

First Lesson

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Introduction

There is much to cover in the first lesson. It would be best to have the information prepared ahead of time.... So, here we go!

First off, a little information about me. I have been playing guitar since 1970, taking a few years “off” to raise children. I have been teaching full time for over twenty years - since February of 2005.

All students are unique.

Our lesson plan will be tailored towards what you want to learn and how you want to learn it. We will strive to match your lessons to your interests. I want to teach you what you want to learn, rather than what I would like to teach you.

There are fundamentals we must cover, starting with this lesson. Once the fundamentals are covered (a few lessons), students are encouraged to bring in music they want to learn. Many students pick songs from their playlists. This is a great place to start. We can learn most songs together using the internet and other tools.

Whether or not we use instruction books on our journey, we will be writing things down. Please keep writings organized for reference.

If you have questions during the week, feel free to text if you need your question answered immediately. Otherwise, write your questions down to get answers at your next lesson.

We strive to start on time and end on time. If I am going to be 5 minutes or later to a lesson (technical difficulties, etc.) I will text you to let you know.

So, let’s get started.....

The Process of Playing

As with any musical instrument it is important to enjoy the process of playing. It does not matter how good you are. It matters that you enjoy playing, that you enjoy discovering new sounds and new ideas with your instrument. That you enjoy hearing it. I always ask new students why they want to learn guitar. The best answer I have received to date came from a 7-year-old student who said, “I like the way it sounds”.

Except for young children, I will ask new students “what do you want to get out of lessons”. A big question and something to think about often as you learn more. Some people like to learn about music theory (i.e. what is under the hood), while others just want to play songs\music and learn that way (just drive the car) and learn that way. All paths are valid. All paths involve curiosity, having goals (both short and long term), and practice to achieve those goals.

Learning to play any instrument involves the following elements:

1. Physical agility
2. Muscle Memory
3. Musical Memory
4. Talent
5. Intellect
6. Knowledge
7. Passion
8. Emotion

It is a combination of these elements that lead us to find our own voice on any instrument. Note that elements 1-3 above can only be arrived by practicing – the process of repetition to build muscle memory and musical memory. A teacher can help you with these things. Elements 4 – 8 are the elements that the student brings to the table. The more that your muscle and musical memories take over, the more you will be able to sit back and listen as you play– to enjoy the fruits of your labor – and, as my 7-year-old student said, ‘like the way it sounds’.

Tools of the Trade

Along with your guitar, your curiosity and a basic desire to learn, the guitar student should have, or have access to, the following items:

Tuner

Metronome

Folder or binder (or bookshelf) for learning materials

Music Stand

Capo

A practice space with minimal distraction

Comfortable armless chair or stool

Guitar polish and soft non-abrasive or microfiber cloth

A convenient way to listen to music (your ear is your most important tool)

Important Parts of the Guitar

Body – the sound of the guitar resonates through the body and emanates through the ‘sound hole’ on acoustic guitars. On electric guitars, the sound of the strings is converted to electrical energy by the “pickups” and then routed to an amplifier via a cord, or wireless system.

Strings – should be a light gauge for the beginning student

Tuning pegs – located on the ‘headstock’

Frets – on the ‘fretboard’

Nut – located at the top of the fretboard

Bridge – located at the other end of the strings from the nut. “open” strings vibrate between the bridge and the nut. “Fretted” notes vibrate in between the crown (top) of the fret and the bridge.

Tuning

Before you play anything, the guitar needs to be in tune.

The easiest way to tune the guitar is to use a tuner. There are excellent hardware based tuners available. Snark is a longstanding good brand. There are also ‘apps’ that you can keep on your phone/device which work well. Tuning is accomplished by playing the string and visually observing the resulting note. Very easy.

A440 Hertz (Hz)

Hertz is a measurement of how often something vibrates per second. The internationally accepted frequency for the A string vibrating on a guitar is 440 Hz.

Hence the term A440.

Some tuners and tuner apps allow you to adjust A440 either up or down. You want to avoid this! So, if your tuner allows you to adjust A440 to A439 or A441 etc., be sure to avoid doing so! Note that sometimes you can adjust it by accident.

Relative Tuning

The pitches of the open strings in standard tuning are E, A, D, G, B, E:

(Eddie ate dynamite, good-bye Eddie)

<u>String #</u>	<u>Pitch</u>	<u>Reference Location for relative tuning</u>
6	E	
5	A –	fifth fret of E
4	D -	fifth fret of A
3	G -	fifth fret of D
2	B –	<u>fourth</u> fret of G
1	E -	fifth fret of B

Relative tuning is accomplished by playing the note on the reference string (i.e. the fifth fret of the low E) and turning the appropriate tuning peg (i.e. the A string) until the notes are the same (called unison).

