

Introducing and Improving Violin/Viola Technique

Part 1. Instrument Position

The goal is to balance the instrument with the body in a way that allows the left hand to move freely around all parts of the fingerboard and the entire bow to easily play all four strings.

Golden Rule for Instrument Position

First, stand or sit tall with a floating head, lengthened spine, and shoulders back. Then bring the instrument to the body; don't bring the body to the instrument.

The violin and viola are balanced between three points of the body:

- the left clavicle/shoulder muscle,
- the left jawbone, and
- the left hand.

Most of the support comes from the relaxed shoulder and jawbone. The left hand provides enough support to counter-balance the action of the fingertips and the weight of the bow; the primary job of the left hand is to play the instrument, *not* hold it up.

Setting Up Good Instrument Position:

Have students stand when they are learning to balance their instrument; it's easier to hold the instrument correctly and also easier for you to see and correct problems that arise.

1. Stand with a lengthened spine and well-balanced head and shoulders. Sit on the front of the chair with tripod support and a lengthened spine and well-balanced head and shoulders.
2. Keeping the head still, feel the clavicle (collar bone), shoulder and back with the right hand.
3. Remember the Golden Rule: Stand or sit in a tall, healthy way, and then bring the instrument to the body; keep the head still and do not bring the body or the head/chin to the instrument.
4. With the left hand on the right shoulder of the instrument, raise the instrument up high over the left foot, then turn the instrument, lower and rest it onto the clavicle so the scroll is over the left foot and the strings are parallel to the floor. The lower left bout should be close to the back of the neck.
5. Without raising or lowering the chin, gently turn the head to look left, and rest the jawbone lightly in the chin rest; the nose, bridge and scroll should align.
 1. The jawbone should move horizontally; it should neither reach up to get over the chinrest nor clamp down.
 2. The shoulder should remain relaxed and back; it should not come forward or hike up to balance the instrument at the correct angle
6. Remind students to "grow an inch" and continue standing with a lengthened spine.

Troubleshooting

- Most problems can be corrected with the same solution: Take the instrument from the student and have him/her stand or sit correctly. Then place the instrument onto the student's shoulder and help the student turn his/her head to support the instrument.
- **Shoulder Rest and Chinrest Height** – Many players require a shoulder rest or a taller chinrest—and sometimes both—to comfortably balance the instrument. While shoulder rests have been popular for decades, many believe taller chinrests are superior to shoulder rests because they allow violinists to balance the instrument lower and closer to the arms than a tall shoulder rest.
- **Viola Problems** – Bigger is not always better, especially for viola. If the viola is so big that the player cannot hold it correctly, then it is too big. Students are happier and play better when they have an instrument that is properly sized.



Part 2. The Left Hand

Left Hand Golden Rule:

Let go of the instrument and rest the thumb lightly on the neck to give the left arm the freedom to move the hand to the correct position.

The best way to teach the left hand to let go is to keep it moving so it does not have the opportunity to stop and hold on. Young players who stay in first position in their first years must learn to move their thumbs, move their hands, tap their fingers on the strings, and do other calisthenics that keep the left thumbs from squeezing. They should also learn how to use their arm and elbow to slide their fingers up and down the string, moving their relaxed hand, wrist, and arm around the instrument as one unit.

Setting Up the Left Hand for Violin and Viola:

Have students stand. They will be less likely to develop bad habits, and you will have an easier time seeing and correcting the problems.

1. Bring the instrument up to the shoulder and balance it between the relaxed shoulder and jawbone. Then lower the left hand back down to the side, and check to make sure the instrument is well-balanced before continuing.
2. Gently shake out the left hand (as if shaking water off the fingertips) and bring the left arm up, with a relaxed, neutral wrist.
3. The visible “joint line” where the first finger meets the palm of the hand should rest lightly against the neck near the nut at the end of the fingerboard.
4. Lift the scroll upwards a few inches with the left hand, and then gently bring it down pointing the elbow toward the belly button.
5. The thumb, wrist, and forearm should be aligned as the student rests the thumb on the neck. The thumb tip should be almost even with the fingerboard and resting against the neck close to where the first fingertip touches the string. Make sure there is ample space (about the size of a mouse hole) under the neck between the thumb and first finger. Polish the side of the neck with the thumb to maintain a soft hand and straight wrist.

6. Turn the left hand, gently bringing the pinky closer to the neck. Place the thumb-side corner tips of the fingers on to the string; fingers should be shaped like a square or a box and should curve and hover over the string— not stick up in the air.
7. Check finger placement. The half-step fingers should touch, and the third finger should be in tune with the lower string.

Troubleshooting: Most left-hand problems (like squeezing thumbs and bent wrists) are caused by poor instrument position and support. Check and make sure the instrument is properly balanced far enough back on the shoulder with an effective shoulder rest and chin rest set-up. Then, gently “shake the water off of the fingertips” of the left hand, and then bring it back up to the instrument, placing it in the correct position without squeezing.

