

Techniques Checklist

Whether you are a complete novice with no formal training or a seasoned professional with years of playing experience, this techniques checklist will solidify the foundation required to become a proficient bassist and save you countless hours of frustration by learning how to do it right the first time. If you discover flaws in your technique after having spent months or years playing bass, it can be extremely discouraging to have to start over from the beginning so we want to get it right from the onset.

By regularly reviewing this checklist, you can acquire the proper mechanics, finger independence, dexterity, and range of motion necessary to execute bass lines and solos with accuracy, speed, and endurance in any style of music. As time passes, musicians often become complacent with the manner in which they play their respective instrument, and in the process, inadvertently develop bad habits. To avoid this situation, it is critical that bassists, especially beginners, review this checklist periodically to correct any bad habits that may have unintentionally formed over time as well as to continually reinforce the proper muscle memory and refine the accuracy that is required to build technique.

This list features a series of questions to ask yourself when playing anything from elemental technique building exercises to complex solo bass music.

The Picking Hand

- Where is the most appropriate location to place my hand in order to generate the best tone?
- Should I play with a pick instead of my fingers?
- Are my index and middle fingers constantly alternating?
- Does raking across the strings provide better economy of motion?
- Is my thumb floating from string to string?
- Should I mute with the third and fourth fingers?
- Am I always using rest strokes to play through the strings and add more depth to my tone?
- Is my wrist bent too much?
- Am I playing with a light touch?
- Is the tone I am producing consistent and even?

The Fretting Hand

- Should I utilize one-finger-per-fret?
- Are my fingers slightly curved over the fingerboard?
- Are my fingers always parallel to the strings?
- Am I always pressing the strings down either over the top or next to the frets?
- Is my thumb on the back of the neck opposite to the middle finger?
- Am I gripping the neck too tightly?
- Are my fingers always staying close to the strings in a position ready to play and offer support?
- Where is the best position to place my hand so I can minimize shifting?
- When and where should I shift?
- If the same note can be played in two or more places, which position provides the best sound?
- Does it make sense to apply the barring technique to any passages?
- Am I accidentally bending any strings out of pitch when I press them to the fingerboard?
- Can I make any phrases sound more musical with vibrato, hammer-ons, pull-offs, or slides?

The Body

- Is my strap always at the same length so the position of the bass relative to my body never changes?
- Do I feel any pain, tension, or numbness in either hand?
- Is my entire body completely relaxed when playing?
- Am I fully concentrated while playing?
- Is my breathing regular?
- Am I using good economy of motion and as little energy as needed to produce the tone that I want?

With repetition, technique will become internalized through muscle memory. Depending on the technique and the amount of time spent practicing, it may take anywhere between a couple days to several months before a technique is thoroughly internalized. At first, you will need to make a conscious effort to think about the mechanics and movements required to execute a technique, but eventually, you will reach a point that does not require much conscious thought due to muscle memory.

As you play, pay particular attention to your degree of relaxation, concentration, and breathing. People tend to learn new material faster and more thoroughly while in a relaxed and concentrated state of mind. The best musicians can make the performance of extremely complicated lines look very easy because they are able to maintain a high level of relaxation and can concentrate more deeply than an average person. Also, the manner in which you breathe directly affects your ability to perform. If your breathing is shallow or irregular, often indicating some form of tension is present, take a few seconds to stop and refocus your attention.

Using good economy of motion, you will learn to expend as little energy as you need to produce the results that you desire. Do not waste energy where it is not needed because, ultimately, it will just slow you down and keep you from realizing your goals.

To help internalize this techniques checklist, go through this list item by item at the start of your practice sessions, and continue to assess your technique periodically as you play. In the beginning, analyzing your technique may take a couple minutes to complete, but after you know which variables to consider, it will become an automatic process that can be done very quickly.