and even if you didn't complete the goal, you should still get the satisfaction that you've worked on it and it has improved.



These 5 steps are the key to having focus and clarity when you practice. Put your goal sheet in the front of your music binder and plan your practicing every day. Just by taking the time to plan you can wire your brain for the fastest results.

## Using a Master List

In addition to the goal sheet, I like to keep a Master List of the goals I have for the piece. The Master List is simply a list of all the sections in the piece and where I'm at with each section. Here's how you make one.

### Step 1: Create the List

Make another chart, and label the columns "Section, Completion, BPM, Memorize, Expressive." Label the rows A, B, C, and so on until you have written all the sections of your piece.

### Step 2: Check Off Your Completed Goals

Now every time you achieve a goal for a section, check the box for that section.

For the *Completion* column, check off the box when you are able to play the section hands together at a slow speed.

For the *BPM* column, first you're going to have to set a goal for a final BPM you want to be able to play the piece at. Then check off the box when you are able to play a section at that tempo with little to no mistakes.

For the *Memorize* column, check off the box when you can play the section without looking at music.

For the *Expressive* column, check off the box when you know the notes well enough that you can play the section while focusing on the expression and emotion of it.

Here's an example of what a Master List might look like partway through learning a song:

Section	Completion	BPM @90	Memorize	Expressive
A	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
B	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
D	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
E	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
F	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
G	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
H	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
J	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
K	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Step 3: Practice Until You've Completed the List

When you've checked off all the boxes, you have completed the song (you might still have to work out some continuity issues, but the main part of the practicing is done). Hopefully every day you practice, you're able to check off a couple boxes. The nice part about the Master List is you can see *exactly* which sections of your piece are good and which sections need work. It's kind of like an overview of specifically how well you know the song. Now when you set your goals, you can focus your attention on the sections that have a long way to go.

## Wrap Up and Key Points

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This planning stage is extremely important for keeping you on track. It can be tempting to skip it and just plan it out in your head, but don't! Studies show that goals that are written down are 42% more likely to be accomplished. Imagine how good you'll get at piano if you accomplish 42% more *each week!* Over a year those results will be huge.

To wrap up this chapter, here are a couple key points to remember

- Plan out which sections you're going to work on at the beginning of each week
- Plan out which strategies you're going to use and follow the plan
- Record your results
- Use a Master List to keep track of where each section is in the learning process

And remember, you're ALWAYS welcome to contact me if there's something in this chapter you're confused about:

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Now on to Part 2 where we get into the fun stuff. The most powerful practice strategies I know, the ones I use *every single practice session*.

*This is a FREE chapter from the ebook "Supercharge Your Piano Practice." If you like the info here, feel free to purchase the whole book for even more tips!*