HOW CAN I IMPROVE THE SPEED OF MY TREMOLO?
Try Speed Bursts and the "Play-Fast-Now" Practice Strategy.

By Douglas Niedt

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IMPORTANT: This practice strategy focuses primarily on developing a FAST tremolo. It does not automatically result in an absolutely EVEN tremolo. To produce an even tremolo, use this strategy plus the strategies I describe in my four-part technique tip, *How to Master the Tremolo*.

THE GROUND RULES

Prerequisites

These exercises and practice strategies are suitable for intermediate and advanced guitarists. The player must:

1. Understand how to execute efficient free strokes with very little follow-through motion. Read A Secret to a Relaxed Right Hand: The Pluck-Return Free Stroke.
2. Be able to contact the string with the flesh and fingernail correctly. Read How to Produce a Good Tone, Part 2 of 4.
3. Possess a high level of self-awareness to detect tension in the playing mechanism and have the ability to release it at will.
4. Have experience and skill playing with a metronome. Possess the ability to hear and feel whether or not you are plucking precisely on the metronome tick at high speed. If you need help with this, sit in with The Rhythm Section.

The Ugly Truth: A Guitarist Has Got to Know Their Limitations

Unfortunately, we must face the facts. It may be that we will NEVER be able to play our tremolo as fast as guitarist "X" because of genetics. We may not have the neuromuscular speed and response that they have. But many believe that using a combination of speed bursts and the "Play-Fast-Now" method will help you attain the fastest speed of which YOU are capable. It will help you accomplish that more efficiently and quickly than the old-school slow-to-fast-practice approach.

If you want to know your real current ceiling instead of guessing at it, my **TremoloMASTER Wizard** will measure where your evenness starts to fall apart as the tempo climbs.

Practice With and Without the Metronome

1. Practice the speed burst components without the metronome. By definition, a speed burst is as fast as possible.
2. In the "Play-Fast-Now" component of your practice, practice chaining with the metronome at your target speed. Read or review How to Play Faster on the Classical Guitar: Use the "Play-Fast-Now" Practice Strategy, Part 1 of 2 and How to Play Faster on the Classical Guitar: Use the "Play-Fast-Now" Practice Strategy, Part 2 of 2 before proceeding to practice the tremolo.

Right-Hand Finger Positioning

Align the right-hand fingers with the string, especially when you tremolo the second string. The "a-m-i" fingers should be equidistant and as close to the string as possible.

Right-Hand Positioning

When you tremolo the second string and find yourself accidentally hitting the 3rd string, adjust your hand position. Move the hand closer to the floor or arch the wrist so that the fingers pull slightly more upward.

Speed Bursts

Speed bursts are great for developing fast but relaxed finger movements. A speed burst will not be a speed burst if your muscles are tense or if you *try* to play fast. A speed burst should be a reflex, not a conscious effort. Do not try; let it happen. Some teachers recommend having a conversation with yourself as you practice speed bursts to distract your brain's analytical and competitive regions. This approach might help cultivate the movements to take place as reflexes instead of conscious effort.

Hear It and then Play It.

Do not mindlessly repeat a speed burst over and over. First, hear the fast speed burst in your head or vocalize it. Then execute.

What's wrong with the old-school method of starting at a slow speed and, over several months, gradually increasing the tempo?

Again, I refer you to the technique tips on the "Play-Fast-Now" practice strategy. But briefly, gradually speeding up the metronome and consciously trying to play faster tends to build up tension in the playing mechanism as you increase the speed. You hit a barrier you cannot get past. Also, for the neuro-muscular system, slow practice has little in common with playing at your target fast speed. Using speed bursts and practicing at your target tempo early in the learning process promotes a relaxed playing mechanism.

However, the old-school strategy is very helpful for developing finger independence to play the tremolo rhythmically evenly. See my 4-part technique tip in the Subscribers Portal on my website on *How to Master the Tremolo*.

HERE IS HOW TO DO IT. WATCH ME DEMONSTRATE THE PROCESS IN THE FOLLOWING SIX VIDEOS.

Full Disclosure

I heavily edited these videos. The practice session lasted over three hours rather than the 64 minutes I show here.

