

## Movable Chord Shapes 101

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There are hundreds of ‘movable’ chord shapes on the guitar. These shapes are great to use when playing with others – be it in a band situation – or just two acoustic guitars where one guitar plays the ‘open’ chords and the other guitar accompanies with movable chord shapes.

Before going on with this lesson, the student should have a basic knowledge of chord construction and the location of notes on the fretboard.

In this lesson we will look at three basic major shapes and their corresponding minor shapes all in the key of G. Let’s get started:

### Major Shapes

The “E” shape.

The image shows a musical staff in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The chord is represented by a single vertical line on the staff. Below the staff is a guitar fretboard diagram for the first three strings (Treble, A, B). The fret numbers are: Treble (3), A (4), and B (5). The label 'Gtr I' is centered above the fretboard.

Some may visualize this as an F chord. The root is on the fifth fret of the D string, major 3<sup>rd</sup> on the fourth fret of G, the 5<sup>th</sup> on the third fret of B, and the root is repeated on the third fret of E.

The “D” shape.

The image shows a musical staff in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The chord is represented by a single vertical line on the staff. Below the staff is a guitar fretboard diagram for the first three strings (Treble, A, B). The fret numbers are: Treble (7), A (7), and B (7). The label 'Gtr I' is centered above the fretboard.

The root is now on the eighth fret of the B string, the major 3<sup>rd</sup> on the seventh fret of E, and the 5<sup>th</sup> on the seventh fret of G. Notice how it looks like the top of a D chord.

## The “A” shape

The diagram shows a musical staff in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. A single chord is written on the staff. Below the staff is a guitar fretboard diagram for the first six strings (T, A, B). The fret numbers are: T=10, A=12, B=12.

Gtr I		
T	10	
A	12	
B	12	

The root is now on the twelfth fret of the G string, the major 3<sup>rd</sup> on the twelfth fret of B, and the 5<sup>th</sup> on the tenth fret of E. Notice how it looks like the top of an A chord.

On a piano, these are called inversions – as we are ‘inverting the locations of the chord tones (root, major 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup>) while going ‘up’ the fretboard. If you have a keyboard available, try these on the keyboard as it is much easier to visualize how the chord tones move. Also – look at all the possibilities ! You can repeat these on many octaves on the keyboard – you can also repeat these on many (albeit, not as many) on the fretboard.

A good way to practice these is to play them one after another to get the sounds and positions engrained.

The diagram shows a musical staff in G major and 4/4 time with three chords. Below is a guitar fretboard diagram for the first six strings (T, A, B). The fret numbers are: T=3, 7, 10; A=3, 8, 12; B=4, 7, 12.

Gtr I			
T	3	7	10
A	3	8	12
B	4	7	12

With a good deal of work, and patience you can find other shapes on the interior of the keyboard. Note that the “E” shape provided is a four note chord. What if you find inversions of the G chord on just the D, G & B strings, or just the A,D & G strings:

The diagram shows a musical staff in G major and 4/4 time with two chords. Below is a guitar fretboard diagram for the first six strings (T, A, B). The fret numbers are: T=3, 8, 12; A=4, 7, 12; B=5, 9, 12 in the first column, and 4, 7, 12; 5, 9, 12; 5, 10, 14 in the second column.

Gtr I						
T	3	8	12			
A	4	7	12	4	7	12
B	5	9	12	5	9	12
				5	10	14

Sonically speaking, when playing in a band situation or with another guitar player we want to stay in our own ‘sonic space’ rather than doubling up (which often means muddying up) another instruments part. So if you are playing with another acoustic guitar that is playing open chords

you can often embellish by using chord shapes on the upper strings. But remember – all rules are meant to be broken. It is about what sounds good.

### Minor shapes

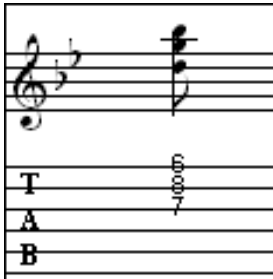
Let's take a look at these same shapes in minor voicings. Remember, the only difference between the major shapes preceding, and the minor shapes that follow is a flatted third. The more you practice these shapes being cognizant of where the root, third, and fifth (chord tones) are then the easier it will be to visualize the minor shapes.

The “E<sup>m</sup>” shape.