When using relative tuning, it is important that you start with a reference string that is “in tune”. Before tuners became inexpensive, most guitarists carried an A440 pitch fork with them to accomplish this. Growing up in Brooklyn in the 1960s the dial tone was a G# so we often tuned the fourth fret of the low E string to the dial tone and then used relative tuning from there.

Tuning may not be easy at first, but as with all aspects of playing it gets easier with repetition.

Let’s make some joyful noise:

Good Posture

Good posture leads to good guitar playing. Sit up straight and let the arch of the guitar rest on your right leg. The fretboard should be somewhere near a 45 degree angle with your upper body. Experiment to find what is comfortable. For younger or otherwise shorter students, having a stool underneath the right foot can be very helpful. When first starting to play you may have to look over the guitar to see the frets. Go ahead and do this. Do not slouch the bottom of the guitar away from you to make it easier to see the frets. This results in bad posture and unnecessary strains. Important - Never play with your left hand resting on your leg!

Some students have success practicing in front of a mirror to be able to see the fretboard.

Fretting Your First Note

The positions for your thumb on your left hand are either slightly over the neck or ball of thumb in the middle of the neck, or somewhere in between. When fretting the knuckles of your left hand should be bent so that the tip of your finger comes 'straight down' on the string. The tip of your finger should press just to the left of the fret for consistent tone. This is important for single note playing. It is not important when playing chords. When playing chords, fit your fingers on the fretboard comfortably and in such a way that all intended strings ring out. Do not dampen adjacent strings unless you are intentionally doing so.

When first learning chords, check that all notes are ringing out by playing chord as an arpeggio (one string at a time) rather than strumming the whole chord at once. Arpeggio means "broken chord" in Italian.

NOTE: For guitar the fingers on your left hand are numbered T (Thumb) and then 1-4 (index through pinky). Borrowing from Classical Guitar we also use Italian words for our right hand fingers –

P (pulgar/thumb)

I (indice/index)

M (medio, middle)

A (anular/ring)

C (chiquito/little)

Left hand fingers are referred to as T(thumb), 1 (index), 2 (middle), 3 (ring), 4 (pinky).

Try fretting the first fret on the high E string (this pitch is F) with your left hand using your first finger. Pick the note and listen to it. When fretting correctly the note should ring clearly. If the note buzzes or otherwise does not ring clearly then check for the following:

1. Are you pressing down with your left finger hard enough?
2. Is your finger 'right behind' the fret?

Once you are successful repeat the following pattern:

Open string – first fret, Open String – first fret etc. until you can get the fretted note to ring clearly and consistently.

The image shows a musical exercise in 4/4 time. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The exercise consists of four measures, each containing four quarter notes. The notes are: G4 (open), A4 (1st fret), B4 (2nd fret), and C5 (3rd fret). The TAB below the staff shows the fretting for each note: Measure 1 (0, 1, 0, 1), Measure 2 (0, 1, 0, 1), Measure 3 (0, 1, 0, 1), and Measure 4 (0, 1, 0, 1). The strings are labeled T, A, B from top to bottom.

This is the exercise written out in TAB and Musical Notation. TAB is further described at the end of this handout.

Before repeating this exercise on all strings, let's talk about right hand technique.

Basic Right-Hand Technique

Here you have some decisions to make. There are several ways you can pick the strings with your right hand:

1. With your fingers
2. With a flat pick
3. With a thumb pick and finger picks

Which begs the question – why not do it all?

If you play a classical (nylon string) guitar then you will want to use your fingers primarily as the guitar is designed to be played this way.

For steel string guitar, I recommend learning to play with both pick and fingers. Once you have facility with your fingers you can try a thumb pick and even fingerpicks (as are typically used to play the banjo) to see if you like them.

Whatever method(s) you choose remember some basic rules:

1. Keep motion to a minimum (in both hands).
2. Keep your right arm anchored in a comfortable position.
3. Do not move your right arm to pick notes. All motion should come from the wrist down.
Make believe you just stuck your right hand in freezing cold water and shake the water off of your hands – notice you don't move your arm but rather shake from the wrist down. This is how to approach picking with your right hand – from the wrist down.
4. Pick the strings lightly always striving for good tone.
5. When using a flat pick you can control dynamics by adjusting how hard you grip the pick.

Holding a Pick

The pick should be gripped in between the thumb and index finger. The tip of the pick should not extend far from the tip of your index finger. Keep it close to the tip of your fingers to allow good control. When picking across multiple strings roll your right wrist *rather than moving your right arm up and down*. The right arm is too blunt an object to be involved in picking.

Grip the pick just hard enough to keep it from falling out of your fingers but not so hard that you tense up. Your arms need to be as relaxed as possible when you play guitar.

Try this exercise to illustrate this point. Hold your pick as described previously (relaxed). Now what the muscles in your right arm while squeezing the pick as hard as possible. Feel your muscles tighten up? If you grip very hard, the muscles will tighten all the way to the bicep and beyond. You cannot play guitar like this. Stay relaxed!!

Experiment with dynamics by adjusting your grip on the pick.

