Basic Sabar technique for beginners. This includes the names of the six basic strokes and how to play them, how to hold the stick, and how to hold or carry the drum.

There are two basic types of sabar, those with an opening in the bottom and those with a closed bottom. All are played while seated except for performance occasions when the open-bottomed drums may be slung over a shoulder with a simple strap. The closed-bottomed sabars may sometimes be seen played while kneeling beside them during performance as well. When seated with an open-bottomed sabar rest the pegs on your thighs so that the bottom is well up off the floor, allowing the bass tone to come out the bottom. There are seven pegs on a sabar, an odd number, so finding which pegs feel comfortable on your thighs is an individual matter.

The hand strokes. For right-handed players the stick, galang, is held in the right hand. The strokes for the open left hand are very similar to those for the Djembe. The bass tone is called "Ghin" or "Bhin", rhyming with "Teen" and is played by striking in the center of the drum with the palm of the hand, making sure that neither the thumb nor the fingertips contact the drum skin.

The hand bounces up immediately after striking the head. This is an important stroke for the Mbung Mbungs and should be played with some strong energy as it is the lowest note produced by the Sabar family. Closed-bottomed drums do not have this centered bass stroke but play it in the Pin position shown next.
The open tone stroke is called "Pin", also rhyming with "Teen", and is played with the whole length of the fingers held together near the drum rim. Each drum will have a slightly different best position. To find this stroke's best tone begin striking the rim with your fingertips and creep in towards the center of the drum. Strike with some force and let your hand pop off the skin with each stroke. You will find the sweet spot for your drum before your palm comes into contact with the head. Do not strike with the bottom of your knuckles in contact with the drum rim, that hurts, but allow the full fleshy parts of the fingers to contact, not just the finger tips.

The slap tone is called Mekh. It is played with a whipping motion of the hand with the fingers relaxed and together and slightly cupped. The heel of the hand touches the drum rim at the same time as the fingertips strike the skin. The fingertips should bounce off the head instantely, making a high popping tone. This can be a little tricky. Try having the fingertips strike dead center in the head or a little bit inwards toward the heel of the hand.

This stroke takes a good deal of practice to get the tone clear and consistent.

The sticked strokes. A proper grip is important. The stick is held between the thumb and forefinger with the smaller end of the stick lightly touching the center of the palm. The wrist is bent to almost 90 degrees and the stick is brought down to the drum head by rotating the wrist. The elbow is held out away from the body. This is considerably different than the
sticking used in conventional drumming and conventional drummers will have trouble getting used to it. This method allows greater power delivered to the stick by whipping it down onto the drum and after your muscles get used to it greater endurance for long session drumming.

The open toned stick stroke is called "Ta". Note that the stick is in contact with the skin along its full length and that the striking position is about midway between the drum rim and center. The stick is to bounce off the head immediately. Playing with the tip of the stick is only for quiet work.
There is a close stick stroke called "Tess" which is probably the least used stroke where the tip of the stick is struck to the head and held there, pushing in to the skin a little and perhaps sliding it a bit. This stroke should not be a big concern to the beginner but is found in some traditional rhythms and can act as an ornamental stroke in solos. It is a quiet stroke, for obvious reasons, unless you want to pull your stick out of a punctured skin.

A very common closed stick stroke is "Tek", or "Tetch". In this stroke the open hand mutes the head in the Pin position at the same moment as the stick strikes Ta. This delivers a very loud cracking sound. Experiment with different positions with the left hand for getting different tones, but the Pin position is the most proper. Make sure that the hand and stick strike the skin at the same time, you do not want a 'ghost tone' of the hand striking first. The hand does not bounce off the head, but holds the head still, muting it.

Practice: Ta - Tek - Ta - Tek - Ta - Tek...
The last stroke is "Rahn". This is the flam stroke and is very important in sabar drumming. The open hand plays Pin an instant before the stick plays Ta. The hand always precedes the stick. Practice: Rahn - Ta - Ghin - Rahn - Ta - Ghin ...

Thanks for checking this out. This is traditional sabar technique as taught by Mapate Diop, Wolof Sabar Master.

With these strokes you can create your own rhythms or copy from recordings. Use the names of the strokes to help remember rhythms by singing them, or to communicate the rhythms you find to others. I hope to begin writing out traditional Sabar dance rhythms here in the future, but until then have fun! Practice slowly, and build up speed only with precision!