

IV. Basic Guitar Techniques

A. Overview

The techniques used to play pick-style (aka plectrum-style) guitar are nowhere near as standardized as those used to play classical guitar or most other well established instruments. There is no “right” way to do this or that technique, although there might be a right way (or a wrong way) for YOU to do something.

Even a casual survey of just a handful of great guitar players will turn up a large number of variations in their technical approaches to the guitar. These differences in technique, as well as conceptual differences, are among the main forces behind what determines someone’s particular style and sound (aka their “voice”).

One guy’s thumb (fretting hand) will always be placed near the middle of the neck - as in proper classical technique, while another guy’s thumb will be hanging over the top of the neck. One guy will hold the pick with his thumb and 1st finger only, while another guy uses his thumb and his 1st two fingers. One guy uses lots of left hand finger stretches, while another guy simply moves his hand whenever the necessity for a finger stretch presents itself. If they all sound great, then who is using the "right" method, and who is "wrong"?

Having said that, I still think that there are some general principles that we can look for to decide when a particular technique is optimal or counterproductive. This can generally be summarized as “economy of effort and motion”, or using the least amount of effort and physical motion as is possible to accomplish a particular task. This approach also has ramifications for the health of your hands, your arms, and the rest of your body.

In my experience, technique is rarely improved upon until the player is at the point where a particular sound is already being envisioned in the player’s mind. Improvement in technique arises simply as a means to achieve a sound that has already been visualized. If the player’s present technique is not adequate for the task, then he (she) will make the necessary adjustments and modify his technique.

B. Holding The Pick

In general, for most people, the most practical way to hold the pick is simply between the 1st finger and the thumb. Some people are more comfortable with the flat of the pick being flush with the 1st finger’s upper side. Some people are more comfortable with the flat of the pick being held between the pads of the 1st finger and the thumb. Pat Metheny, the exception to many a rule, is the guy I mentioned above who holds the pick between his thumb and his 1st two fingers. I can’t really say that Pat’s technique is wrong because he sounds so freaking good. But it is wrong for me, and it is wrong for most people, I suspect.

In general, the picking motion should be done with the wrist, as opposed to the whole forearm or just the fingers. Once again, everyone is different on this, but the majority of good players seem to be doing as I suggest.

Some people claim that for the ultimate in speed and accuracy the wrist should always be free floating, with no fingers or the palm of the picking hand touching the guitar or the strings. I often practice this way, but when it comes time to play a gig I will notice my 3 free fingers often making themselves comfortable by resting on my pickguard. Touching the pickguard gives me a tactile spatial orientation. Again, everyone is different.

There are also reasons, as we shall see, to rest the extreme base of your thumb (palm side) lightly on the strings to dampen sympathetic vibrations and open strings, when picking on the upper 4 strings.

With regards to comping (i.e. chording); certain types of passages are best executed by striking the strings with the pick only, while other passages are better played by using the quasi-finger-style technique of pick + fingers. I.e. The 3 available fingers on the picking hand are used as well as the pick to pluck the strings. I believe that developing proficiency in both techniques is a wise course of action.

I will not be dealing with real finger-style techniques or classical guitar techniques very much, if at all, in these pages - although the odd voicing here and there might require some proficiency with fingerstyle technique.

Please have a look at the chapter entitled Open-Position for an overview of the basic plectrum techniques: alternate picking, reverse alternate picking, and economy picking.

C. Fretting Hand: Placement Of The Fingers

In order to economize your efforts the following bit of information is important to understand. Less pressure is required to get a note to sound, without fret buzzing, if the fretting finger is placed immediately behind the fret. If you place your finger too far behind the fret you will need to apply much more pressure to the string in order to get a good sound. Always play as close to the fret as possible. Playing too far away from the fret also increases the likelihood that you may press too hard and thereby cause the note to go sharp as your finger tip pushes down on the string.

In general, your finger's joints should always be rounded when playing single note passages, never flatten (as in barring) any of your finger's joints; unless you are intentionally barring across two or more strings simultaneously.

