

A COLLECTION OF GUITAR WISDOM

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How and what to practice as a beginning guitarist

In my years of experience as a guitar teacher, I encounter a lot of guitar players, who think that learning to play guitar is super hard in the beginning and that they need to learn tons of theory to know exactly what they are doing, else they would embarrass themselves in front of their friends. This is nonsense.

There are only some small varieties depending on what the student wants to learn, but the most things are in common to every guitar player.

So, if you want to have an easy and stress less start with your guitar, here are a few recommendations from me for you:

The most important thing is, to take your time and always enjoy what you already CAN do. Granted, in the beginning it will not be much, but that can quickly change, if you find some nice and simple melodies you can play, basic chords you can practice, etc.

Do not try to understand it all in one day but pick what you learn in little pieces and work with them. That will make it much easier to connect new concepts and new knowledge to what you already can do.

In the beginning it is vitally necessary to build some motoric skills and coordination and to develop some sense of rhythm. That means: Playing playing playing.

Do not be afraid of getting into bad habits, this will not happen after 2-3 months of simply playing "somehow".

Just grab your guitar and play something every day and try to not give too much meaning to mistakes or inconsistencies of strings that do not ring properly. Most of that will go away on its own.

Start by learning some basic chords, or better even 3-string chords, that often require only one or two fingers and learn to change between them slowly and smoothly, but in time.

Try to strum them to a metronome with up and down strokes and easy rhythm patterns, but never let the swing of your arm stop its regular up and down motions. It should always swing up and down steadily without any breaks.

If you struggle with any part of a song or a specific key change in particular, isolate what is holding you back and practice that alone with full focus, because learning to play the guitar is to a huge part learning how to focus.

For example: if you are playing a chord progression like G-C-D-G, my bet is, that you will struggle to change from the D to the G. What you need to do here, is to

stop using your strumming hand and only focus on your fretting hand and simulate this chord change until it feels smooth. Especially pay attention to all the fingers that the two chords have in common in their respective positions and just leave where they are.

If you struggle with a smaller passage of a melody in a song, repeat this section until you can play it just as well as all the other parts in this melody.

That should already help you to develop a lot of momentum to get hungry for more.

Confusion about 3NPS scales

In the years that I have been teaching guitar, I have encountered a few great players already, who were stuck, because of the same mistakes and misconceptions, that occurred.

Most of the time, they have been using something resembling the 3-Note-Per-String system, but not consequently, which results in hitting a wall, which they cannot get through or over or past.

This article is written to help you understanding the basic principles behind the 3-Note-Per-String system.

The basic principle is, to assign three notes of any scale to each string and the biggest reason why you want to do this, is to get a consistent pattern of note divisions for every string, so that your picking hand can use the same motions, no matter what pattern you play somewhere on the guitar neck.

Another important reason is, that it is easily combinable with directional picking, which is a very useful way to pick with a lot of efficiency, and by that getting your playing up to speed pretty easily, compared to any other method.

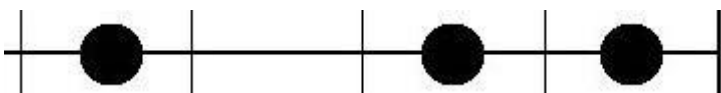
To achieve maximal efficiency, some things need to be done correctly:

Fingers used by the fretting hand

First off, for all the shapes I am demonstrating here, there is one basic rule for maintaining the best posture: Keep your thumb opposed to your middle finger as a general guideline. This allows you to make the stretches more comfortable that you need for this way of playing.

There are three main shapes for diatonic scales, that your fingers can assume.

The first one looks like this:



This one is generally played with the 1st, the 3rd and the 4th finger.

Let's call it the Blue Shape.

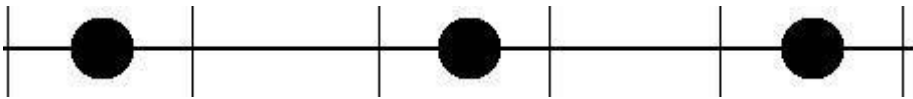
The second shape looks like this:



Whenever this shape occurs, usually you should play that with your 1st, 2nd and 4th finger. At this point, do not worry about any exceptions. Later on, you will know, what those are. Let's call it the Green Shape.

