

# Snare Drum Stoke Types

*Andrew Baldwin*

## Introduction

I wanted to make this handout as a reference for students and teachers alike. If a student starts learning percussion and they are unable to study privately or with a teacher whose primary instrument isn't percussion, there is a chance that the student's practice will have little to no emphasis on the stroke types. Even most method books don't go into great detail on the strokes. This is where I hope to be of help. Please use this sheet as a guide in working on one's snare drum technique, and use it as a resource for your own practicing or teaching.

## Before we get started...

You have to know how to hold the stick! I won't focus on grip in this handout, but I do want to touch on it as well as the mechanisms with which we implement the strokes. One key element of the matched grip is the **fulcrum (pivot point)**. This is the point where the stick is pinched between the first digit on your index finger and your thumb. This is crucial in creating the "bounce" for double and buzzed strokes. Too loose, and there is no control. Too tight, and you lose clarity in the bounce. Even with a teacher, finding the perfect amount of fulcrum pressure takes solid individual practice.



*Picture of the fulcrum*

A few other points you'll want to keep in mind for the grip:

- Have an inch or two of the stick extending past your palm. Similar to your fulcrum: too far back, and you won't have enough control. Choke up too much on the stick, and you won't have the natural weight of the stick at your disposal.
- **PALMS DOWN.** No thumbs up with this grip!
- Don't let your pinky stick out.
- Don't let your index finger stick out (breaking the fulcrum).



*Underside view of match grip*

## The 3 Mechanisms of striking

When we play percussion, we use one or a combination of 3 mechanisms to strike the instrument:

- **Fingers** (back fingers of the grip [middle, ring, pinky])
- **Wrist**
- **Arm**

The when and how much of each we use depend on the stroke type and the needs of the music. The louder you need to play, the more arm you may need to use. The faster you need to play, the more wrist and finger you may use. This handout won't delve into this concept, but I wanted to point it out, as they are important when talking about the strokes.

## The Four Stroke Types

Finally! What you've been waiting for. When we play snare drum (or membranophones in general), we strike the drum in 1 of 4 ways (not counting untraditional or extended techniques): Full, Down, Tap, and Up. Attention to these strokes is imperative for efficient playing. One can waste a lot of time and energy if one doesn't pay attention to the stroke types they are using.

### The Full Stroke

The **full stroke** is our general stroke. It is utilized from mezzo piano/forte dynamics up to and beyond fortissimo. I like to think of the stroke types by where the stick starts, and where the stick ends. With the full stroke, the stick starts and ends up in a position over the drum (high to high). This stroke is initiated with either or both finger and wrist strokes. With snare drum, we think to control the rebound, not forcing the stick to hit the drum. Gravity will help with that, so for this stroke, think of initiating the stick to strike the drum, and letting your hand follow the natural rebound of the stick back to an "up" position.

*Starting position:  
High*



*striking the drum*



*Ending position:  
High*



### The Down Stroke

The **down stroke** is the accented stroke. It starts in an up position and ends in a down position (high to low). The down position it ends in is not a dead stroke with the bead of the stick on the drum, rather just hovering slightly above the drum. This stroke is initiated by snapping your back fingers closed (creating a more closed [not tight] grip at the down position).

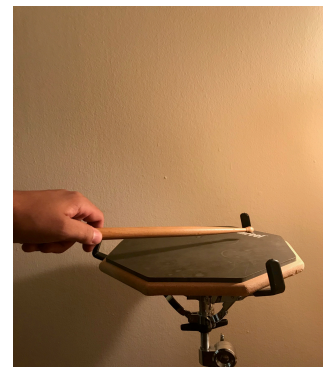
*Starting position:  
High (note the back fingers)*



*striking the drum*



*Ending Position:  
Low (just above the drum)*



## The Tap Stroke

The **tap stroke** is for playing at quiet dynamics. One can think of them as tiny full strokes. The stroke starts low to the drum, strikes, and ends in the low position (low to low). This stroke is initiated mostly with the wrist, but will vary depending on the needs of the music.

*Starting position:  
Low*

*striking the drum*

*Ending position:  
Low*



## The Up Stroke

The sole purpose of the **up stroke** is as a preparatory stroke. It is essentially a tap stroke that you end in a high position to prepare for either a full or a down stroke. A common mistake with beginning players is that they think of this stroke as two separate motions: 1. a fully executed tap stroke (low to low) and 2. bringing the stick to the high position after completing the tap. Thinking of the up stroke in this manner is incorrect because it doesn't create a fluid motion. I like to teach that you give the stick enough energy to strike the drum, and the rebound will do the rest of the work. The only trick to this is that you have to enhance the rebound with your grip (use of wrist and fingers, depending on the following stroke) to help the stick reach the proper height. I also like to use the image of a bouncing ball. Though the bouncy ball may be dropped



from a point lower than what it bounces to, the ball does not stop at the height it was dropped at, pause, and then continue to bounce higher. It is one fluid motion. This is how we want to think of the up stroke. It will start low, given the inertia it needs, and fluidly move from striking the drum into a high ending position.

*Starting position:  
Low*

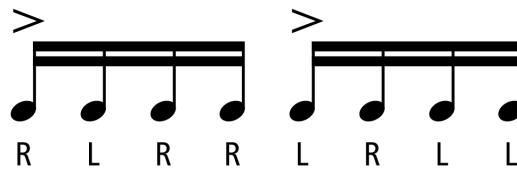
*striking the drum*

*Ending position:  
High*



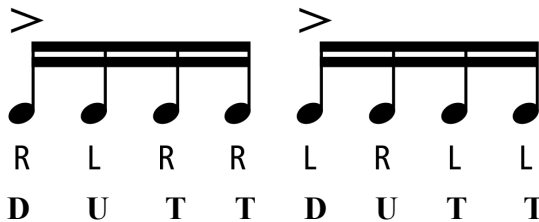
## The Stroke Types in context

As I have been alluding to throughout the handout, the stroke types are used to help efficiency of playing by maximizing our **economy of motion**. What this means is that we want to use as little movement as possible in our playing (practice smarter, not harder). To give a glimpse into how one uses the stroke types, I'd like to look at one of the rudiments and apply the stroke types to it. Let's take the paradiddle:



Now, we know to follow the sticking, and to play the first of each four 16<sup>th</sup> notes be accented. Without attention to the stroke types, we can just play a string of full strokes, making sure to keep the accents clear and distinct. This will do until you have to play faster. What could easily end up happening is that you start to play with more tension to try and achieve the increasing speed. Instead, we can apply the stroke types to aid in playing more effective and efficiently.

F=Full  
D= Down  
T= Tap  
U= Up



**Stroke Types:**

When the stroke types are applied to the paradiddle, you see we have Down, Up, Tap, Tap. When this sticking is applied, it allows us to play smoother and faster with far less fatigue. The first Down stroke (first 16<sup>th</sup> note) will set up the two Tap strokes (the third and fourth 16<sup>th</sup> notes), and the Up stroke (the second 16<sup>th</sup> note) will set up the Down stroke when the pattern restarts on the other hand. Try applying this to the other rudiments, as this will help with improving hand-to-hand coordination.

## Wrapping up

When working on a drum piece, attention to the strokes you'll use is as important as figuring out stickings and roll bases. To recap:

- Full (High to High)
- Down (High to Low)
- Tap (Low to Low)
- Up (Low to High)

As with all music, there is wiggle room in the way the stroke types are applied. If you're playing loud paradiddles, then maybe your tap strokes will be more like full strokes, but the mechanics are the same. This is no substitute for personal instruction, but I hope this handout will be of use!

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