A good way to start developing finger independence and strength is to practice putting all 4 fingers on the fretboard at the same time, covering a 4 fret area.

For example:

On your 1st string; put your 1st finger in the 1st fret.

Leave your first finger down, and put your 2nd finger in the 2nd fret. (F#/G♭)

Leave both these fingers down, and place your 3rd finger in the 3rd fret. (G)

Leave all 3 fingers down, and place your 4th finger in the 4th fret. (G#/A♭)

You should now have all 4 fingers down at once.

Each finger should be immediately behind the fret.

The joints of all your fingers should be arched.

You should be relaxed and not pressing so hard as to cause discomfort.

Now, practice taking one finger at a time off the fretboard while the others remain.

Now, try taking 2 fingers off the fretboard while the others remain.

Now, try 3 fingers then all 4.

Repeat with the other 5 strings.

Note: This is merely an independence exercise. This is not how you are supposed to play the guitar.

When you are actually playing, you should try not to lift your fingers any higher off the fretboard than they really need to be for any particular task. Your fingers should always be poised above the notes that they are about to play, always thinking ahead. Again, economy of effort is the guiding principle.

D. String Dampening

When sounding notes that are the same pitch as an open string (or closely related to the overtones of an open string), that open string itself will start vibrating sympathetically.

Try this:

With your amp on at a reasonable volume, play the E at the 9th fret of your G string. Be careful not to touch any of the other strings with either of your hands. Quickly release the finger pressure, so that the 3rd string no longer sounds.

You should notice that your both your open E strings as well as your open A string are still ringing out. They are vibrating "sympathetically" to the fretted E.

The same phenomenon will happen, for sure, whenever you play any of the following notes anywhere, in

any octave, on the guitar: E, A, D, G, B.

Plus, there are other acts of nature that complicate things even more. Eg. Playing a note that is fretted one fret above or below a node (one of the possible equal divisions of a string's length) and then releasing the pressure to stop it vibrating, will often cause the harmonic at that node to sound.

Try this:

Play the F at the 6th string's 13th fret and immediately release the pressure. You should notice the sound of the 12th fret harmonic, E, still ringing out.

It is often possible to set off a sympathetic vibration from many other causes.

Clearly, some sort of method for controlling all these unintended sounds, especially on an amplified guitar, is required.

What follows, is an outline of the way **I** dampen strings. Again, I'm sorry, but, everyone is different. There is no right way to do this. Most guitar method books don't even mention this subject at all!

1. When I am fretting notes on the 6th string, my fretting hand's 1st finger will lightly touch all of the other strings in order to dampen them. Sometimes, my 4th finger will accomplish the same task. Rarely, I will use one of my other fingers for this.
2. When fretting a note on the 5th string, I will partially overshoot that string with whatever finger I am fretting with, and lightly touch my 6th string in order to prevent the 6th string from accidentally sounding. The other strings are dampened via the same methods as I describe when fretting notes on the 6th string.
3. When fretting a note on the 4th, string I will partially overshoot that string with whatever finger I am fretting with and lightly touch my 5th string in order to prevent the 5th string from accidentally sounding. The 3rd, 2nd and 1st strings are dampened via the same methods as I describe when fretting notes on the 6th string. I dampen the 6th string by lightly touching it with the extreme base of my thumb (palm side) of my **picking hand**.
4. When fretting a note on the 3rd string, I will partially overshoot that string with whatever finger I am fretting with, and lightly touch my 4th string in order to prevent the 4th string from accidentally sounding. The 2nd and 1st strings are dampened via the same methods as I described when fretting notes on the 6th string. I dampen the 6th and 5th strings by lightly touching them with the extreme base of my thumb (palm side) of my **picking hand**.
5. When fretting a note on the 2nd string, I will partially overshoot that string with whatever finger I am fretting with, and lightly touch my 3rd string in order to prevent the 3rd string from accidentally sounding. The 1st string is dampened via the same methods as I described when fretting notes on the 6th string. I dampen the 6th, 5th and 4th strings by lightly touching them with the extreme base of my thumb (palm side) of my **picking hand**.
6. When fretting a note on the 1st string, I will partially overshoot that string with whatever finger I am fretting with, and lightly touch my 2nd string in order to prevent the 2nd string from accidentally sounding. I dampen the 6th, 5th, 4th and 3rd strings by lightly touching them with the extreme base of my thumb (palm side) of my **picking hand**.