There are many different thicknesses, sizes and shapes of picks. Try experimenting with as many as possible. Most players prefer light or medium gauge picks for strumming, medium or heavier gauge picks for single note playing. There are no hard rules, more so personal preference.

Picking involves combining upstrokes and downstrokes. Now try Exercise 1, alternating the open string and fretting with the first finger on all strings alternating upstrokes and downstrokes:

Exercise 1

Exercise 1 is a 4/4 time signature exercise. The notation is written on a single staff with a treble clef. It consists of three measures. Measure 1 starts with a downstroke on the open string (0), followed by an upstroke on the first fret (1), a downstroke on the open string (0), and an upstroke on the first fret (1). Measure 2 starts with a downstroke on the open string (0), followed by an upstroke on the first fret (1), a downstroke on the open string (0), and an upstroke on the first fret (1). Measure 3 starts with a downstroke on the open string (0), followed by an upstroke on the first fret (1), a downstroke on the open string (0), and an upstroke on the first fret (1). The notation is written on a single staff with a treble clef. Below the staff is a tablature line with the following fret numbers: 0 1 0 1 | 0 1 0 1 | 0 1 0 1.

Once you are comfortable with this, let's explore the second, third and fourth frets which should be played with your second, third, and fourth fingers respectively. Note that by using this fingering you will not have to move your hand up or down the neck (referred to in guitar lingo as playing in a position). Try Exercise 2 one string at a time, then combine all strings as follows:

Exercise 2

Exercise 2 is a 5/4 time signature exercise. The notation is written on a single staff with a treble clef. It consists of three measures. Measure 1 starts with a downstroke on the open string (0), followed by an upstroke on the second fret (2), a downstroke on the open string (0), an upstroke on the third fret (3), a downstroke on the open string (0), and an upstroke on the fourth fret (4). Measure 2 starts with a downstroke on the open string (0), followed by an upstroke on the second fret (2), a downstroke on the open string (0), an upstroke on the third fret (3), a downstroke on the open string (0), and an upstroke on the fourth fret (4). Measure 3 starts with a downstroke on the open string (0), followed by an upstroke on the second fret (2), a downstroke on the open string (0), an upstroke on the third fret (3), a downstroke on the open string (0), and an upstroke on the fourth fret (4). The notation is written on a single staff with a treble clef. Below the staff is a tablature line with the following fret numbers: 0 1 2 3 4 | 0 1 2 3 4 | 0 1 2 3 4.

Play these exercises SLOWLY and caefully. Focus on getting the notes to ring clearly. Remember to exercise with good posture. These exercises will hopefully be a good first step on your journey. More fundamentals to come in future lessons.

ENJOY!

Tablature Notation

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Tablature notation (commonly known as TAB) is used for guitar and other fretted instruments. It is a simple way to represent musical notes as fret numbers on strings.

6 string guitar tab will represent the strings starting with the Low E string on the bottom and ending with the high E string on the top. Sometimes tab will have the string names represented on the left hand margin, sometimes not:

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E-----0-----  
B-----0-----  
G-----0-----  
D-----2-----  
A-----2-----  
E--0-----
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The above example is telling the student to play the open E string followed by the second fret on the A string, and the 2nd fret on the D string as individual notes and finally an E^m (minor) chord (all strings strummed at the same time).

The major drawback of tablature is that it does not communicate rhythmic information. The student must know the rhythm of the song or the tab is useless. The student's other choice is to use standard musical notation to read the rhythm and the notes together. In the above example there is no way to know whether the notes to be played are eighth notes, quarter notes, half notes, or a combination thereof.

The following example is the first four measures of the Tennessee classic Rocky Top with musical notation and tab combined:

The image shows the first four measures of the song 'Rocky Top' in 4/4 time, key of D major. The top staff is standard musical notation with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The notes are: Measure 1: D4, E4, F#4, G4; Measure 2: A4, B4, A4, G4; Measure 3: F#4, E4, D4, C4; Measure 4: D4 (half note). The bottom staff is guitar tablature with three lines labeled T (top), A (middle), and B (bottom). Measure 1: T-3, A-3, B-3, B-3; Measure 2: T-0, A-0, B-3, B-0; Measure 3: T-0, A-0, B-0, B-0; Measure 4: T-0.

If you had never heard Rocky Top, you would only be able to play it by reading the musical notation. If you are from Tennessee you won't need the musical notation, hence you can read the tab.

The most accurate tablature will come from reputable music book publishers such as Hal Leonard, Berklee Music Publishing along with a host of others. Music is transcribed by paid professionals who tab accurately. There are hundreds of thousands of songs "tabbed" on the internet, but these are often contributed by amateurs who may or may not transcribe accurately. Useful sites for good tab include Songsterr, Ultimate Guitar, TrueFire and others. Many YouTube videos include good tab as well.

Learning to read tab proficiently is an essential tool for the guitar student.