

STICK TECHNIQUE

**The Essential Guide for
the Modern Drummer**

by Bill Bachman

Edited by Michael Dawson

Cover photos by Rick Malkin

Interior photos by Rick Malkin, Leslie Voorheis, and Sally Somers

Design and layout by Gerald Vitale

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Table of Contents

Foreword and Acknowledgements	4
Section 1: Technique	
Introduction	5
Matched Grip	6
Traditional Grip	10
Free Stroke	12
Alley-Oop	15
Downstrokes, Taps, and Upstrokes	17
Moeller Whip Stroke and Moeller Whip-Stroke Combination	19
Perfect Practice and Building Speed	22
Section 2: Top Twelve Rudiments	
Introduction	24
Rudimental Breakdown	25
Single-Stroke Roll	26
Double-Stroke Roll	28
Triple-Stroke Roll	31
Buzz Roll	33
Paradiddle	34
Six-Stroke Roll	36
Hand-to-Hand Flams	39
Flam Accents	42
Flam Tap	45
Inverted Flam Tap	47
Drag	49
Dragadiddle	51
Section 3: Chops Builders	
Introduction	53
Accents/Taps	54
Diddles and Rolls	56
Trip Stepper	60
Hairta	62
Same-Hand Flam Accent	65
Puh-Duh-Duh	67
Single Five	70
Single Three	72
Accents/Taps: Added and Integrated	74
Double Paradiddle Accent Shifter	76
Paradiddle-Diddle and Extensions	79
Inverted Sticking Patterns With Single-Stroke Fill-Ins	82
Swiss Army Triplet	84
Irish Spring	86
Irish Spring With Accents	88
Bonus Section: Two-Hand Coordination/Independence	
8th-Note Ride	90
16th-Note Ride	92
Triplet-Based Ride	94
Stick Technique Wrap-Up	96

FOREWORD

Welcome to *Stick Technique: The Essential Guide for the Modern Drummer*. The goal of this book is to help you develop hands that are loose, stress free, and ready to play anything that comes to your mind. The book is for everyone who plays with sticks, regardless of whether you're focusing primarily on drumset, orchestral percussion, or the rudimental style of drumming. The book is designed to get you playing essential techniques correctly and as quickly as possible.

Stick Technique is broken up into three main sections: Technique, Top Twelve Rudiments, and Chops Builders. In the Technique section, we'll take an in-depth look at the most practical and essential grips and playing techniques. We'll discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each, as well as why to learn them and when to use them.

The Top Twelve Rudiments section includes the ten rudiments covered in my *Strictly Technique* series in *Modern Drummer* magazine, plus two additional rudiments. All of the essential hand motions you'll need to know are included within these twelve rudiments.

Also from my *Modern Drummer* magazine articles, the Chops Builders section includes exercises that are designed to build great technique while also sneaking in a bit of very useful vocabulary.

Finally, there is a bonus section to build coordination and independence between the hands for drumset applications.

The exercises in the book are easy to figure out so that you can focus on the technique and not the exercise itself. (They may be easy to play, but they're hard to play *perfectly*.) Be sure to extrapolate and perfect any small parts of the exercises that give you trouble. There's no sense working on the whole exercise if each section isn't where it needs to be. You should also memorize the exercises. If they're not engrained in your memory then you haven't practiced them enough to get the real value from each.

Once you've gotten through *Stick Technique* you'll find



Rick Malkin

yourself playing with better sound quality, while expending less energy and remaining injury free. Your technique will be more relaxed, allowing you to play more musically, dynamically, and faster than ever before—and, best of all, you'll never have to think about technique on the gig! Your hands will be ready to play anything, automatically using the technique that offers the path of least resistance so you can concentrate on making music. Practice smart, practice a lot, and have fun doing it!

Bill Bachman

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Section 1: TECHNIQUE

INTRODUCTION

First of all, let's start with a disclaimer: Technique is just a means to an end, and that end is making music without having to think about technique. If you're thinking about technique on the gig, you'll sound that way to the audience. If you're playing from the heart, you'll sound like you're expressing yourself openly—as long as your technique is at a level where the execution (or lack of execution) of your ideas doesn't ruin the experience for the listener. Technique leads to ability, and ability leads to vocabulary. Having more than enough technique, ability, and vocabulary is a good thing, since the more you have, the more you'll be able to draw from when the time is right.

Using proper technique will also prevent injury. Most of the time, drumming-related injuries occur when you work too hard and ask too much of the body. Many drummers hold on to the sticks too tightly and use too much force by playing "through" the drums and cymbals, which often leads to injury and broken equipment. Proper technique will allow you to play loosely and with more velocity, which results in more sound, improved flow, better feel, more endurance, more speed, and *no* injuries.

