



# CELLO

## The Yellow Sheet—Aphorisms for Cellists

by David Littrell

According to legend among my students, I wrote a list of ideas at midnight in the depths of my lair. Forthwith each student received a copy on yellow paper to help them retain key principles of cello playing and intelligent practice. The students and I fondly (!) refer to this list as “the yellow sheet.” I ask them to recount what this ray of sunshine in their lives tells them about specific technical problems or practice habits they should follow. I should hope that the aphorisms below are a small portion of my base of knowledge, but these concise sayings are the ones I use most frequently.

Some of the ideas I have used habitually in my cello teaching come from teachers with whom I never studied on a regular basis. I derived many of these ideas from Phyllis Young at the University of Texas at Austin String Project and from reading her books. A wealth of knowledge came from Margaret Rowell and Irene Sharp, teachers at a week-long seminar at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro in 1983. When we teach, we inevitably bring our own teaching style and personality into the studio. I can no longer make a distinction between what I learned from these three women and which of these ideas have melded with my own.

The text after the aphorism in boldface is a brief explanation found on the yellow sheet to jog the student’s memory during home practice. Usually one explanation at length will suffice for a student to understand these principles, but remembering to put them into action is another story. These ideas are parceled out over time as they become appropriate to the age and readiness of the student.

### **Slow is good.**

Practice new, difficult material slowly enough to have a high success rate. Your muscles need “time to think.” Stumbling because of a fast tempo simply reinforces your mistakes; you’ll learn how to play poorly very well!

A metronome is good. Increase the tempo one notch at a time to learn to play

a passage, going from slowly to a tempo.

### **Go from the known to the unknown.**

Play pitches or a series of pitches in first and fourth positions only, where you know how to locate the pitches. Transfer the series of pitches you hear to thumb position, to fifth–seventh positions, etc.

### **Cello playing is just one note after another.**

Any piece is really a long series of pairs of notes linked together in a chain. If the chain is broken — incorrect pitch, rhythm, etc. between the pairs or other small groups of notes — the piece doesn’t hold together.

### **When shifting, don’t be a jerk.**

Shift as slowly as possible, but still be on time.

### **Grapefruit hand.** (left hand)

Left hand holds a grapefruit for good finger spacing.

### **Porcupine under the left arm.**

The left arm and elbow should not sag.

### **Pay attention to both thumbs**

- Curved right thumb, touches bow on side of tip
- Left thumb rather straight, but loose
- Left thumb behind second finger, even in extensions

### **Half-note system**

In a new, difficult passage, eliminate printed rhythm, bowings, but never fingerings. Get the series of pitches and their fingerboard locations firmly in your ear and muscles. Then add the bowings and rhythms.

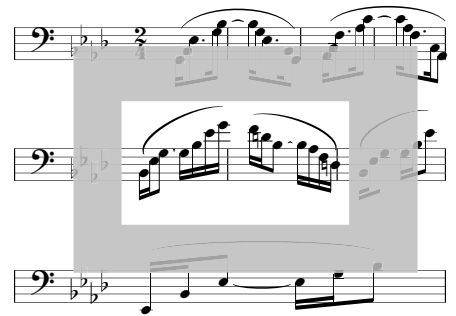
### **Five-note window**

Play notes 1 through 5, 2-6, 3-7, etc., in a difficult passage with correct bow direction. Add-a-note: Play first note, notes 1-2, notes 1-2-3, etc., through the difficult passage.

“**Windows**” — the portion to practice can be any length.

Similar to five-note window. The window

can be any size as to number of notes/measures/lines. Move the “window” to next difficult section. (Fold a paper in half and cut a rectangular hole. Or use post-it notes to cover up the notes before and after the “window.”)



### **Low High High Low :**

Good for any problematic shift, no matter how narrow or wide the interval. Repeat many times with various bowings and rhythms.

**Printed bowings and fingerings are the law** until [1] your teacher provides alternatives; or [2] you are advanced enough to make these decisions.

Following fingerings and bowings is part of your training and is essential when you play in an orchestra or chamber music ensemble. There is certainly more than one way to finger and bow any passage, but using an expert’s suggestions helps you to learn the logic behind fingering and bowing.

### **“Page 27” and “Page 15” are verbs.**

You need to “page 27” (rhythmic and bowing variations) or “page 15” (bowing patterns) difficult passages. See Dr. Littrell’s scale book.

### **To increase tone production and emotional content:**

- Play a passage at a *mp* level. Repeat it at a *mf* level, then *f*, then *ff*.
- Substitute numbers for dynamic levels (2,5,7,9). Play the passage at level 3, now at 8, now at 6, etc.

What do you need to change with your bow and right arm to produce these

changes?

**There is no such thing as being “a little out of tune.”**

You must hit the bull’s eye. Being “a little out of tune” and “a lot out of tune” is the same thing. Especially when you shift and extend, you must practice hitting the center of the pitch. It’s a bad habit to wiggle and slide the finger around to find the pitch — and very annoying to the listener.

**Truck test; dogleg; armchair** (right arm)

Basic posture at the frog on the D string is described as a truck traveling on a flat highway (your forearm) and then the highway curves and goes downhill at your wrist.

A dogleg is formed at the wrist.

When you sit in an armchair, your hand hangs naturally from the wrist and the fingers are spaced in a relaxed manner. This is also the basic position of your hand in relation to the wrist and your finger spacing when holding the bow.

**Elephant “ploppy” fingers** to cling to the fingerboard.

**Play on fingertips with curved fingers** in order to play fast.

Left hand fingers that feel as heavy as an elephant, caused by the back and arm pulling back, provide the weight needed to hold down the strings on a cello and bass. Collapsed joints are like a collapsed arch; the weight is lost and you can’t play fast passages with any speed or clarity.

**No gutter balls; stay in your lane; narrow mountain path** (bow track)

A bow at a right angle has a much better chance of staying in the same path (bowing lane, highway lane, narrow path with a cliff on both sides) than if it is not at a 90° angle. Achieving this is a long, deliberate process.

Wipe off the strings and then strive to leave no more than a ¼" of a rosin track when your eyes are closed.

**Don’t practice stopping.**

Stopping every time you make a mistake, even for a moment, is a bad habit. Of

course, you need to stop and fix mistakes, but you also need to practice without allowing yourself the luxury of stopping. Stopping is a habit that creeps up on you until you no longer realize that you’re doing it. It is annoying to the listener, who is usually the teacher.

**Strength through flexibility.**

An airplane wing and a tree branch are designed to bend, yet they are strong. Our joints and limbs will have strength only if they are loose and flexible, not if they are stiff from cramped muscles and postures.

**A pencil is your friend in the practice room.**

*David Littrell currently serves as President of ASTA WITH NSOA He is a University Distinguished Professor at Kansas State University where he teaches cello and conducts the orchestra. Dr. Littrell edited the two volumes of ASTA’s String Syllabus, and is currently compiling and editing Volume 2 of Teaching Music Through Performance in Orchestra for GIA Publications. ‡*