Classical guitar technique uses the plucking hand's fingers, thumb (mostly) and palm (a little) for string dampening, as well as the fretting hand's fingers. Sometimes, when using pick + fingers technique, it is necessary to dampen the strings with the 3 available fingers of the picking hand. Sometimes, open strings must be dampened with the fretting hand's fingers. Every situation is different.

The general rule of thumb here is that **you** should be in control of, or at least aware of, all the sounds coming off of your guitar. In order for you to be able to do this, you have to listen very closely to what you are playing and be determined to not settle for inferior execution. Once you know how you want something to sound, it is up to you to develop the technique to be able to make it sound that way.

I like to compare this situation to the concept in audio engineering of "signal to noise ratio". The guitar, especially the electric guitar, is pretty much impossible to control completely. This is especially true when improvising on an electric guitar. There are simply too many variables. There is always some sound coming off the guitar that was not directly intended by the player. At any one time, however, this can be minimized so that a listener will only be aware of the sounds you intend them to notice.

On the other hand, part of the charm of the guitar is the way all these sympathetic vibrations sometimes drone away in the background, complimenting the overtones of the chords or notes being played. It can have the effect of a type of reverberation. As with all art, it is a sensitive balancing act we are involved with here.

E. Fretting Hand: The Thumb

For most people, doing the above finger independence exercise will get them to place their thumb just slightly above the centre of the back of the neck, with the thumb almost exactly behind the first finger. This is similar to the thumb position advocated in classical guitar technique, and there is rarely any real reason to have your thumb anywhere else, in my opinion. In the upper positions, the thumb is placed successively more and more behind the first finger (i.e. towards the nut).

Note: Many players use the fretting hand thumb occasionally to fret bass notes (or even to mute the 6th string). I hardly ever do this because I had a teacher, early on, who frowned upon it. But many of my favorite jazz guitar players (eg. Metheny, Scofield, etc.) do it all the time.

But once again, a survey of just a few great guitarists will show that this is highly variable. As I remember it, I think Jim Hall and Mick Goodrick both keep their thumbs as I have described, for the most part. But Pat Metheny and John Scofield's thumbs are all over the place. Sometimes, occasionally moving your thumb away from the centre of the neck, and hanging it over the top for a while, can serve to relieve some strain if it is beginning to build up. (See below - Fretting Hand: The Wrist.) It can also be used to dampen the 6th string.

There is rarely any real need for the fleshy part of the palm of your hand to be touching the back of the neck. All pressure to the strings should be applied between the finger tips and the tip of your thumb.

Your thumb should always be relaxed, with the thumb-tip never bent inward.

When the fingers are removed from the fretboard, the thumb pad should, generally, remain lightly touching the back of the neck, moving around, getting ready for the next passage.

Do not use your fretting hand to hold the guitar in place. The guitar should be held in place via the forearm of your picking hand and your thigh, and supplemented by a good, well placed, secure shoulder strap. When seated, a footstool under the picking-hand-side foot is a good idea too. But keep the footstool pretty low. The guitar is held firmly in place by the posture of the player, in such a way that the hands are free to do whatever they need to without having to use them secure the guitar's position.

F. Fretting Hand: Finger Stretches

A very useful feature of the fretting hand is the ability to stretch the fingers such that 2 fingers can span 3 adjacent frets as opposed to only 2 adjacent frets. This is usually done between fingers 1 and 2, and/or fingers 3 and 4. Stretches are done sometimes between the inner 2 fingers also, but for most players this is needed only on a rare occasion. In the lower positions of the fretboard these stretches are more difficult to execute due to the wider spacing between the frets. Finger stretches get easier the higher up the fretboard one gets.