A lot of drummers ask, "Which technique is best?" The correct answer is any of them—depending on the situation. All too often a certain technique gets accepted as being "better" than another. While this seems to simplify things, it actually limits your options. In this book we're going to look at *all* of the essential techniques that a well-rounded drummer needs to master in order to play well and in the most efficient manner possible.

Along with discussing various grips and fulcrums, in the following chapters we'll dive into the following stroke techniques:

Free stroke (aka full stroke or legato stroke). This loose, rebounding stroke is the foundation of efficient drumming technique. It's used when playing successive strokes at the same stick height and dynamic level.

Alley-oop. This is a wrist/finger combination technique that's used when playing diddles (double strokes) and triple strokes. This technique is necessary at tempos where the wrists can't play multiple-note combinations without tensing up.

Downstroke, tap, and upstroke. Downstrokes and upstrokes are just like free strokes, except that after you hit the drum, the stick heights are modified in order to play subsequent strokes at a different dynamic level. Taps are low free strokes.

Moeller whip stroke. This technique involves playing downstrokes and upstrokes from the forearm when the wrist would otherwise get overworked and stiffen up. The Moeller whip stroke is crucial for playing accent patterns with a smooth and effortless flow, especially at fast tempos.

So, how do you choose when to use a certain technique? The technique you use will be determined by the type of rudiment or pattern being played, the instrument being played, and the tempo. Once the various techniques are mastered, your hands will automatically choose the one that allows you to perform in the most effective and efficient way possible.

The bottom line is that in order to develop a wide vocabulary on the drums, you need to have a lot of techniques at your disposal. Building technique requires thousands of correct repetitions ("perfect practice") in order to train your muscle memory. While there are no shortcuts to developing good technique, the material in this book is designed to help you get there as quickly as possible.

MATCHED GRIP

Matched grip simply means that the hands hold the sticks in a mirror image of one another. There are important variations within matched grip, however, both in terms of the hand angles and fulcrums (pivot points) that are used. The main grip variations are German, French, and American.

German grip involves holding the hands flat and favors wrist use over finger use. French grip involves holding the hands more vertically, with the thumb on top, and favors finger use over wrist use. American grip falls in the middle of German and French in order to utilize the advantages of both.

The common fulcrums for matched grip are between the thumb and the first finger or between the thumb and second finger. The first-finger fulcrum is generally better for speed and finesse at lower stick heights (finger micromanagement), while the second-finger fulcrum is generally better for bigger strokes and for more power (wrist/forearm-driven). Quite often the fulcrum will be located somewhere in-between the two and will adjust automatically according to the demand put on the hands. Each hand position and fulcrum point within the matched grip variations has advantages and disadvantages, so it's good to master each of them in order to be prepared to use the most appropriate technique for a particular situation.

German Grip

German grip is the position where the hands are held flat. Grasp a drumstick between your thumb and first finger. Lightly wrap your other fingers around the stick and set your hand down on a table. That's it! You'll notice that if you keep the wrist relaxed in a natural position, the angle of the stick will be somewhat turned in and the butt end of the stick will jut out a bit to the side of the hand. The sticks will generally form a V at about a 90-degree angle.



German grip

German grip is great for wrist use, downstrokes, and the Moeller whip stroke. It favors wrist use over finger use, since the fingers have a narrower range of motion in this position.



Because the palm of the hand is held directly over the stick in German grip, the fingers can squeeze the stick against the palm to stop the rebound when playing downstrokes. (I'll later refer to this as the "brakes.") German grip is also great for the Moeller whip stroke because the butt end of the stick can protrude past the wrist when the forearm is raised in preparation for the stroke.



One thing to watch out for with German grip is an extra-wide V setup where the sticks are turned in to form an angle greater than 90 degrees.



What *not* to do

This extra-wide position forces you to play with an exaggerated inward wrist rotation and less of the desired up-and-down motion. The up-and-down wrist motion has more power and leverage. Another disadvantage of improper German grip is that the wider the V, the less range of motion you'll have for your fingers.

French Grip

French grip is the position where the hands are held vertically, with the thumb on top and in line with the sticks.



To get into French grip, hold out your hand as though you're going to shake hands with someone, and then add the stick between your thumb and first finger, making sure that the end of the first finger curls upward somewhat so the stick can't roll out. Lightly curl the rest of the fingers underneath. That's it!



With the wrist relaxed in its natural position, the angle of the stick will be somewhat turned out relative to the forearm, and the butt end of the stick will be located at the inside of the wrist. The sticks will generally form a very narrow V at about a 20-degree angle or close to parallel.