Retraining a Squeezing Thumb by polishing the neck with the thumb. With the fingers resting on the string, polish the neck of the instrument with the pad of the thumb. The wrist should relax and straighten into a neutral position. After polishing, rest the thumb next to the first finger so it leaves a “mouse hole” underneath the neck between the thumb and first finger.



Part 3. Right Hand

From the very beginning, students need to learn to “balance” the bow *on the string* (either balancing the bow in rest position on our knee or balancing it vertically in the air). If we are going to “hold” the bow horizontally, the only way we hold it is down on the string. We do *not* hold the bow up horizontally in the air—ever. Holding the bow up horizontally creates enormous tension in the pinky, which tries to counterbalance the weight of the stick on the other side of the thumb. Beginners are anxious to get to the bow and learn how it works. Too easily, they quickly learn and ingrain tension in the pinky, which can take months (sometimes years) to un-learn. This brings us to the golden rule for the bow hand:

Bow Hand Golden Rule:

The bow is held up by the string and held down by the bow hand.

Introduce the bow hand in two stages.

Stage 1 – Start by teaching beginners how to hold the bow in rest position.

1. Hold the bow gently at the balance point with the left hand so the tip points toward the ceiling and the bow hair faces you; then lean the tip away from you about half way between vertical and horizontal.
2. Gently shake out the right hand (like shaking water off the fingertips) and then hold the right hand in front of you in the shape of holding a soda can. Tap the tips of the two middle fingers to the tips of the thumb, making perfect circles with round knuckles in the fingers and thumbs.
3. Shrink the circles by sliding the tip of the thumb from the fingertips down to the first crease behind the knuckles of the two middle fingers, always keeping round knuckles in the fingers and thumbs. Gently tap the tip of the thumbs on the creases several times.

4. Place the bow into these top creases of the two middle fingers so the space on the bow between the frog and the grip go directly in front of the second finger. Depending upon the instrument, the bow will rest in different parts of the top creases of the right fingers. Violin bows should touch the left side of the crease closest to the fingertip; viola bows should lay directly on the crease. Wrap the tips of the middle two fingers around the stick; the *fingerprints*—not *tips*—will gently “hold” the stick opposite the thumb.
5. Tap the tip of the thumb on the bow between the frog and the grip with a curved thumb knuckle, and then let it rest there. The placement of the thumb varies somewhat between upper and lower strings. Set the tip of the thumb near the bottom of the stick and curve the thumb more.
6. Release the bow with the left hand, allowing the stick to rest between the top two knuckles of the right hand first finger. The first finger should feel the full weight of the stick. Tell the students to “go fishing” and joggle the bow gently in the right hand so the stick bobs up and down in the first finger.
7. Tap the pinky several times on the stick. Tap the tip of the curved pinky on the top of the bow over the circle or center of the frog

Stage 2 – Getting the Bow to the String:

1. When students can hold their bows with beautifully curved and relaxed fingers and thumbs, they can learn to bring the bow to the string. Students should *never* hold the bow horizontally when carrying the bow to the string. This causes tension in the right hand—tension that stays in the hand even after the bow is resting on the string.
2. Pick up the bow from the stand or the lap: first rest the bow hair up with the stick in their fingers (“go fishing”), then bring the bow to vertical with relaxed, curved fingers, and then finally “pour” the bow onto the string.
3. Balance the instrument on the left knee and balance the bow vertically on the right. Then, raise the instrument up and balance it on the shoulder (as explained in the previous chapters) so the strings are horizontal. At first, it may be best to hold the upper bout of the instrument with the left hand for added security. Finally, keeping the bow vertical, lift the bow with the right hand and bring the bow’s balance point close to the string. Then, without any pinky tension, “pour” the bow onto the string by raising the elbow so the wrist remains relatively straight. If the pinkies are in danger of becoming stiff, lift the pinky off of the bow while pouring the bow on the string, and then replace the pinky once it is balanced on the string.
4. Rest the bow on the string in the middle of the bow; then tap fingers and pinky on the bow and readjust the fingers until they are beautifully curved and flawlessly free of tension. Knuckles should be curved, soft and flexible; when the bow moves, the knuckles should be visibly fluid, not stiff.
5. Position the right elbow so the wrist is comfortably straight; as the bow moves, bend the wrist to keep the bow angle perpendicular to the string at all times. Pronate the top of the right wrist toward the tip so the first finger digs in to the stick—as if gently pouring the soda out of your soda can hand shape.
6. Keep the bow hair flat on the string between the bridge and the fingerboard, and rotate the bow so the stick rolls over the hair slightly toward the bridge.

“Curve all fingers, pour the bow; tap the pinky, ready, go!”