1. I practiced many more repetitions of each exercise than I show in the video.
2. I took MANY breaks between the repetitions of each exercise.
3. I made many more mistakes than I show in the video. I hit the wrong strings and did not always stay on the metronome ticks. However, I analyzed the causes of the mistakes and corrected the errors.

DO NOT WATCH ALL SIX VIDEOS IN ONE SITTING. IT IS TOO MUCH INFORMATION TO ASSIMILATE. WATCH ONE VIDEO A DAY.

The Goal

The pattern is the traditional tremolo: p-a-m-i / p-a-m-i / p-a-m-i/ etc.

The goal I demonstrate in the videos is to play the tremolo pattern on the second string at 168 (the thumb plucks on each tick). I am not recommending that you play a particular piece at this tempo. 168 is a generic speed for a fast tremolo. Although I demonstrate passages from "Recuerdos de la Alhambra" in the videos, I prefer to play that piece slower, around 144-152. Again, 168 is for demonstration purposes.

The Procedure

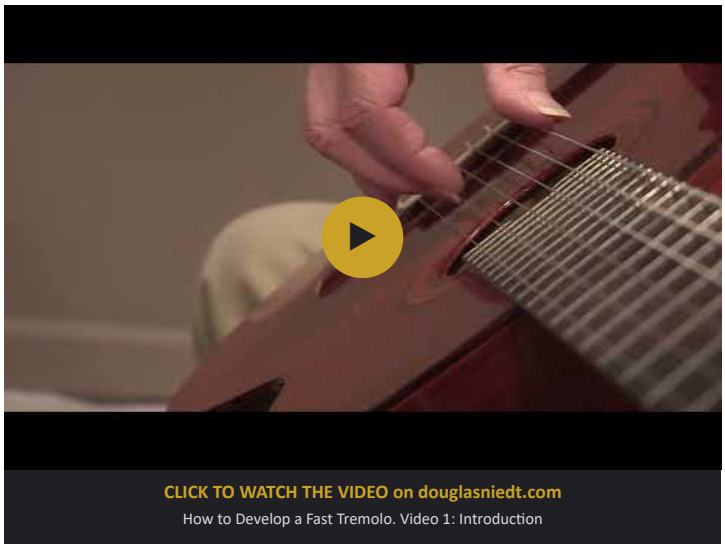
Before we begin, warm up the right-hand fingers.

Practice some scales at slow to moderate speeds for 5-15 minutes using "im," "ma," and "ia." When the fingers play scales, they play on all the strings in all areas of the neck. The fingers learn to adjust their touch to multiple changes of string tension which they will need to do when playing the tremolo.

Watch Video #1 (Introduction) for an overview of how to begin.

★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon with the arrows at the bottom on the far right:

How to Develop a Fast Tremolo. Video 1: Introduction.



First, we practice speed bursts.

Here are the two-note speed bursts we can extract from the "p-a-m-i" tremolo pattern. Example #1:

Tremolo Pattern:
p a m i - p a m i

2-Note Speed Bursts
p a m i - p a m i
p a m i - p a m i
p a m i - p a m i
p a m i - p a m i

So, from the standard p-a-m-i / p-a-m-i tremolo, we should practice these 2-note speed bursts:

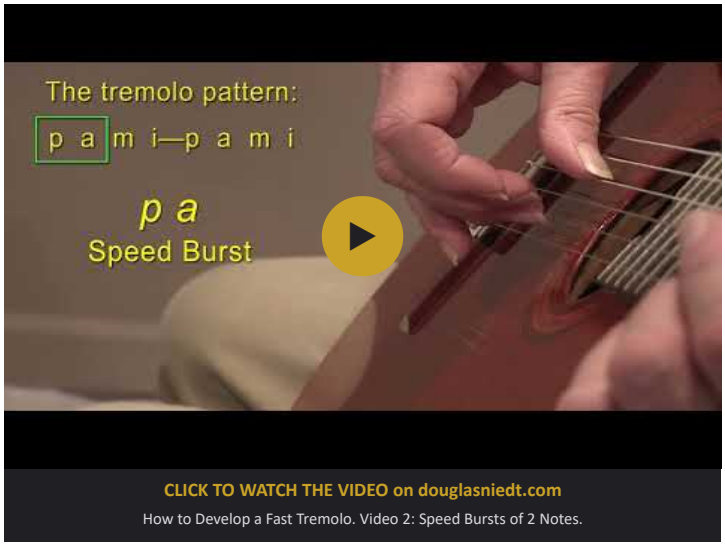
1. p-a

2. a-m
3. m-i
4. i-p

Watch me demonstrate how to practice these speed bursts in Video #2.