French grip favors finger use over wrist use, since the fingers have a wider range of motion.



In French grip, the wrist has a narrower range of motion and relies partially on an outward rotation. French grip is good for free strokes because the "brakes" (palms of the hands) are now unavailable to stop the stick on the rebound. The stick breathes and resonates well when held in this position, which is why French grip is so commonly used when playing timpani or the ride cymbal. It's a great grip to use when you want a loose, wide-open sound from a freely rebounding stick or mallet.

One thing to watch out for when using French grip is an open, claw-looking hand, where the stick turns out excessively relative to the thumb. In this improper position, there's very little control available since the stick isn't stabilized within the fulcrum.



American Grip

American grip is where the hand angle is in between German (flat) and French (vertical). The hands and thumbs are at about a 45-degree angle. With American grip, the first knuckle of the first finger is the highest point of the hand, and the stick is in line with the forearm or turned slightly inward. The sticks will generally form a V at about a 50-degree angle.



American grip is great for almost everything, since the wrists can turn up and down with a wide range of motion, the “brakes” are readily available for downstrokes, the butt end of the sticks won’t hit the underside of the wrists when playing Moeller whip strokes, and the fingers have a relatively wide range of motion. Since the thumb is positioned towards the topside of the stick, it can open up a bit to be more on the side (like in German grip) when the stick comes up, and you can squeeze it in a bit to be more on top (like French grip) when the sticks are lower and when more finger control is required.



Choosing a Grip

If you had to choose only one grip to use exclusively, the American grip would be the winner. However, if you limit yourself to American grip, you will miss out on the advantages of the other two, especially French grip for ride-cymbal playing. The ability to play each of the grips will allow you to use different parts of your body for different drumming tasks.

On a related note, many drummers find that they inadvertently slice (hit the drum at an angle instead of perpendicularly) when they play. This is often related to whichever matched-grip wrist motion you favor. For instance, if you slice inward, you can flatten out your hand more toward German grip, and the stick will start to travel vertically. If you slice outward, turn your hands more vertically, toward French grip. Ideally, you want to be able to hold your hands everywhere in between French and German grip while maintaining perpendicular strokes.

Stick Angles Relative to the Drum

Both sticks should point down toward the drum at about a 10-degree angle.



Matching this stick angle in both hands is important so that both sticks get the same sound and rebound out of the drum. The flatter the angle the sticks are relative to the drum, the more rebound. The steeper the angle, the less rebound. While it might seem that the more rebound the better, it’s good to have some leverage over the stick for when you want to play down into the drum or to set yourself up for downstrokes that stop lower to the drum. The 10-degree angle gives you this leverage while still maintaining great rebound.

Fulcrums

The most important part of any grip is the fulcrum (pivot point). We use three fulcrums when drumming: the elbow, the wrist, and the axis between the thumb and first or second finger. When we discuss fulcrums in this book, we’ll always be referring to the rotational axis between the thumb and first or second finger.



It’s important that the thumb and first or second finger be located directly across from each other so that the stick can pivot freely. This allows the remaining fingers to be used to help move the stick instead of gripping it. Without a good fulcrum, you’ll never develop the finesse that comes from incorporating the fingers, and you’ll be limiting your potential.

In American grip, the thumb should be a bit on top of

the stick so that it's in a position where it can push the stick down when extra leverage is needed. As you look down at the stick in your hand, the V formed where your first finger and thumb meet should be centered over the middle of the stick.



When you raise the stick all the way up, the thumb will naturally move to the side. If your thumb always stays positioned on the side of the stick, or if the thumb hangs lower, you'll have difficulty playing downstrokes and roll patterns where you need to press down in the front of the grip.



What *not* to do

Players who use this problematic fulcrum will have to compensate for the lack of control by holding the stick more with their fingers, which limits the ability to use the fingers to help play the stick.

As a general rule, your fulcrum should be located a little less than a third of the way from the back of the stick. This is the sweet spot where the stick rebounds as much as possible on its own. You'll want to hold the stick at this point so that it can do as much of the work as possible.

Each hand should have the fulcrum located at the same spot on the stick; otherwise the sound and volume between the hands will be different. If you find that one hand is choking up higher than the other, quite often the choked-up stick is in the hand with less-developed finger technique. A choked-up stick will have a darker/quieter/stiffer sound because it's being played with more wrist motion.

There's a lot of discussion about whether or not to have a gap in your grip between the thumb and the hand. This

relates to the choice of using a first- or second-finger fulcrum (which will be explained in the next section). As a general rule, a first-finger fulcrum will leave no gap, while a second-finger fulcrum will.