The third shape is a variation of the 2nd shape, because it uses the same fingers

(1, 2 and 4), but extends the first finger down one fret. It looks like this:



The way that you hold your fingers for this shape is almost exactly like in the 2nd shape, but you stretch your index finger to the next lowest fret. So, if you would fret the 2nd shape on frets 6, 7 and 9, you would keep everything as it is, but you simply move the index finger to the 5th fret, so that you have your fingers on frets 5, 7 and 9. Let's call this the Red Shape.

The Picking Hand

The biggest obstacles, guitar players can create for themselves, when they want to play with modes in the 3-Note-Per-String system, is to NOT apply directional picking but to stick to alternating picking. Sure, you can continue using it, but using directional picking and getting used to this way of playing brings you (I estimate) 30 % more efficiency.

What you need to work on, is to not let the pick stop between string changes and keeping up the momentum. A good way to practice this, is to play a scale sequence like this:

Musical notation for a 3-note-per-string scale sequence. The top staff is in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 4/4 time. It shows two measures of music. The first measure contains two groups of three eighth notes, each with a '3' above it indicating a triplet. The second measure contains two groups of three eighth notes, also with a '3' above each. Below the staff is a picking pattern consisting of alternating 'v' (downstroke) and 'u' (upstroke) characters. At the bottom is a guitar tablature with six lines labeled T, A, B, G, D, E from top to bottom. The notes are: 5-7-9 on the B string, 5-7-9 on the G string, 6-7-9 on the D string, 6-7-9 on the A string, 7-9-10 on the E string, and 7-9-10 on the high E string.

Play this really slowly and every time you have two downstrokes right after each other, try landing on the next string immediately after playing the note before the string change and only then pick the next note. Also practice this going down the scale for your upstrokes.

If you played using alternating picking for your whole life as a guitarist, this will take some time to get used to it and I recommend to not force anything in the beginning. Just play slow and get used to that. Building speed with this system requires a different approach. So, don't rush, just get your brain to get used to the new way of playing and focus on clean movements and perfect motions.

How to write nice chord progressions

If you ever heard of song writing, you might find the thought of writing your own music intimidating at first, but that is not necessary. What frightens most musicians to write their own material, is when they start comparing themselves to their idols and to the music they enjoy listening to and then start thinking "How could I possibly write music good as this?"

What most people usually don't get to see is, that this ability to write and compose awesome music, does not come over night. It needs development. So, all your favourite composers and songwriters had to start at some point and I guarantee you: They all sucked at it, in the beginning. And there is NOTHING wrong with that.

It only matters where you are going with your skills and where you WANT TO end up. If your goal is, to become a highly skilled composer, GOOD! Just also accept that it will take some time to develop and it will require to write some really bad things, to find out what works well. Nobody judges you for the bad stuff, if you do not publish it :)

But you WILL get there, if you persist and work on your skills consistently. That is the key to everything, is it not?

Anyway. To get you moving on your way a little faster, here is something to help you write some nice chord progressions.

Did you know, that you are allowed to put chords in any order you wish?

It is vitally important to be aware of the fact, that music theory is only an explanation of everything you hear in music. Its main purpose is, to explain, why something sounds as it sounds. A lot of people forget about this and by that forget, that there are no real right or wrongs. The final judge always is yourself and what sounds good to YOU. If it sounds good to YOU it is fine to do it.

Take the chords from the G major key:

G – Am – Bm – C – D – Em.

Now pick three of them and play them in various orders. For now, stick to one chord for one bar.

Now pick four of them and play the new selection in various orders. Since you have more slots available here, you could also repeat one chord a few times.

For example, three bars of G major and one bar of B minor. There are no restrictions and every restriction I mention here, only serves the purpose for practicing and learning.

You will notice eventually, that you will like some orders, and some you will not like. That does not mean, you did anything wrong, it only says something about your taste and preferences. At this point I recommend getting a little song writing and composing notebook where you can write into everything that you like, but also everything that you do not like, because you might find ways later, to apply those things in a different way, in which you could like them!

On top of that, whenever you write down a new item into your little database now, make sure to also describe in a few words, what it sounds like to you.

This exercise will help you tremendously showing you the options, with which you can approach your songs and gives you over time a large database to which you can refer to, if you are stuck with writing a song.