★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon with the arrows at the bottom on the far right:

How to Develop a Fast Tremolo. Video 2: Speed Bursts of 2 Notes.



Here are the three-note speed bursts. Example #2:

Tremolo Pattern:
p a m i - p a m i

3-Note Speed Bursts

p a m i - p a m i
p a m i - p a m i
p a m i - p a m i
p a m i - p a m i

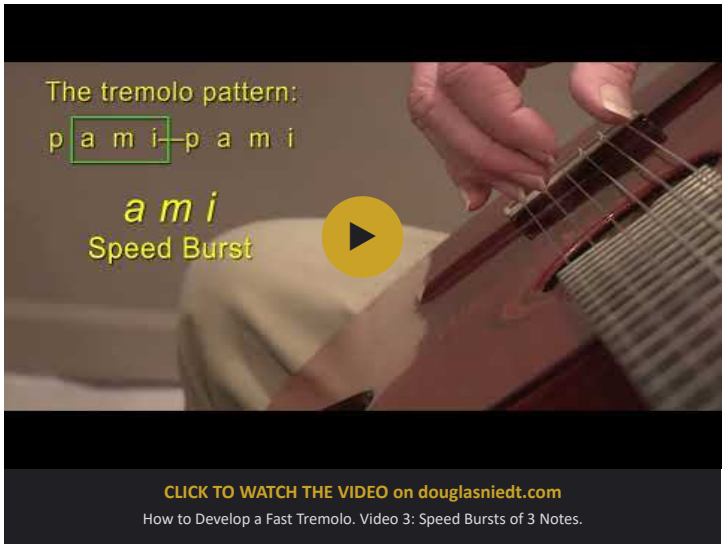
So, from the standard p-a-m-i / p-a-m-i tremolo, we should practice these 3-note speed bursts:

1. p-a-m
2. a-m-i
3. m-i-p
4. i-p-a

Watch me demonstrate how to practice these speed bursts in Video #3.

★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon with the arrows at the bottom on the far right:

How to Develop a Fast Tremolo. Video 3: Speed Bursts of 3 Notes.



And here are the four-note speed bursts. Example #3:

Tremolo Pattern:
p a m i - p a m i

4-Note Speed Bursts
p a m i - p a m i
p a m i - p a m i
p a m i - p a m i
p a m i - p a m i

So, from the standard p-a-m-i / p-a-m-i tremolo, we should practice these 4-note speed bursts:

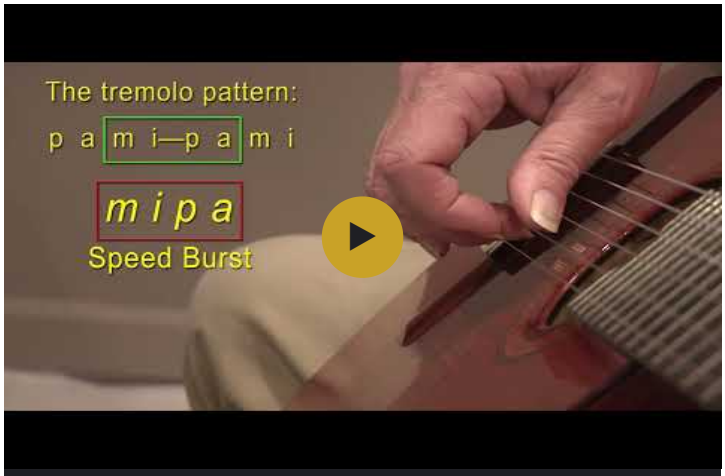
1. p-a-m-i
2. a-m-i-p
3. m-i-p-a
4. i-p-a-m

By the way, we will not always play the bursts in the order shown. In fact, we can gain many benefits by practicing them in *reverse order*.

