

Beginning Left-Hand Training

Before You Begin

Although your left and right hands perform distinctly different movements when playing the guitar, both function according to the same muscular principles. Minimizing tension is as important to your left hand as it is to your right. Since you've previously focused on right-hand training, you may tend to favor your right hand when positioning the guitar. Uncorrected, this can cause counterproductive tension in your left hand.

To eliminate this possibility, you should again carry out the right- and left-hand position checks (pp. 14 – 15). Be alert to the following common errors:

- Is the head of the guitar too low?
- Is the head of the guitar too far forward?
- Is the body of the guitar too low or too far to the left in relation to your torso?

Each of these errors can cause counterproductive left-hand tension. Experiment with both position checks until you find the position of maximum advantage for both hands.

Left-Hand Positioning

In preparation for left-hand positioning, carefully study the following illustration:

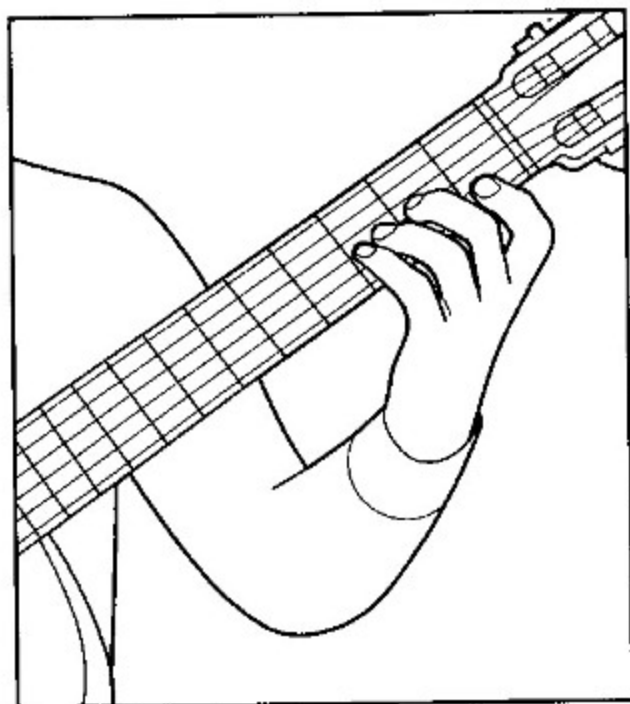


Figure 26

Notice that the elbow hangs comfortably downward, and the wrist is slightly arched. The finger joints are in their powerful midrange positions.

Your aims of left-hand positioning are as follows:

- To maintain the natural alignment of your wrist.
- To position your wrist and finger joints within their midrange of movement, and position your forearm within its midrange of rotation.

Proceed as follows:

□ Based on your experiments with the left- and right-hand position checks, carefully place the guitar head at a height which allows your left forearm to function within its midrange of rotation.

□ Compare your position to the following illustrations. With your left hand in playing position, your fourth-finger knuckle should be farthest from the side of the fingerboard, and your first-finger knuckle should be closest. Notice that each fingertip falls just behind its respective fret.

CORRECT LEFT-HAND POSITION

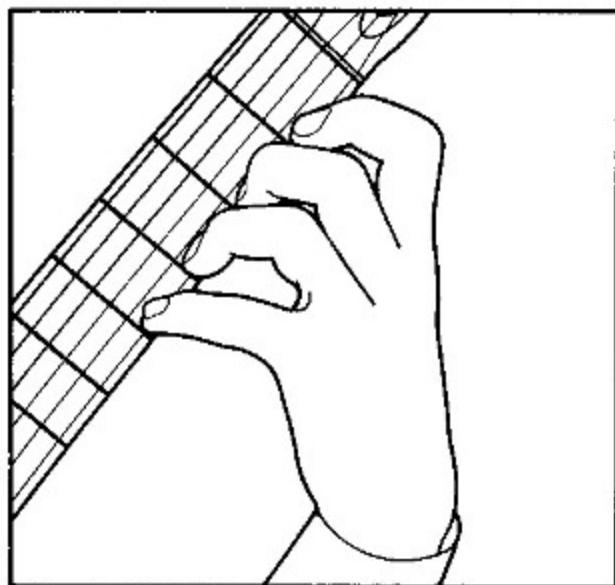


Figure 27A: The most advantageous left-hand position. The fingers can extend lengthwise along the fingerboard with a minimum of tension.

