

# FUNDAMENTALS OF PLAYING VIOLIN AND VIOLA

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## HOLDING THE VIOLIN

When we hold the violin or viola, it should rest easily on the shoulder and only holds the instrument with the chin or shoulder. Avoid gripping the instrument tightly with the chin and shoulder. This could cause discomfort around the jaw, chin, and shoulder which could lead to discomfort in the forearm and thumb.

### The Left Arm

The right side of the LEFT arm/hand should be straight.

The lower back side of the hand going down the wrist/arm should also be straight.

If you align your fingers, slightly above the A string, the arm/elbow will be like a pendulum swinging left and right, causing your fingers to align on rest of the strings.

### The Left Shoulder

When resting the violin on the shoulder, the top of the instrument will face up and slightly tilt to the right. At times, the angle will change depending on the string you are playing on.



*Figure 1 Straight Arm and Wrist. Elbow moves to set the hand correctly for each string change. Hilary Hahn is a world class violinist performing recitals and soloing with major professional orchestras.*

*Check out Hilary Hahn's website at <http://hilaryhahn.com/>*

## BOW HOLD

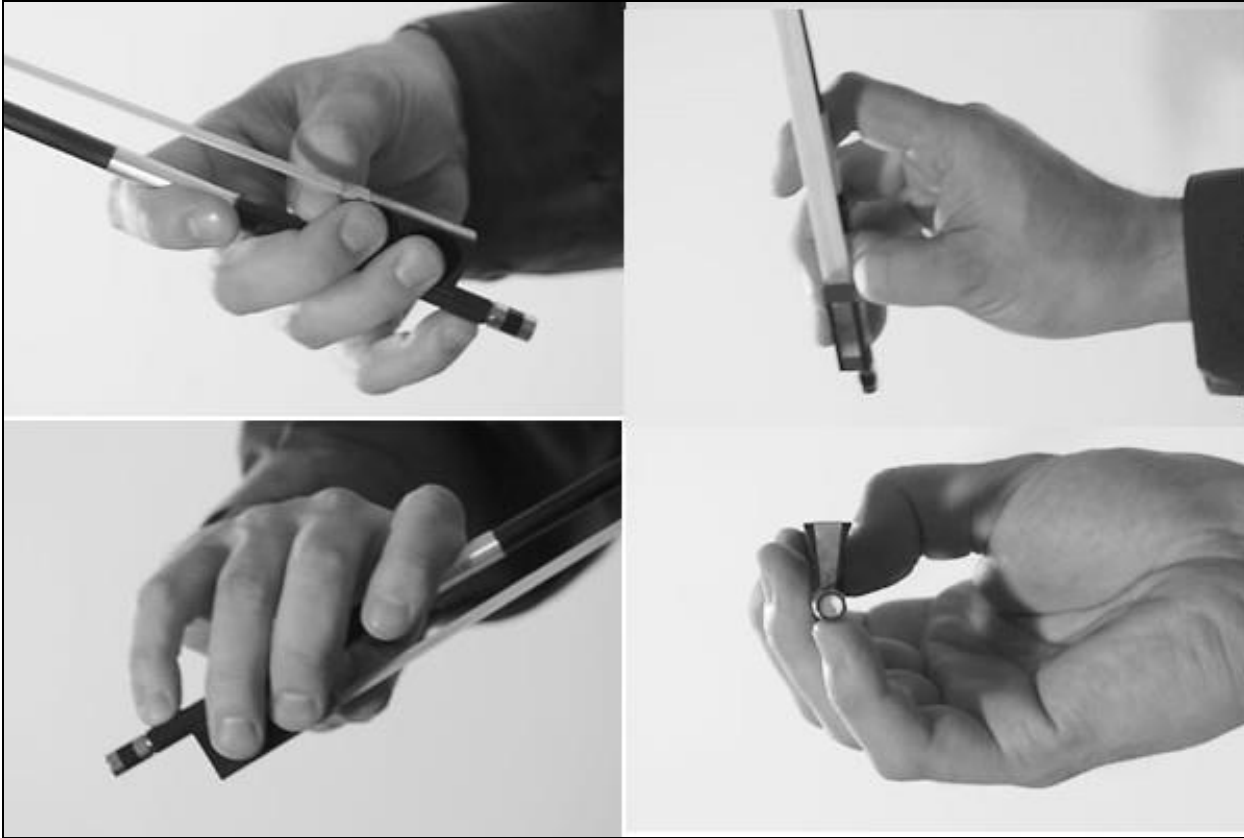
There are slight variations of bow holds which teachers may offer. The bow hold will be a work in progress throughout your life.

Look at *figure 2*. Notice how the thumb is bent like a letter J and the index finger is relaxed.

In the natural position with the bow placed at slightly above the middle on A string, the pinky should be flexible, curved, and relaxed. The pinky can rest either on the side or on top of the stick. With most people, the pinky does not rest on the screw. This is because the pinky is a shorter finger and would require stretching the pinky out to reach the screw.

The top of the hand should be slightly curved, but mostly flat.

The bow hold displayed in *figure 2* below is only demonstrating the hand portion of the hold. Normally, the wrist should not be bent inward as the picture shows. The wrist should be slightly bent in the opposite direction.



