

The Fingerstyle Brain Boost!

How to Practice Smarter for Better Memory, Faster Progress & a Healthier Mind

By Dan Thorpe

Introduction: Why I Wrote This Guide

Back when I was still teaching guitar full-time in person, juggling a crazy schedule as a single father to a lovely toddler (shout out to my little lad, Archie), things were hectic.

I had lessons to teach, songs to prepare, and barely a quiet moment to myself.

It could have been overwhelming.

...But in that chaos, I figured out a way to learn more songs per week than I ever had before. And here's the truth:

There's nothing special about my brain!

What worked for me can work for you — especially if you're over 50 and feel like memory, time, or the ol' grey matter, is holding you back.

The Problem: Why We Forget What We Practice

Have you ever had a great session on Monday... and by Wednesday, it's like your fingers (and brain) forgot everything?

That's not just you — it's how the brain works.

In the late 1800s, German psychologist **Hermann Ebbinghaus** discovered the *Forgetting Curve*¹. It showed that new information starts slipping away from memory within hours if not revisited. By 24 hours, we forget up to 70% of what we learn.

Unless that is... We fight back with something called **spaced repetition**.

The Secret: Frequency Beats Duration

Most people think, *"I need an hour a day to get better at guitar."* But here's the key thing...

In terms of playing, learning, and especially memory, it's not how long you practice — it's how often you remind your brain.

When I was in the thick of life chaos, I didn't always have an hour. But I *did* pick up the guitar in tiny bursts throughout the day. And those mini sessions kept the music "topped up" in my brain.

It made everything stick better.

Meet Dave: The Student Who Learned 16 Songs...

Dave is one of my all-time favourite students. A passionate music lover, he'd never touched an instrument until later on in life, but...

- He practiced every day — not just once, but in short bursts.
- He'd run through song parts when he could (e.g. while the kettle boiled).
- He'd *daydream* playing guitar at work and he even visualised chord changes in his head when he couldn't practice physically.

Two years later, he'd learned 16 superb songs.

He didn't have a photographic memory. What he *did* have was a passion for music... and a brain wired by repetition and visualisation.

The Science: 3 Brain-Based Practice Tips

Now, let's cover three practical science backed tips that have helped me and my students over the years and will help you too!

1. Spaced Repetition (The Forgetting Cure)

Instead of one long practice, consider breaking it into:

- One **core session** (20–60 mins)
- Two (or ideally more) **micro-sessions** (2–5 mins)
These could be before breakfast, during TV ads, or just when passing by the guitar stand.

Bonus: Play just the tricky bar from your song. This reinforces it and avoids “rusting” between sessions.

2. Visualisation

Studies show that mentally “playing” your music activates the same brain areas as physical practice.²

- Close your eyes and picture yourself playing the bar you're learning.
- See the fingers move and hear the notes in your head.
- Use this any time — e.g. stuck in traffic or waiting for a loved one!

I call this playing in your “Mind's eye”. In *Fingerstyle 101* I write about this on *page 105* and give you a fun musical example. Even imagining yourself playing a song can strengthen your muscle memory and reinforce what you've learned³.

3. Multipoint Learning (Engage the Senses)

The more senses you use, the more your brain locks things in.

- Say note names or chord changes aloud while playing.
- Sing the melody or hum the rhythm.
- Watch your hands, then try without looking.

These small shifts create stronger neural connections that boost memory and reduce frustration⁵.

Practical Plan: Your 7-Day Brain Boost Routine

Here's how to start right now.

Choose a song such as *Amazing Grace*, which is one of the bonuses from *Fingerstyle 101*.

...Or pick one of the powerful musical exercises from the book. (My favourites for this are on *page 31, 44, and 59* as these are like mini songs and they will set you up for playing more songs!)

Time of Day	Task	What to Do	Why It Works
Morning	5-minute review	Revisit what you practiced yesterday. Play the trickiest bar or transition slowly, 2–3 times.	Refreshes your memory and “unsticks” errors before they become habits.
Midday	Quick memory jog (2–3 mins)	Pick up your guitar and casually play the whole piece or section once or twice. No need to be perfect.	Frequent, low-pressure review keeps the piece “active” in your brain.
Evening	Main practice session (20–60 mins)	Do the deep work — learn new bars, improve transitions, and polish your tone.	This longer session builds new neural connections and integrates earlier reviews.
Before Bed	Mental replay (1–2 mins)	Close your eyes and visualise yourself playing the piece smoothly — imagine finger movements, the sound, even the feel.	Visualisation activates brain regions like real practice and helps lock in learning.

You don't have to follow the plan exactly but instead, feel free to adapt it to your lifestyle. Repeat this cycle for 7 days and you may be amazed at what sticks. You'll learn faster, build better habits, and enjoy your practice more.

This kind of spaced, repeated playing strengthens your muscle memory through consistent practice⁴.

Bonus Tip: The Power of “The First 5 Minutes”

Feeling stuck? Just play for 5 minutes. Most days, you’ll often end up playing longer. But even when you don’t, your brain still gets a valuable “ping” — enough to fight the forgetting curve and keep your skills sharp.

Final Word: No Special Talent Needed

What works is **consistency** and **brain-friendly practice** — not fancy talent or perfect memory.

This guide is here to remind you:

- You *can* improve.
- You *can* learn new music faster.
- You *can* feel more confident and creative with your guitar — especially in your 50s, 60s, 70s, or 80s.

...And if it ever feels slow, remember:

Even 5 minutes can change the game.

Enjoy the process.

Remember — memory is shaped by the methods you use, how often you use them, and your desire to keep going. With consistent practice, brain health *can* and *will* improve.

What works is consistency and brain-friendly practice⁶ — not so-called “natural talent” (which is a bit of a myth and something I talk about elsewhere) or perfect memory

Trust the process, trust the methods, and most of all — trust yourself.

Thanks for reading, and don’t forget to apply these tips while going through *Fingerstyle 101* or any time you're learning something new on the guitar!

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