Watch me demonstrate how to practice 4-note speed bursts in Video #4.

★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon with the arrows at the bottom on the far right:

How to Develop a Fast Tremolo. Video 4: Speed Bursts of 4 Notes.



CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

How to Develop a Fast Tremolo. Video 4: Speed Bursts of 4 Notes.

Next, we use the "Play-Fast-Now" strategy to practice chaining.

Here are the possible five-note chains from the "p-a-m-i" tremolo pattern. Example #4:

Tremolo Pattern:
p a m i - p a m i

5-Note Chains

p a m i - p a m i
p a m i - p a m i
p a m i - p a m i
p a m i - p a m i

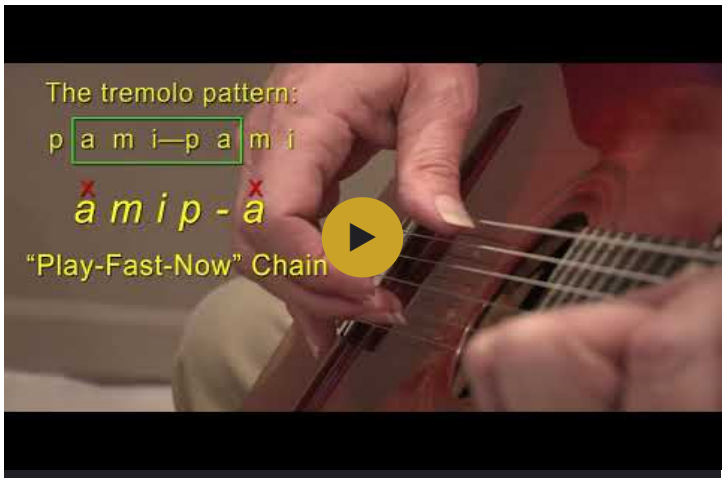
You may wonder, "Why practice all five chains? Why not save time and only practice the "p-a-m-i-p" chain? After all, that is the tremolo pattern we are trying to learn." You could do that, but I find that also practicing the other chains produces even more significant improvement in finger independence, speed, evenness, and awareness.

Once again, we will not always play the bursts in the order shown. In fact, we can gain many benefits by practicing them in reverse order.

Watch me demonstrate how to use the "Play-Fast-Now" strategy to practice these chains in Video #5.

★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon with the arrows at the bottom on the far right:

How to Develop a Fast Tremolo. Video 5: Chains of 5 Notes.



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How to Develop a Fast Tremolo. Video 5: Chains of 5 Notes.

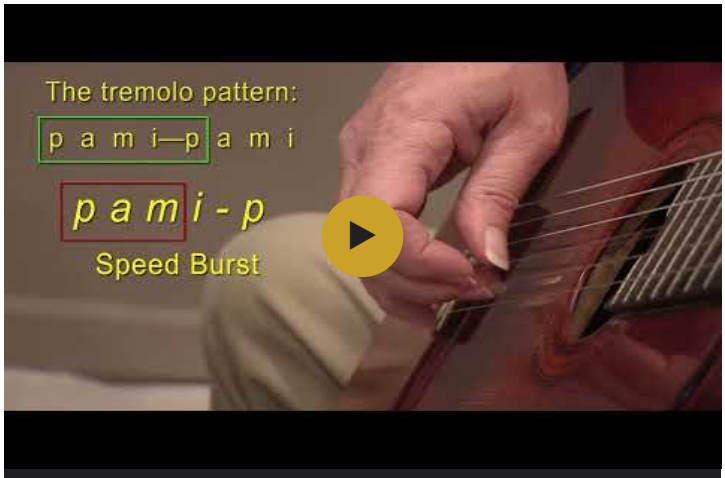
Finally, using the "Play-Fast-Now" strategy, we can practice the "p-a-m-i" tremolo pattern in multiple and continuous chains.

The difficulty with playing multiple and continuous chains is to maintain effortless and relaxed finger movements. But the procedure of practicing effortless speed bursts and short chains teaches the hand to stay relaxed. As we become more fluent with longer chains, we can begin practicing passages from a tremolo piece we wish to master.

Watch me demonstrate how to use the "Play-Fast-Now" strategy to play multiple and continuous chains in Video #6.

