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# BASICS

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## Beginning at the point

Placing the bow on the string at the point, perhaps in a *pianissimo* passage where you have to ‘creep in’ from nothing, and where the slightest ‘juddering’ of the bow on the string might easily be audible, is something that many players readily admit to sometimes finding difficult or nerve-racking.

One simple answer is simply not to think about it and concentrate on the music, so that you do not ‘get in the way’ and the technical action of placing the bow on the string takes care of itself. Sitting with a good, balanced posture, relaxing the shoulders, or making sure that you are not holding your breath, may be all that is necessary to ensure a smooth beginning to a note. However, here are a few simple ways of increasing the feeling of security and safety in placing the bow on the string.

### Practise it

Add to your warm-up a couple of minutes of up-bows at the point. Cover a wide range of different notes, positions and strings:

Example

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The first staff is in treble clef, starting with a double bar line and a repeat sign. It begins with the instruction 'Slow' and '(At the point)'. The first measure contains a quarter note with a bowing symbol 'V' above it. This is followed by a series of notes with 'V' symbols, some with accents. A repeat sign appears after the second measure, with the instruction 'Repeat several times' below it. The staff ends with a double bar line. The second staff is also in treble clef and starts with a double bar line. It contains a series of notes with 'V' symbols above them, indicating up-bows. The notation ends with 'etc.' and a double bar line. The dynamic marking 'pp' is written below the first staff.

Remember to experiment with different amounts of hair, from beginning on the outside edge of the hair (bow tilted towards the fingerboard) to beginning with full hair.

### Experimenting with leverage

One of the factors that may lead to a feeling of precariousness in guiding the bow down on to the string at the point is the fact that you are holding the bow so far away at the frog.

If you hold a pencil as you hold a bow there is a feeling of great control because the end of the pencil is so near to the fingers. You can get a similar feeling of control if you hold the bow in the middle.

#### Exercise 1

Play repeated up-bows at the point, placing the bow on the string from the air and beginning *pianissimo*.

Begin with your hand in the middle of the bow. Feel how you can control the placement of the bow on the string precisely.

Place your hand lower down on the bow, and find the same degree of control that you had before.

Gradually work your way down the bow until you are holding it normally at the frog – with the same comfort in placing the bow on the string at the point as you had when holding it in the middle.

Example

The image shows a single staff of musical notation in treble clef, starting with a double bar line. Above the staff, there are labels for different hand positions: 'Holding bow in middle', 'Lower', 'Lower', 'Lower', 'Lower', and 'Holding bow at frog'. The notation consists of a series of notes with 'V' symbols above them, indicating up-bows. The dynamic marking 'pp' is written below the first note. The staff ends with a double bar line.

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## Exercise 2

Using a normal bow-hold at the frog, play repeated up-bows from the air beginning at the middle of the bow. Gradually move up towards the point:



Example

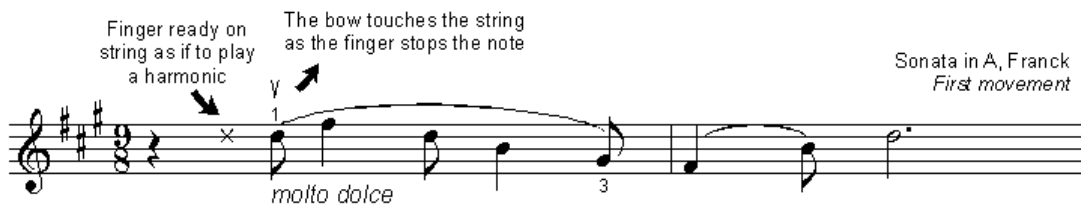
## One action, not two

Rather than first stopping the string with the left finger, and then concentrating on bringing the hair of the bow to the string (i.e. two, separate actions), find how to merge the two actions into one.

Get ready to play by placing the finger on the surface of the string without stopping the note, as though to play a harmonic.

At the same time position the bow just a fraction above the string. To play, lean the finger gently into the string almost at the precise moment that you want the note to start. While concentrating on the left finger let the bow find the string and begin the note.

Pretend that it is the action of the left finger itself that lowers the bow perfectly. Then there is a feeling of the hands working together as one, rather than the feeling of trying to co-ordinate two, separate actions that have nothing to do with each other but which need to happen at the same time. This is like the feeling of playing a vibrato accent at the same time as a bow accent: there is a feeling of the hands working together when it feels as if the vibrato accent is itself the trigger that moves the bow.



Example

## Move the string towards the bow hair

Rather than holding the instrument so that it is absolutely still and fixed in one position – and then trying to get the hair of the bow down on to the unmoving string without the bow bouncing on impact – find a feeling of flow in the body and the violin so that there is the slightest movement towards the bow as it approaches the string. This is a good moment to make sure that you are not holding your breath.

The amount that you move may be so slight as to be invisible, but even so this can again help to create a feeling of 'one action, not two'.

## Release the thumb

Control may be lost if the bow is gripped tightly instead of being *balanced* by the fingers. One important area to watch is the thumb, which should not press up unnecessarily hard into the bow.

Due to the natural principles of leverage, when playing at the heel the thumb can be very light on the bow even in the heaviest *forte*; but playing heavily into the string at the point does require counterpressure from the thumb. A common error is to continue counterpressing when the bow has moved away from the point, which can lead to the thumb losing its flexibility; another is to counterpress even when playing less than very heavily at the point.

Experiment by sitting the bow on the string near the heel. Without moving along the string, press the bow down quite hard into the string. Feel how relaxed the thumb is. Repeat at the point, feeling how the thumb now naturally exerts counterpressure.

Placing the bow on the string at the point, *pianissimo*, concentrate on balancing all the weight of the bow with the little finger, rather than 'holding' the bow, the thumb remaining light and uninvolved.