

Troubleshooting for Beginning Strings

“It hurts when I hold the violin/viola.” A sponge or shoulder rest under the instrument should help. Tilt your head up, rest the instrument on your shoulder, level with the ground. (Be sure it covers your shoulder.) Bring your jaw down into the chinrest. Avoid twisting your neck, and don't use your chin. The end button should point into your neck, but not touch. If it hurts your collarbone, try angling the scroll up or placing your sponge or shoulder rest closer to the edge of the instrument. If the chinrest hurts, it can be replaced with a different one.

“I'm getting a blister from plucking!” Don't pluck too hard. Pull diagonally to the string with the side of your finger, like you're pointing away from yourself. Try switching fingers, use the middle finger. You can also try using a band-aid. You'll switch to the bow soon, so this won't last long!

“It doesn't sound right when I put my finger on the string.” Be sure to press the string all the way down to the fingerboard. Use the tip of the finger, keeping the knuckles rounded out, don't cave in. Use weight, try not to squeeze with the rest of the hand.

“The bow doesn't make a sound on the string.” Be sure the bow is tightened enough by turning the screw clockwise. The hair should look like a flat ribbon, and should be roughly a pinky's width from the stick. Don't over-tighten, this can damage the bow. The stick should still be curved in slightly. Apply rosin by rubbing it vigorously on the bow hair. New rosin often doesn't work on new bow hair, so borrow someone else's until the rosin starts to look cloudy. (Don't scratch it, despite what they say at the store.) It will become a white powder as it goes on the bow.

“It sounds scratchy when I play with the bow.” If it looks like your bow is smoking when you play, you may have too much rosin. Otherwise, pull the bow faster and don't press. Check your bow hold, almost let go. Be sure the bow is perpendicular to the strings and is centered over the holes.

“I hit two strings at the same time with the bow.” Raise or lower the frog of the bow until it is only on the string you want. Violins and violas, be sure your elbow is level with the frog of the bow, then just open and close the elbow. Don't swing from the shoulder. Practice playing open strings until you can keep the bow at the right level for each string. (4 strings = 4 levels) Can you play with your eyes closed? If you still have trouble, have your teacher try your instrument; there may be a problem with the bridge.

“I can't reach 4th finger.” (Violin and viola.) Be sure your wrist is straight. Can you lay a ruler from your elbow to the back of your hand? Keep your base knuckles close to the finger-board, make a hook shape with your fingers. (Square knuckles.) Place 4th finger by itself, then place others behind it. Tap fingers in this position to establish a new habit. Do 4th finger drills.