★ BE SURE TO WATCH ON FULL SCREEN. Click on the icon with the arrows at the bottom on the far right:

How to Develop a Fast Tremolo. Video 6: Multiple and Continuous Chains.



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How to Develop a Fast Tremolo. Video 6: Multiple and Continuous Chains.

Mix It Up: The Variables

1. Practice on the 1st or 2nd string. The 1st string is MUCH easier. But the 2nd string requires more precision and therefore provides extra benefits. String tension is a huge factor to the fingers. They must adjust their touch as we fret different notes or shift the tremolo to another string.
2. Practice on open strings or fretted notes. In general, it is easier to play the open strings. Playing higher up the neck requires a more precise touch. Again, the fingers must adjust their touch as we fret different notes or shift the tremolo to another string.
3. The thumb can play the same string as the fingers or a different string. Playing on the same string makes it easier to hear and feel how fast and evenly you are playing. In a 3-note or 4-note burst, it is easier to hear whether it is rhythmically even. I find that the further away the thumb is from the fingers, the more difficult it is to play, which is an excellent reason to practice it that way.
4. Before playing a speed burst, you can pre-plant the first finger or not. Ultimately, in the full tremolo at high speed, you will not have the opportunity to pre-plant. However, it can be helpful to pre-plant in the early stages of learning. It also allows the player the opportunity to check that the flesh-nail contact is perfect.
5. When practicing speed bursts that do not involve the thumb, you can plant the thumb on a string or leave it hovering above the strings.
6. We can practice random notes or use chords from an actual tremolo piece.
7. When we decide to plant the thumb on a string for stability, do not always plant it on the same string. Plant it on different strings, increasing and decreasing the distance between the thumb and the "a-m-i" fingers. I find that the further the thumb is from the fingers, the more difficult it is to play.
8. When practicing chains with the metronome, sometimes it can be helpful to count out loud. But other times, it might be easier to hear whether you are precisely in sync with the beat if you do not count out loud.
9. If we fail to expand a five-note chain into multiple chains at the target speed, it can be helpful to slow down a few notches until we achieve success. Then, try the target speed again. Do not ramp up the speed notch-by-notch from a slow tempo to the target tempo. Again, study the "Play-Fast-Now" practice strategy to understand why.

Success and Failure:

We will continually build a chain, break it down into its component parts, and reassemble it.

We will:

1. Break the chain ("p-a-m-i-p ") into its component parts.
2. Practice each component as a 2-note speed burst. If it fails, analyze the problem. For example, before playing the first note, the next finger must already prepare itself as close to the string as possible for speed and accuracy.
3. Add a note to make a 3-note burst.
4. If we fail, analyze the problem, and break it down again into a 2-note burst.
5. Try the 3-note burst again.
6. Move on to the next 2-note and 3-note bursts.
7. Take frequent breaks.
8. We must constantly analyze what we are doing right and what we are doing wrong.
9. Add a note to make a 4-note speed burst.
10. If it fails, analyze the problem, and deconstruct the burst into its components. In other words, relearn the 2-note or 3-note bursts.
11. Once we build the 4-note speed bursts, we add a note to construct our first chain of five notes.
12. We set our metronome at our target speed (mine is 168).

13. If the 5-note chain fails, analyze the problem, and tear it apart into speed bursts as needed to fix the problem. Reconstruct it and try it again as a chain.
14. Once you can successfully play a single 5-note chain at the target speed, try playing the chain twice. Analyze, tear it apart, and put it back together.
15. Continue to add repetitions of the chain until it is continuous.

How do you know whether the chain actually succeeded?

At 168, you cannot hear it. Everything above depends on judging whether a burst or a chain came out even — and at speed, your ears will tell you it was fine when it was not. Record the chain and run it through my **TremoloMASTER Wizard**. It measures every note to the millisecond and shows you which one in the group is dragging or rushing, and which finger is coming out louder than the rest. That is your pass or fail, and it is not a matter of opinion.

Because it keeps every recording you send it, you can also watch your evenness hold — or not — as you push the target tempo up over the following weeks.

It's free, and it runs on a Mac or Windows computer (phones and tablets can't upload audio).

Analyze my tremolo →