INCORRECT LEFT-HAND POSITION

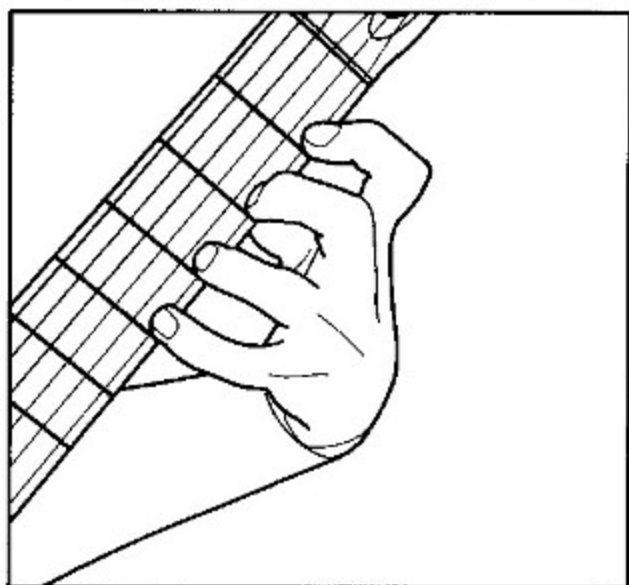


Figure 27B: A poor left-hand position. The fingers must perform a tense lateral spread to reach their respective frets.

Left-Hand Movement

Before beginning, you need to consider the care of your left-hand nails. Keep them short enough so that they don't touch the fingerboard when you depress a string. Also, to present a neat appearance during performance, keep your nails carefully shaped, clean, and the cuticles gently pushed back.

You'll begin left-hand movement with one of the simplest movement forms in guitar playing: forming A (La) on ③ at the second fret with 2.[†]

• Your aim is to operate your finger joints within their mid-range of motion.

Proceed as follows:

- Carefully place the tip of 2 on ③ just behind the 2nd fret (Figure 26). Depress the string firmly through a balance of pressure between your thumb and finger — not by pulling with your arm.
- Alternately sound A (La) and G (So) slowly and evenly.
- For maximum leverage and balance, place the tip joint of your thumb against the back of the guitar neck at a point opposite your first two fingers. **CAUTION: Apply the minimum pressure needed to produce a clear tone.** Carefully avoid unnecessary tension in your left hand and forearm.

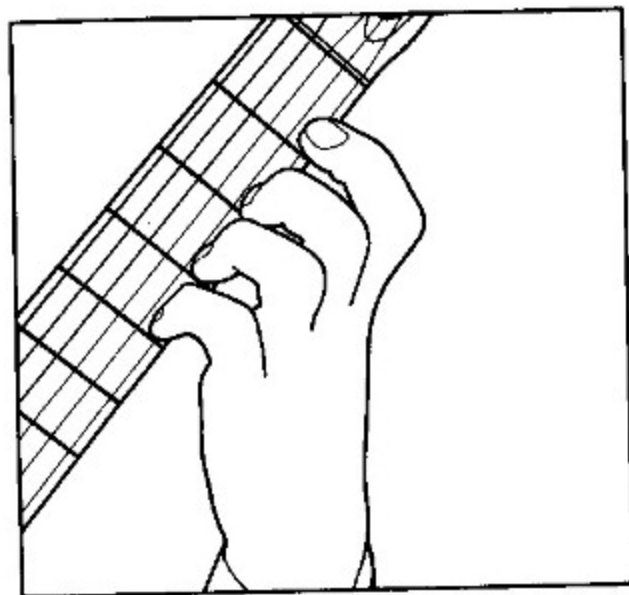


Figure 28: Incorrect position of the knuckle joints.

- Avoid drawing your fingers back (hyper-extending) at the knuckles, as shown in Figure 28. With your fingers correctly positioned in their midrange, movement for depressing the strings occurs mainly at the knuckles.

- When your fingers aren't contacting the strings, keep the joints well within midrange so that your fingertips remain comfortably suspended over the strings.

[†]Since solfege will become an essential part of your training, musical notes will often be identified by both letter name and solfege syllable. You'll find an introduction and explanation of solfege syllables in *Part Two*, p. 209.

Cultivate a sensitivity to counterproductive tension. Experiment by slightly altering the sideways position of your elbow, the rotation of your forearm, and the arch of your wrist. Practice freely altering these positions to determine the position of greatest strength and ease for your left-hand fingers.

