

Warming Up the Mind

We're all familiar with daily warm-up exercises: we do long tones, scales, arpeggios, chords or whatever on our instruments to get the muscles in shape to play. Proper warm-ups can help you play with better sound, technique, and endurance.

But what about warming up our minds? We often get the physical skills ready but leave our minds behind. With a good mental warm-up to accompany the instrumental one, you're ready to create some interesting improvisation ideas.

Getting in SHAPE

Here are a few tips on mental warm-ups to help you use SHAPE more effectively. Remember to take mental warm-ups at the right pace: don't push too hard, and don't lose focus.

- Get yourself in a state of relaxed concentration. Closing your eyes and deep-breathing can be helpful.
- Listen to good solos – imagine playing them or changing a few of the notes to your own.
- As you do your physical warm-ups, let your mind start toying with new directions and approaches. For example, as you hold out long tones, visualize other musical shapes you could play. As you play scale or arpeggio warm-ups, imagine the kinds of rhythmic mayhem you could create with them.
- Create new 3-note or 4-note patterns. Take it slow; visualize each note and interval clearly in the original motif, then carefully transpose them to the new sequences. Chord instruments can usually tackle tougher patterns, as horn players also have to focus on sometimes unrelated fingerings.
- Push the envelope with flexible scales, either with your instrument or with virtual practice. Go gradually from medium eighth-notes to faster 8ths to eighth-note triplets. Keep your sense of SHAPE clear and focused.
- Listen to a few choruses of the background accompaniment and hum some ideas before you actually start playing solos.
- To warm up on rhythms, improvise in a narrow pitch range and work on consecutive offbeat quarters and halves, triplet combinations with rests, slower-to-faster rhythms, faster-to-slower rhythms, etc.