The root is on the fifth fret of the D string, minor 3<sup>rd</sup> on the third fret of G, the 5<sup>th</sup> on the third fret of B, and the root is repeated on the third fret of E. Notice how it looks like the top of an E<sup>m</sup> chord.

The “D<sup>m</sup>” shape.



The root is now on the eighth fret of the B string, the minor 3<sup>rd</sup> on the sixth fret of E, and the 5<sup>th</sup> on the seventh fret of G. Notice how it looks like the top of a D<sup>m</sup> chord.

## The “A<sup>m</sup>” shape

Musical notation showing the A<sup>m</sup> triad in the twelfth position. The treble clef is in the key of A minor. The notes are A (12th fret E string), C (11th fret B string), and E (10th fret E string). The guitar fretboard diagram below shows the strings T, A, and B with fret numbers 10, 11, and 12 respectively.

The root is now on the twelfth fret of the E string, the minor 3<sup>rd</sup> on the eleventh fret of B, and the 5<sup>th</sup> on the tenth fret of E. Notice how it looks like the top of an A<sup>m</sup> chord.

Musical notation showing the A<sup>m</sup> triad in the seventh position. The treble clef is in the key of A minor. The notes are A (7th fret E string), C (7th fret B string), and E (5th fret E string). The guitar fretboard diagram below shows the strings T, A, and B with fret numbers 5, 7, and 10 respectively.

As with the major shapes, a good way to practice these is to play them one after another to get the sounds and positions engrained.

## Combining shapes

Here's one idea. Hopefully it will inspire many more on your part. This is an example of a Steve Cropper style rhythm part to vamp behind a G major chord:

Musical notation for a Steve Cropper style rhythm part. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 80. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The notation shows a series of chords in the treble clef, with a 3-measure rest indicated by a bracket and the number 3. The guitar fretboard diagram below shows the strings T, A, and B with fret numbers 7, 7, 7, 7, 5, 3, 7, 7, 7, 7, 5, 3 respectively.

Notice how we move from an upper inversion to the next lowest inversion by ‘passing’ thru an Am triad. Why does this work? When we look at diatonic harmony, we are simply harmonizing the descending scale tones of B-A-G (the top of the triads) with diatonic harmony.

## Adding movement to static chords

In the preceding example did you notice that the Am triad is also the relative minor of the IV chord in G (C)? Moving from the IV chord to the I chord is a very common change in rock, blues, and country music. We can imply movement in many ways including using the suspended 4<sup>th</sup>, suspended 2<sup>nd</sup>, and by hammering on the major third from the minor third. Some examples follow:

The diagram shows three chord shapes (T, A, B) on a six-string guitar. The treble clef is in G major. The first shape is a G major triad (T) with notes G, B, D. The second shape is an A minor triad (A) with notes A, C, E. The third shape is a G major triad (B) with notes G, B, D. Hammering (H) is indicated on the B string for each shape, moving from the minor third to the major third.

The above example shows hammering on the major third from the minor third for the three chord shapes studied so far.

The diagram shows four chord shapes (T, A, B) on a six-string guitar. The treble clef is in G major. The first shape is a G major triad (T) with notes G, B, D. The second shape is an A minor triad (A) with notes A, C, E. The third shape is a G major triad (B) with notes G, B, D. The fourth shape is a G major triad (B) with notes G, B, D. Hammering (H) and sliding (sl) are indicated on the B string for each shape, moving from the major third to the suspended 4.

The above example shows hammering on the suspended 4 from the major third (a half step) for the E & D shapes. The A shape lends itself more to sliding to the suspended 4<sup>th</sup> than to hammering on. Notice how the “A” shape lends itself easily to also playing the suspended 2<sup>nd</sup>. Using a suspended 2<sup>nd</sup> in the E & D shapes is not as easy, but it can be done. As was suggested earlier in the lesson, try to find these movements in other voicings of these chords in both major and minor.

## A life long study

This lesson barely scratches the surface relative to the possibilities of using different chord shapes up and down the fretboard for accompaniment. It is only meant to ‘show you the way’. We only used three inversions of a basic major chord (intervals 1, 3 & 5). Furthermore, we only focused on the G, B & E strings and looked briefly at other string combinations..

Once you are comfortable with how these triads are constructed and used, try expanding your musical vocabulary by applying these principles to seventh, ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords. You can easily spend a few enjoyable decades absorbing all of this.