Movement by Touch: Applying Aim-Directed Movement (ADM)

At first you'll need to watch the fingerboard as you execute left-hand movements — this is the quickest and easiest way to ensure the accurate placement of your fingers. To read music proficiently, however, you must learn to accurately place your fingers by touch rather than sight. You should begin this process as soon as you've gained confidence in executing left-hand movements by sight.

In doing this, you're beginning to apply ADM to left-hand movement. *When applied to the left hand, ADM is the process of knowing where to move your fingers on the fingerboard before actually moving them.*

Proceed as follows, beginning with A (La) on ③ at the 2nd fret with 2:

Count slowly and evenly in twos. While watching the fingerboard, alternately sound the open G (So) and A (La) as before. As you repeat these movements, look away from the fingerboard. Try to maintain the repeated accurate placement of your finger.

Be sensitive to error. If, as you're looking away from the fingerboard, you feel your finger starting to creep away from the fret, stop and reestablish the fret location by sight.

Maintain the natural alignment of your wrist and finger joints, and keep your forearm, wrist, and finger joints within their midrange positions. As you gain security, look away from the fingerboard for increasingly longer intervals. Continue this procedure until you can accurately and confidently place your finger by touch.

Practice until you can clearly visualize left-hand movements away from the guitar — seeing them in your mind's eye as though you're actually executing them on the fingerboard.

When you can confidently play A (La), repeat this procedure, alternating between the open B (Ti) and C (Do) on ② at the 1st fret with 1. Then alternate between C (Do) and D (Re) at the 3rd fret with 3 (or 4).

You'll find musical examples for practicing left-hand movement in *Part Two*, pp. 22 - 35.

Further Left-Hand Training

The Principles of Efficient Muscle Function apply in different ways to the right and left hands. The right-hand thumb and finger movements needed to play the guitar allow you not only to keep your right hand in a relatively stable position, but also to use the most advantageous movements when sounding the strings. Your left hand, however, must frequently execute movements and positions which don't entirely conform to the principles. But you can still use the principles as a point of departure, aiming for the least strenuous, most controlled, and most comfortable movements and positions. (Before proceeding, be certain you understand "The Four Principles of Efficient Muscle Function," pp. 9 - 11.)

Applying the Principles of Efficient Muscle Function

Each of the four principles has specific applications to your left hand.

Muscular Alignment: Never deviate your left-hand wrist. When moving from one position to another on the fingerboard, move your arm laterally from your shoulder joint. Although lateral spreading of your fingers is sometimes necessary, you can often minimize it by rotating your forearm clockwise to increase the angle at which your fingers approach the strings (see Figure 35B, p. 95).

Midrange Function of Joints: This is indispensable for minimizing tension. Although the Midrange Function Principle can always be applied to the wrist, it can't always be applied to the fingers. It can be applied often enough, however, for you to establish a powerful *basic* left-hand position. You can use this basic position as a point of departure whenever the music requires a movement form which contradicts this principle.

Uniform Direction of Joint Movement: When well coordinated, finger joints tend to move in a uniform direction. Although you can't always apply this principle, you should keep it in mind and apply it whenever possible.

Follow-Through: As a finger flexes to depress a string, it must continually apply force against the fingerboard. Thus, since there's no follow-through to consider, the Follow-Through Principle isn't a consideration when flexing a finger to depress a string.[†]

When applied to left-hand *extension*, the Follow-Through Principle is subtle. Some guitarists believe that the fingers, when extending from the frets and into their inactive positions, should be held as closely as possible to the fingerboard. But this is a misapplication of the "economy-of-movement" idea.^{††} A feeling of minimal tension is the best criterion for how far to lift your fingers. Don't overextend your fingers, but don't restrain them either. To gain left-hand speed and mobility, your fingers must move sufficiently to promote muscular release.

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Another consideration, though not directly related to the Principles of Efficient Muscle Function, is the amount of pressure you use when depressing the strings. At all times, avoid pressing the strings harder than necessary — use only enough pressure to get a clear sound. By generally observing these principles, you can reduce left-hand tension and fatigue.

Developing Left-Hand Mobility

Left-hand mobility refers to the free positioning of your hand to provide maximum advantage for the involved muscles as you execute left-hand movement forms. Left-hand mobility includes all movements of your arm, wrist, and fingers.^{†††}

[†]*To the teacher:* In downward technical slurs, of course, there is follow-through during flexion. But this follow-through generally occurs so naturally that it seldom requires any attention.

^{††}See "Economy of Movement," p. 122.