Try this:

1. On the 6th string, put your 1st finger in the 2nd fret. (F#)
2. Now, put your remaining 3 fingers in the next 3 frets respectively. All 4 fingers should be down now across frets 2, 3, 4 and 5.
3. Put your first finger in the 1st fret now (F), while keeping the other fingers still depressed.

This is a "1st finger stretch".

[Note: Finger stretches, on the 5th and 6th strings (with either the 1st, or 4th fingers ... see below), are pretty much impossible to execute unless your thumb is in the position I advocated earlier. But finger stretches on the upper strings can be accomplished with the thumb placed almost anywhere.]

4. Put your 1st finger back in the 2nd fret now, and stretch your 4th finger so that it frets the note B \flat in the 6th fret.

This is a "4th finger stretch". [Ditto, regarding the placement of the thumb.]

5. See if you can do a 1st finger stretch and a 4th finger stretch simultaneously, so that your 1st and 4th fingers now cover a 6 fret area.

In 2nd position, aka Position II (i.e. 1st finger normally plays in the 2nd fret - see Subsection H., below), this is quite a stretch, because the frets are spaced so far apart. But it CAN be done, and it should be practiced.

When doing either a 1st finger stretch or a 4th finger stretch, your 2nd and 3rd fingers should remain poised over their designated default frets, while the 1st and 4th fingers actually stretch up or down 1 fret.

When trying to execute a finger stretch, it is wrong to move your whole hand down (or up) to the lower (or higher) fretboard area. The hand should not move. If it does move, then you've shifted position instead of accomplishing a finger-stretch. Position shifts can be good things, *unless you're trying to do a finger stretch*!

When doing a finger stretch, the thumb (when it's on the back of the neck) should not have to move either. I.e. Within any single position; anything you play should not require the thumb's position to be moved. Thumb movement is generally part of (and indicative of) a position *shift*.

G. Fretting Hand: The Wrist (About Carpal Tunnel Syndrome)

Attempting to do these wide finger stretches on the lower strings in 2nd position, where the frets are so widely spaced, has probably resulted in your wrist becoming sharply bent away from the neck. This is necessary every once in a while, in the lower positions. But care should be taken to minimize the wrist's angle and the frequency of using these sharp wrist-bends, or else some rather nasty RSI's (Repetitive Strain Injuries) can result, including Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS) and Tendonitis. Your wrist should never need to bend up, towards the neck, btw, although sometimes you might want to do this just for a change.

CTS happens when the little tunnel through the cartilage that surrounds the nerves that run from your forearm through to your hand and fingers becomes compressed repetitively. This causes the conduction of the electrical impulses along the nerves to suffer. The symptoms are tingling in the fingertips (as if your hand has gone to sleep, due to lack of circulation), often accompanied by pain. The symptoms usually go away with a little rest or stretching. But if it becomes chronic it can easily ruin a career. What happens in chronic cases is that the muscles in the base of the thumb begin to atrophy, and once that begins they don't ever come back to full strength again.

ALWAYS be VERY careful to avoid over-bending the wrist joint of either hand (but especially the fretting hand) too much and too often when playing the guitar!!!

H. "Position-Playing" On Single Strings

The finger independence and finger stretching exercises, above, have brought us to the concept of what is called "Position-Playing". Position-Playing is a technique whereby you limit yourself to a 6-fret area of the fingerboard and fingerings for single note lines (like scales and arpeggios and melodies) are determined, almost solely, based on your hand's present position on the fretboard a few "rules".

The finger independence exercise you did earlier had you in what is called 1st Position, or Position I. (Aka Open-Position.) In 1st Position, any notes that you need to play in the 1st fret are played with the 1st finger. Anything in the 2nd fret is played with the 2nd finger. Anything in the 3rd fret is played by the 3rd finger. And anything in the 4th fret is played by the 4th finger.