Cool things about guitar: how to make crazy noises and sounds unique to the guitar

One thing that makes guitar so cool, is that you do not simply play notes, but you can also make all kinds of cool noises that make up for great sound effects in your songs and in your playing in general.

I want to shed some light on these here and give some understanding on how to produce those sounds.

The Pick Scrape

Especially in metal, this is THE classic noise to make, when introducing a new part or a solo in a song, just to give an example. Over the course of a few beats, it can gently or roughly lead you into another part of the song and announce that something awesome is right ahead.

Here is a raw sound sample. First you will hear a pick scrape with the pick moving towards the headstock and after that a pick scrape in the opposite direction with the pick moving towards the bridge:

[Listen here](#)

And here is a sound sample with some music:

[Listen here](#)

Here is how to do it.

Make sure to use some distortion from your amplifier. It also works without, but it is a different sound. Try them both!

Take your pick and place it perpendicularly on the lower strings, then slide it along the strings to the head stock or from the headstock to the bridge, both ways are fine and give a different sound.



When going to the headstock it sounds like falling into something, because the distance between the pick and the bridge gets longer, thus making the actively ringing part of the string longer, same as if you would for example play the 12th fret and then the 8th fret, for example, which would make it sound lower.

You can also vary the strengths with which you press down the strings, so that they either touch the fretboard or just stay hanging in the air.

Both is possible, and they sound differently. Start some experimenting here!

Scrape with the fretting hand

This works the same as the pick scrape described above, only that instead of using your guitar pick, you use the fingers of your fretting hand to slide it across the fretboard. Again, start experimenting with the amount of strength you use to

press down the strings. There will be some cool sounds coming out of your hands!

[Whammy Bar tricks](#)

Did that not sound cool? Want to learn how to make those sounds?

Let us look at them mainly there were two effects that I used. One is called the divebomb:

You will need a whammy bar (sometimes referred to as tremolo bar or trem in short) for this to work:



This can also work with a normal tremolo system but in general, I personally would recommend a Floyd rose system (or for Ibanez: Edge III) to make sound effects like that, because with that systems your guitar will stay in tune after using it, which probably will not be the case with a regular bridge that has a whammy bar.



Here is one way to do it:

Play a flageolet somewhere on the guitar, for example over the 5th fret. That means: merely lay one finger on the string exactly above the fretstick without pushing the string down, now pluck the string. You will hear a pretty high note, that is definitely higher, than the note, that you would hear if you would fret the note in the usual way.



When you hear that note, grab the whammy bar and push it down towards the body of your guitar. Do not spin the whammy bar around. You need to have the bridge moving up and down, to get any effect.

If you want to get that chaotic crashing sound from the sound sample above, you simply need to randomly hit the strings on the guitar.

The other I do not really know what it is called, so I call it the [whammy bar snap](#).

It is a pretty cool way to emphasise and important note of your solo or to simply give more importance to a note in your solo.

It is pretty easy to do, if you have a Floyd rose system or an Edge III tremolo system. It will not work with the usual tremolo system, because it relies on the bridge to be able to swing back and forth. Standard bridges simply do not do that.

To make this interesting sound all you need to do is to play ANY note you want (works very well with higher notes) and pull the whammy bar and then releasing it in a moment, so that the bar snaps back to its standard position.

Cool, heh?

[Artificial Harmonic](#)

This one is a bit tricky and takes some experimentation on your part, but it will sound very cool once you mastered it, so do not get discouraged if for some time you do not succeed in playing this reliably.

First, put a finger anywhere on the fretboard and fret a note. I recommend fretting a note in the lower region, between fret 2 and 7 for now.

Next, from this point forward ignore the fretting hand completely, just make sure, that it still holds down the string to the fretboard. But the focus now needs to be entirely on your picking hand now.

Now you need to hit the string right after plucking it, with that part of your thumb, that is closest to the string somewhere between the tip and the first joint. For right hand players it would be on the left side of your thumb.

Now try to hit different places on the string until you found the sweet spot!

There are several that can work.

This technique is great to combine with the whammy bar tricks explained above!

About the Author:

Michael Korte is a professional guitarist and composer in Finland and also teaches guitar at his [Guitar School in Tampere](#). Highly recommended if you are interested in learning how to compose or if you just want to learn the essential skills to be able to join a band.

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