*Figure 2 Bow Hold - Curved pinky. Thumb shaped like the letter J. (Picture borrowed from Stringscool.com website)*

## **PLAYING WITH INSTRUMENT AND BOW TOGETHER**

When your instructor finds that you are ready to use both the bow and violin together, the angle of the bow, instrument, and left arm will change elevations for each string change. The angle of the bridge allows us to pull the bow across individual strings with ease. However, we can make the bow stroke easier by slightly tilting the instrument for better access to the string. We play each string in the highest priority position while avoiding compromising the performer's comfort.

### Demonstrating with only the instrument

When playing on the **G** string, the instrument will be angled slightly more to the right.

When playing on the **E** string, the instrument will be less angled to the right, but not quite parallel to the floor. See Figure 1.

### Demonstrating with the instrument and bow together

The bow will move in the opposite direction of the instrument's angle. The elbow will swing more under to the right when fingering on the G string. When fingering on the E string, the elbow will swing to about center pointing down to the floor.

The goal is to use the right amount of tension without discomfort or pain when we play the instrument. It is very easy to tense up if we are not making ourselves aware of the tension in our body.

## **PLAYING WITH DISCOMFORT OR PAIN**

This section is mainly giving ideas of potential reasons why you may be experiencing issues with your performance related to discomfort, tension, and/or anxiety.

This is not intended to replace the opinion, give medical advice, or to be a final decision as to why you are experiencing pain or discomfort. Please consult your instructor, or if you feel your health is at risk, seek medical help immediately.

The goal is to play with the right amount of tension when we play the instrument. It is very easy to tense up if we are not aware of what our body is doing while we are playing.

## **Past Injuries**

If you have a history of a past injury, it would be best to first talk with your doctor and instructor to gain the best information regarding your personal injury. Take it seriously. Weather, questionable posture, anxiety, and tension can also contribute to more issues with your discomfort.

## **Body Tension**

Tension is one of the major causes of discomfort related to playing the instrument. Many times, when we feel the music and/or are experiencing an intense passage in the music, we project this feeling using our body. In many cases, we tense up by gripping or flexing our muscles more than we need. Consider the following:

### Holding the Instrument

Leave the instrument down for now. Breathe from the diaphragm slowly and fully. The shoulders (blade) should not be lifting up if you are breathing from the diaphragm.

- Close your eyes and assess while releasing your tension on your face, jaw, neck, shoulders, arms, fingers.
- Raise your left hand as if you were going to gently hold an apple on a tree at the level of the neck of the instrument. Slowly lower and raise your arm focusing on releasing tension in the shoulder and arm. If you feel tension, place your arm back into rest on your side and repeat the process.

Pick up your instrument and rest your instrument on your left shoulder. Turn your head slightly to the left and leave the chin barely touching the chin rest in a relax state. Keep your left hand on the instrument at all times. Ensure your shoulder, arm, and hand are very relaxed. Slowly, lower and raise the instrument with your left arm focusing on releasing tension in the shoulder and arm. Avoid raising your shoulder blade.

If you are ready to proceed, you may start using the bow with the next steps.

## Bowing on the Violin

Some individuals do not require a warm up. However, if you find yourself prone to pain or discomfort, it may be recommended to start with a warm up routine. Everything that was applied for holding the instrument, should continue through your warm up. Talk with your instructor to gain more feedback about an appropriate warm up for your skill level.

A few key points to consider for a quality warm up:

### *Intelligent Warm Up*

Have a purpose you wish to master during your warm ups. The warm up should help with a skill that needs development and/or helping with tension.

### *Slow Warm Up*

If you have a tendency of rushing or slowing down between bow or finger changes, consider using a metronome to help keep your warm-up passages steady.

### *Developing a Critical Ear*

Developing your ear will be a constant challenge. Remove vibrato for a moment to find the core pitch. Use your open strings to help tune your note using intervals. If you are practicing double stops, consider a third string to have a static note that you can check your tuning. Do not use double stops if you have not had instructions on how to play double stops.

### *Find Your Focused State*

Every motion you make is unique. We may have not given ourselves the time to be aware of each motion we make for each note played. Take the time to review your tension level related to your bowing. Like driving a car, we first need to understand and experience the muscle memory where all the pedals, switches, and gauges are located before we can truly start utilizing the capability of the vehicle.

## **Anxiety**

In many ways, anxiety is evaluating and comparing ourselves while setting an expectation of what we are or will be when we perform. It is very easy to slip into a heart racing, sweaty palms, adrenalin driven experience. It's okay and normal to feel this experience. This is known as "fight or flight".

Many of the points offered by the Body Tension section assist with Anxiety. However, if you struggle with performance anxiety, consider reviewing the Bullet Proof Musician website at <http://www.bulletproofmusician.com>. The site offers a methodical approach to dealing with stresses on stage and in other similar circumstances.

## **Questionable Posture**

Past Inquiries, Tension, and Anxiety can all lead to questionable posture. Consider talking with an instructor to re-evaluate your posture to ensure you are holding the instrument and bow correctly.