



VIOLIN

Teaching and Troubleshooting Shifting on Violin

by Katie Gustafson

The perfect shift should be like a ninja: smooth, quick and undetectable. It is one of the many techniques on the violin that must sound effortless, or it will be a distraction from the actual music. Portamento shifts are an exception, where the sound of the shift contributes to the style of the music. But in most cases, the mechanics should be hidden.

There are a few key elements that build into successful shifting and must be carefully maintained as the student attempts more and more difficult shifts.

1. Bring your thumb with you!

The first is to be mindful of the thumb. The thumb must always travel with the shifting finger. A common beginner mistake is to let the thumb trail far behind the first finger during a shift, which distorts the hand position. If your student is having trouble bringing the thumb along, they might be squeezing the neck of the violin with their thumb. Many students unintentionally do this, but shifting is the perfect opportunity to address it, because it is virtually impossible to do a good shift while squeezing. Try having your student slide up and down the fingerboard with a kleenex wrapped around the neck of the violin. (“Polish your fingerboard!”) You can also ask them to slide their fingers up and down the fingerboard while holding their thumb away from the neck. (“Pretend you don’t have a thumb! Can your fingers slide on their own?”) You can even address it while working on other things. Have them pause in the middle of a scale or other exercise to tap their thumb on the side of the fingerboard to release the tension. (“Wiggle out the tension!”) Once your student trains their thumb to rest more gently against the neck, they should be able to slide a bit easier.

2. Glide the finger lightly.

The second important element of shifting is finger weight. Your finger applies weight while playing a note. It must release the weight and glide lightly while shifting, and then reaply weight when it arrives in the new position. If your student has trouble releasing their finger to slide, they will hear

a slurpy, glissando-style shift. First, check to make sure a squeezing thumb isn’t the culprit. If you’ve ruled that out, show them a slow-motion shift so that they can watch how your finger lifts away from the fingerboard, and gently trails along the string while it slides. Try also describing it with imagery. “Float your finger across the string like styrofoam floats on top of water.” Or, “Trail your finger across the string as if you were tickling it.”

Some students have the opposite problem, lifting their finger completely off the string and jumping to the new position, so that the open string sounds in the middle of the shift. Encourage them to maintain light contact with the string. Use descriptive words that reinforce your goal, like gentle, light, soft or slippery. (“Your string is slippery like ice—have your fingers go ice-skating!”) Or “Be gentle with your fingers, so they slide easily.”)

3. Swing the elbow.

When students start shifting higher than third position, the swing of the elbow becomes necessary to get around body of the violin. Some students find it a bit awkward at first, so try the following teaching process: start by practicing the motion without holding the violin. Hold up your left hand as though it were playing in first position, and demonstrate for your student how in first position, the palm faces your eyes. Then, show them how the elbow swings toward the belly button when doing a large shift, pulling your hand toward your face, and turning it so it faces over your left shoulder. Then swing your elbow back, so that your hand is back in “first position.” Have the student do this with you, and repeat until they can do it easily. Next, show your student how the shift will look on the instrument. Help them identify how your left-hand position changes when you shift up into fifth position. I like to highlight three important elements: first, the left thumb slides down from its perch and rests under the neck. Second, the base of the palm rests against the body of the violin, and third, the lowest knuckle of the pointer finger pulls slightly away from the

side of the neck. Students can then try to build this new hand position on their own violin, and finally try shifting between first and fifth position. Encourage patience, as it often takes many tries to get comfortable with all of the details.

Finally, a few thoughts on practicing shifting. First, make sure your student understands that playing a shift correctly once is only the start of their work. Many repetitions will be necessary in order for good shifting technique to become *reliable*. In whatever exercises you use to practice shifting or position work, encourage your student to repeat the shifts many times. Second, I often ask students to do their shifts in slow motion until they gain more confidence. For example, when students first learn third position, method books often provide easy one or two-line exercises with a few shifts between first and third position. I sometimes have them play along at a steady pace until they arrive at a shift, where I ask them to pause, shift slowly and mindfully, and then continue on at their original pace. This gives them time to watch their form and accuracy without feeling hurried. This stepping stone can be very useful and is often only needed for a short time. As the shifting becomes more secure, speeding the tempo back up is usually an easy transition.

If you are looking for good resources to use for position work, *Essential Techniques for Strings* provides a good introduction to third position, and *Advanced Techniques for Strings* provides an introduction to higher positions, as well as shifting practice in all positions. Both of these are produced as part of the *Essential Elements* method book series that is commonly used in beginner orchestra. For a more thorough and rigorous study, Harvey S. Whistler’s *Introducing the Positions for Violin* is a popular choice. Any of these will serve you well as you work on shifting with your students.

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