In Open-Position, the open strings are also available to play the notes that are not right under our 4 fingers if and when those notes are required. In all other positions, besides Position I, we use finger-stretches to play any notes that are not right under our 4 fingers. [In the higher positions we don't use any open strings in Position-Playing technique, generally speaking.]

In guitar notation, the position number is indicated with uppercase Roman numerals. Eg. "V" means "Position Five". The position number is determined by the fret number that the 1st finger *normally* plays in, not the fret below that where you'll sometimes be stretching to.

- In the finger stretching exercise, you started out with your hand in Position II.
- When playing the F natural in the 1st fret, you were cautioned not to move your hand down to Position I, but rather, to stretch your 1st finger.
- It is a common mistake to accidentally shift position when trying to do a finger stretch.
- If it helps, try thinking of the position number as really being the fret number of the fret *below your 2nd finger*, instead of the fret above your 1st finger.
- Within a single position, you are always anchored into that position by where your 2nd and 3rd fingers *have to* play. As soon as they play somewhere else, a position shift has occurred.

For example: When playing in Position II, your 2nd finger should always be playing in the 3rd fret, and

your 3rd finger should always be playing in the 4th fret. As soon as your 2nd finger plays a note in the 4th fret, you have shifted to Position III. Likewise, as soon as your 3rd finger has played a note in the 5th fret, you have shifted to Pos. III. Etc.

Note: Although you may find some well-known players who make use of what looks like finger-stretches between fingers 2 and 3, I will not be covering these, as such, in this book. When the 3rd finger is used in a fret normally assigned to the 4th finger, I will be labeling that as a shift of position, even if the shift is only very brief. You should know, though, that finger stretches between fingers 2 and 3 happen quite often within certain types of chord grips. But when playing single-note lines, my advice is to save these types of finger stretches for a very rainy day.

Using Position-Playing techniques it becomes evident that a fingering for any scale, or arpeggio of any chord-type, is possible, wherever your hand happens to be on the fretboard.

Examples:

- All 12 major scales can be played in Position 5.

- An arpeggio for a Maj7 chord, with *any* root can also be played in Pos. V.

The fingering you come up with may not be the best fingering, but it will be a do-able fingering nonetheless. "Do-able", after the fingers have gotten used to this idea of finger stretches and after some practice, that is!

Position-Playing is a wonderful conceptual tool. But many novice players get hung up on it, and overdo its usefulness in their minds. It is *not* the "right" way to play. It is simply *one* very effective concept for calculating relatively logical fingerings for single-note lines based on hand/fretboard position. It can be quite useful when sight-reading, because you can leave your eyes glued to the page, instead of glancing down at the neck as is often needed when doing position shifts. However, after a piece is known a little better, it is rare to find that a fingering that stays in any one position for very long actually sounds very good. The musically expressive stuff usually requires frequent position shifts, and slides, and hammer-ons, etc. I.e. It requires phrasing that simply cannot be achieved within any single position.

Practicing in position is also a great way to get your fingers to learn how to do things that they don't really want to do yet, but that they ARE capable of. I.e. It is great for developing finger independence and strength.

Position-Playing can also be quite useful when looking for ways to join scales and arpeggios by step or common tone (eg. when improvising), because within any single position, there is usually only one place where any particular pitch can be fingered (and at most, two places). It is interesting when you realize that you can solo over an entire tune, all within a single position. Studying an elaborate chord progression within a single position helps us to see how the notes of one scale (or arpeggio) join up with the notes of the next scale (or arpeggio), because all the scales (or arpeggios) are all right in front you in the same area of the fretboard, rather than spaced out all over the place. Again, this is just an exercise; a "limitation exercise". This is not "the right way" to play, or "the best way" to improvise. Only you can find the right way, for *you*. But, in my opinion, it's good to be armed with the knowledge of as many of the possible fingerings for any line as you can devise. And, in my opinion, the fingerings you arrive at via Position-Playing are a great 1st step in mapping out the vast majority of all those possible fingerings.