

Is traditional grip a useful technique that drum students should learn?

Let me first make a general statement and say that good drumming is less about the specific technique you use and more about how you use it, and there are examples of great drummers and strong opinions on both sides of this grip issue. I want to address this topic from my perspective as a teacher, and as a teacher, especially with young and developing students (we're all developing students), I believe there is really only one choice.

Efficient and effective drumming technique (grip and stroke) is about getting your body to move comfortably, naturally, injury and pain free, and in a way that will not limit your self-expression as a drummer. It's also about holding the sticks in a way that will produce an efficient stroke that takes maximum advantage of the physics of the drum, heads, sticks, and their angles, etc. This may all sound very 'technical'...because it is.

Sometimes we think of the grip as being a binary choice – either traditional or matched. In actuality, there are dozens of variations of each grip, including not just how you hold the stick in the hands but also how the wrist turns, how, or if, the fingers are used, the angle of the hand relative to the drum and forearm, the angle of the stick relative to the alignment of the forearm, the use of the forearm in the stroke, etc., etc. I've seen drummers using a matched 'grip' but turning their wrist to the inside using a more traditional 'stroke', and vice versa. So, with my students we examine both grip and stroke as two highly related issues. Of course, the 'grip' discussion also leads to one about whether drumming is, or should be, a right-handed/left-handed issue (I firmly believe it is NOT – drumming is a compound task requiring two-handed input), and if one's dominant hand (right or left) should even be considered in a discussion of technique for drummers (it's not for pianists, saxophonists, trumpeters, etc.). Of course, this evidence also points towards open-handed playing as the next great step forward (more about that in a future article).

Reading, researching, and always looking for a better, or the best, way to do things is one of my primary jobs as a teacher. For millions of years, human bodies have evolved to move a certain way, and we drummers should understand how and what that is, and not try to reverse or ignore a millennia of growth, change, and adaptation. It's not up to me to tell my hands, wrists, arms and body how they should learn to move, or to try to force them to move in a way that's not natural...it IS up to me to learn and study how the body moves normally, comfortably, and how to use my muscles and tendons in the most effective, efficient, and safe way possible in order to play the drumset. In addition to studying kinesiology, I've read and undertaken considerable research into the neuroscience of right handed/left handedness, defined motor skills in the fingers and hands, and brain functions to know that this issue goes well beyond personal preference. Regardless of what we tell ourselves, our technique and how we use our bodies are either helping or hampering our drumming development and capability.

Matched and traditional grips each employ different muscles and tendons, and the fingers have a different role and move in different ways on each hand. A drummer's goal

through technique is to develop muscular and neural control of the limbs and the sticks (the intricate patterns of brain activity required for advanced coordination in how the limbs and muscles interact with each other). Although these are extremely complicated tasks for the body and the brain, they can be accomplished much quicker by practicing the correct things in the correct and natural way.

Consequently, as a teacher, I don't see the benefit of teaching/learning two completely different techniques with one hand, and one technique with the other. To me, it even makes less sense to learn two techniques with your weaker hand (weaker only because you may not use it as much in your life away from drumming), thereby effectively splitting the practice time with the 'off' hand so that it will likely never catch up to your genetically more dominant hand.

I try to teach my students to develop equally facility in their hands and not handicap themselves from the outset in trying to learn two different techniques. I won't try to change the grip of someone studying with me, but it is my responsibility to point out and explain all of the issues relative to technique including kinesiology (study of body movements), physics, and sound in order that they become knowledgeable. Then they're able to make an informed educated decision and stick with it.

Sometimes I'll ask a student why they're using a specific stroke or a particular technique and they'll say 'because that's how I learned', or that's how (name of favorite drummer) does it. They're not acceptable reasons. I want my students to know about technique, so they can give an hour's worth of reasoned, solid, evidenced, researched, and correct explanations – not just state things conveniently made up to fit a choice that they made, or was made for them, months or years ago.

I first started playing drums using traditional grip, but have long since changed to matched grip, and have never looked back. When teaching beginning students and music educators about playing the drumset I will ONLY teach matched grip and matched stroke, and will speak about, and demonstrate, the evidence in great detail - the vast majority of which points clearly towards matched being a more natural way to play, with less risk of injury, greater ease of moving around the drumkit, and quicker more accurate results (both physically and musically) from dedicated practice.

Drumming is an extremely complicated and difficult skill to develop to a professional level. It also has a dynamic and forever-evolving set of physical, neurological, and musical challenges that will only increase over time. The technique, coordination, and musical mastery required to perform in most settings today, far exceed those that were required 50 years ago, and it's not going to stop here. The circumstances and equipment limitations that gave rise to 'traditional' grip and technique no longer exist; we have to accept that and move on. Good luck and have fun!