Most players who grip the sticks too tightly will have no gap between the thumb and hand, regardless of their fulcrum choice. While the lack of gap is a common symptom of playing tightly, I've seen players try to create a gap in order to play "looser," but they're still using a first-finger fulcrum. This results in a lot of extra tension in the hand, because they have to squeeze the stick extra-hard in the fulcrum so that it doesn't slide up into the gap, plus the back fingers are now needed to stabilize the stick where they would otherwise be used to play it.

No matter which fulcrum you use, the stick should be held just tightly enough to remain in your hand. If the stick slides, or falls out of the fulcrum, you simply need to apply a bit more pressure with the thumb in order to keep the stick secure in the sweet spot. With relaxed hands, the sticks will feel heavy as they do a lot of the work for you.

First-Finger or Second-Finger Fulcrum?

There's some debate about the fulcrum's ideal location. Some players prefer to hold the stick between the thumb and first finger, while others prefer to hold the stick between the thumb and second finger. Quite often you'll want to play using a combination of the two, which some call the "three-point fulcrum," but favoring either a first- or second-finger fulcrum will be necessary at times, depending on the vocabulary you're trying to play.

Both the first- and second-finger fulcrums have advantages and disadvantages, and a well-trained drummer should have both options at his or her disposal. Once both fulcrum options are learned, the fulcrum you use will change automatically based on the physical demands of the music.

It's important that the first-finger fulcrum be well developed, because it's ideal for finesse and high-speed and lower-dynamic playing at lower stick heights. The end of the first finger, which is underneath the fulcrum, can move the stick very quickly and very lightly with very little linear movement. This is why when playing at high

speeds with a light touch it's common for the front two fingers to control the stick while the back two fingers do very little work. In this situation, the thumb will rise to the topside of the stick a bit, and the gap between the thumb and hand will be eliminated in order to hold the stick in the first knuckle joint of the index finger so that the tip of the index finger has maximum access to play the stick.



A second-finger fulcrum transfers more of the wrist's energy to the stick for a more powerful stroke. This fulcrum is also preferable when playing with the Moeller whip stroke, where you want as much of the whip motion as possible to flow from the arm and hand into the stick.



I always start by teaching the first-finger fulcrum because it's easy to fall back to the second-finger fulcrum when finger finesse isn't required. If, however, you start by learning the second-finger fulcrum, you'll have a more difficult time getting the first finger to function when needed.

A good exercise for getting your fulcrum together is

what I call the "first-finger fulcrum isolator."

Hold the stick near the front end and play the back of the stick on the bottom of your forearm, using just the first-finger fulcrum. The top of your hand should remain still. (Don't cheat by using the wrist!) If your first-finger fulcrum is out of position or not working correctly, this exercise is nearly impossible to execute, so it forces you to develop good technique. The exercise will make your forearm burn pretty quickly. Later you'll add the other fingers to help move the stick, which makes the first finger's job much easier.



Grip/Fulcrum Conclusion

It's good to have every grip and fulcrum option at your disposal, since each has its advantages. I tend to use the first- and second-finger fulcrums about equally, and I employ every hand position between the extremes of French and German grips.

I also break my own grip and fulcrum rules from time to time. For instance, when I play rimshots on the snare, I tend to hold the stick lightly between my second and third fingers. And when I crash a cymbal with no need to play anything immediately afterward, I sometimes hold the stick loosely, like a bicycle handlebar. If I'm not going to use my fingers to play the stick, then I have no need for a proper fulcrum. Of course, it's important to learn the rules before you can break them. So get on it!

TRADITIONAL GRIP

Traditional grip is where the left stick is held underhanded, while the right stick is held the same as in matched grip. Traditional grip goes back hundreds of years, when drums were held on a sling over the shoulder. This position caused the drum to hang in front of the body at an angle. Rather than lift the entire left arm to get the left hand into playing position on these tilted drums, players used an underhanded technique so that the left arm could hang comfortably. It's rare to see anyone playing a drum on a sling anymore, but the grip still exists.

Some drummers who play traditional grip set up their drums so that they're tilting away from their bodies or angled to the right in order to accommodate the left hand's position. Traditional grip is more difficult to develop than

matched, and I feel that it's easier to learn *after* a solid foundation is built with matched grip.

There are many mechanical disadvantages to playing on a flat drum with traditional grip. Here are some common arguments against traditional grip:

1. It's difficult to play with a balanced sound when holding one stick overhand and the other underhand.
2. There are different amounts of flesh on each stick, which affects stick resonance.
3. The left stick has a much more limited range of motion and almost no capacity for lateral motion.
4. There are fewer muscles used in the left hand to spread the workload.
5. There are fewer fingers available to play the stick.