

A photograph of a banjo resting on a black tripod in a natural setting. The banjo has a light-colored wooden neck and a white head. The background features a waterfall and a pool of water, with rocks and trees visible. The text is overlaid on the image.

The Natural
**BANJO
PLAYER**

Nature's Lessons
for Effortless Playing

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4. Focus on the Target



4.1 Observe the Eagle, the Fox and the Frog

If you have ever seen an eagle snatch a fish from a lake or a frog catch an insect you know they are focused on their target. A fox will hunt in deep snow where he can't even see the rodent he is after. He has to listen and determine where his prey will be by the time he plunges into the snow.

Activity 4.1 Watch Creatures in the Wild

Take some time to watch animals as they hunt. Notice how intently they are focused on their target. Even your pet cat can teach you lessons about concentration. Can these lessons be applied to the banjo?

Exercise 4.1 Slides

Let's consider executing a slide. For a slide to be effective we need to hear the note that we are sliding to. This means keeping your finger tight against the fingerboard, but even more importantly it means focusing on the target location. Think of concentrating the energy in the string to that spot - that's your target. Try fretting the 1st string at the 2nd fret, striking the string, and then sliding to the 5th fret. Don't follow your finger as it slides. Focus on the 5th fret and imagine concentrating the energy in the string to that fret. The resulting note should sound out nice and loud. After all, you are taking the energy in the string and concentrating it to a shorter string.

Just to bring this point home, wait for a while after striking the string and then do the slide. You should have complete control over the sound.

Artist use this same technique. If an artist wants to draw a line between point A and point B, he doesn't watch his hand as he draws. He focuses on the target - point B.

Exercise 4.2 Chord Planting

The same technique applies if you have to make a quick chord change. You need to know ahead of time what the chord form looks like and where it is. Then you concentrate on the target position. Try this method while moving back and forth between chords. Picture the chord first and where it is on the fingerboard, and then move your left hand.

A good practice technique when learning a new song is to simply learn the shape and position of all of the chords. Practice quickly and accurately moving through the chord progression before you start working on the actual arrangement.

9. Anticipation Means No Surprises



9.1 Bird on a Wire

The picture above is of an Osprey landing on its nest. When you see a bird landing in a tree or on a telephone wire you are witnessing an amazing feat of flying. Unless it is a Gooney Bird, the landing will probably be perfect. It knows exactly where it wants to land and how to perform the maneuver. There are no surprises here. It doesn't have to wonder, "What should I do next?" This same principle of anticipating an event for perfect execution also applies to our banjo playing.

Activity 9.1 Observe Animal and Insect Behavior

Take a field trip out into the wild and look for examples of anticipation. Don't just take note of them, but study them in as much detail as you can. If you are watching a bird land in a tree, try and put yourself in its place. How do you slow down for the landing? Do you reach out with your feet ahead of you? How do you avoid hitting a branch?

Look for other examples. Even trees will anticipate the arrival of spring by sprouting out new growth. Sometimes they can be caught off guard by a late freeze, but usually they are good predictors of the change of season. Ants and bears know when to prepare for hibernation. Many of nature's lessons regarding anticipation can be applied to the banjo.

Exercise 9.1 Anticipate Chord Changes

Every song has a chord progression associated with it. Once you know the song you can hear the changes coming up and be ready for them. So many times beginning banjo players are so focused on playing the current measure correctly that they are caught by surprise when the chord changes. If you are thinking ahead (or reading ahead if using tab) then you will be ready for the change, and not be caught off guard.

A good practice for anticipating chord changes is to listen to recordings or attend jam sessions and just listen. At first you may hear a change coming up, but don't know which chord it is going to be. With practice you will anticipate the change and know (usually) what chord it is.

Most simple 3-chord songs use the I, IV and V chords. Another good practice is to just pick a familiar song and strum along as you sing it. If you hear a change coming up you only have two choices because you are already playing one of the three chords. So, when the change comes just pick a chord. You will know soon enough if you picked the right one. Again, with practice you will start picking the correct chord more often.

Exercise 9.2 Slides That Put Your Left Hand in Position

When you perform a slide, which finger do you slide with? Anticipating what comes next in the song and where you want your left hand to end up helps you to determine what finger to use for the slide. Anticipation makes for smooth and accurate playing.

Let's use the first part of Clinch Mountain Backstep as an example. The goals here are to put your left hand in good position, to minimize movement, and to have stability in your fretting hand.

Looking at the tab below, in the pickup measure we slide with the Ring finger from 3rd to 5th fret on the first string. This puts our hand in perfect position for the Index finger to go back and fret the 3rd fret again. Give it a try and see how everything just seems to fall in place.

In measure four sliding on the second string with the middle finger puts your hand in good position for the Ring finger to fret the first string. This is another good example of how anticipating what comes next makes for easy fingering.

Slide with Ring finger puts Index in position for 3rd fret

Index finger acts as Pivot

Ring finger comes down

Index finger

Slide with Middle finger

Ring finger comes down

Index acts as Pivot finger as Ring finger moves between 3rd and 4th strings

Slide with Ring finger which is already there

Exercise 9.3 Right Hand Picking

With experience, choosing which right hand finger to pluck a string with becomes fairly natural, but at first we may have to make some conscious choices. Anticipating what comes next will influence those choices.

For the common G-lick shown below which finger is the best choice for striking the 3rd string on the "and" of beat two?

I would choose the Index finger. Then Middle finger on the 2nd string at the top of the slide and the Index finger again on the 'and' of beat three. Try those choices and see if you agree. Again, we're anticipating what comes next in the song.

Exercise 9.4 Read Ahead

This lesson may seem obvious but based on lots of experience with students, it isn't always obvious. When using tablature as a learning aid one of the best ways to anticipate what comes next is to read ahead.

Once you have seen the tab for the measure you are currently playing, look ahead at the next measure or two. I will often tell a student, "While you are playing this G measure be thinking D7." And of course they are not just thinking D7, they are planning ahead for the move to the new position.