^{†††}*To the teacher:* Left-hand mobility also includes shifting. Shifting, however, is an advanced technique — thus, it will not be addressed in *Part One*.

In considering left-hand mobility, a review of the considerations provided on p. 70 will be helpful:

- As a basic technique, avoid deviation or hyperextension of your wrist.
- For maximum leverage, do not allow the middle or tip joints of the fingers to collapse — be sure to pay particular attention to the third and fourth fingers.
- Let the pull of your fingers determine the position of your hand. Freely rotate your forearm and allow your elbow to move out or in to achieve maximum ease for your fingers.

These considerations allow your fingers to function with maximum, well-balanced mechanical advantage and no excess tension.

You can move your left hand in the following ways:

- 1) by rotating your forearm
- 2) by moving your arm sideways, forward, or backward from your shoulder
- 3) by flexing, extending, or deviating your wrist
- 4) by flexing or extending your elbow
- 5) by combining any of the above

Although some movement forms require little or no mobility, others require considerable mobility. With proper training, you'll respond automatically to these movement forms, allowing your hand, wrist, and arm to follow the pull of your fingers. The following musical examples demand considerable left-hand mobility:

A. B. C.

The musical examples are written on a single staff in treble clef, C major, and 2/4 time. Example A consists of four measures: a chord of F4-A4-C5 (fingered 2), a quarter note G4 (fingered 3), a quarter note F4 (fingered 2), and a quarter note E4 (fingered 2). Example B consists of four measures: a chord of F4-A4-C5 (fingered 2), a quarter note G4 (fingered 3), a quarter note F4 (fingered 2), and a quarter note E4 (fingered 2). Example C consists of four measures: a chord of F4-A4-C5 (fingered 2), a quarter note G4 (fingered 1), a quarter note F4 (fingered 3), and a quarter note E4 (fingered 2).

You should play the first and third chords of each example with your wrist and arm in their midrange positions:

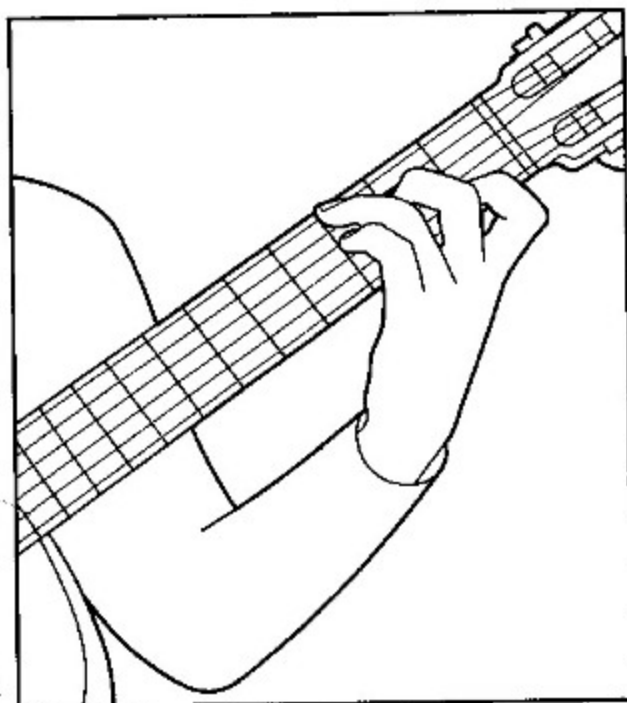


Figure 35A

The second chord of each example, however, requires you to arch your wrist and rotate your forearm clockwise, causing the knuckle area of your first finger to press gently against the edge of the fingerboard:

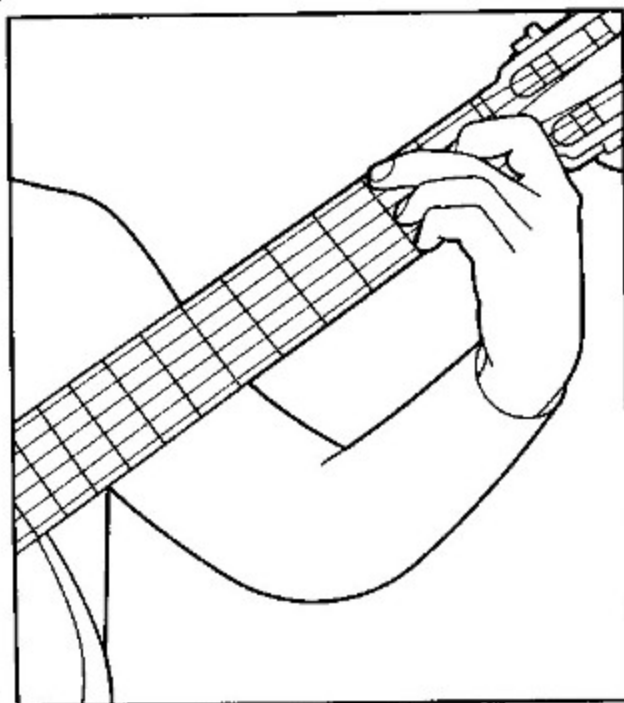


Figure 35B

Notice also that, in the second chord of Example A, your first finger acts as a pivot while your second finger moves to F (Fa).

While you should freely apply the concepts of left-hand mobility as you execute movement forms, remember that a single movement form may include more than one finger movement. If you're playing two or more consecutive notes rapidly enough so that they feel like one unified movement — as in a scale fragment — you should consider them to be a single movement form. Thus, your hand position shouldn't favor any single finger — rather, it should provide a balance of muscular advantage for all fingers involved in the movement form.

Until you've gained coordination with left-hand mobility, you should evaluate any fingering or hand position by two simple criteria:



As with all other aspects of guitar technique, your goal is to practice left-hand mobility until it becomes habitual.

Slurs

A *slur* is a curved line between, above, or below two or more successive notes. In guitar music, there are two kinds of slurs:

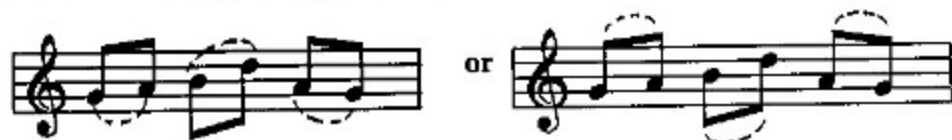
Phrasing slur: This indicates that the notes are to be played as a group.



Technical slur: This occurs only between notes of different pitch—it indicates that, after sounding the first note with your right hand, you sound the remaining note with your left hand alone. Older editions indicate the technical slur with a solid curved line:



Newer editions generally indicate the technical slur with a broken curved line:



This clearly distinguishes the technical slur from the phrasing slur and tie.*

Technical Slurs

Slurs are either upward or downward, depending on their pitchwise direction of movement. To execute an upward slur, sound a note with the right hand, then rapidly and firmly hammer the vibrating string against the fret with a left-hand finger. The resulting sound comes not only from the string's vibration carried over from the preceding note, but also from the impact of the string against the fret.



To execute a downward slur, sound a note which is formed with a left-hand finger, then pluck the string with the left-hand finger to sound the lower note of the slur.



*For an explanation of the tie, see *Part Two*, p. 43.

Types of Downward Slurs

There are three types of downward slurs. Each of these slurs is defined by how the finger moves in relation to the higher adjacent string. (Since there's no higher string adjacent to ①, downward slurs on ① are not classified in this way.)

Rest slur: The left-hand finger executes the slur parallel to the surface of the fingerboard, coming to rest against the higher adjacent string. Although this is the most powerful slur, it's a very restrictive movement. Thus, the rest slur is most frequently used in slower passages.

Brush slur: The left-hand finger lightly brushes the higher adjacent string and passes over it in a follow-through movement. This is the most rapid and practical slur. Since the finger executing the slur brushes against the higher adjacent string, this string must be dampened in one of the following ways:

- If the slurred note is formed with a finger, lean the finger against the higher adjacent string.
- If the slurred note is an open string, use an inactive left-hand finger to dampen the adjacent higher string.

Free slur: The left-hand finger executing the slur plucks sharply outward, passing over the higher adjacent string. The free slur is used when the higher adjacent string must continue sounding. Also, it's the most practical slur when you're barring across six strings.

Although the brush slur is used most often, you may occasionally find the rest and free slurs useful, depending on the speed, dynamics, and left-hand requirements of the music.

You can rapidly develop your slur technique by being sensitive to feelings of strength and ease of execution. Always observe the following as you practice slurs:

• For maximum strength and leverage, keep the finger executing the slur curved in its midrange position — this is especially important when slurring with your fourth finger.

• In playing the upward slur, don't unnecessarily restrict movement. Lift your fingers enough so that you'll have sufficient downward momentum for "hammering."

• Stress sympathetic movements when slurring groups of notes.

You'll find musical examples for slurring in *Part Two*, pp. 163 – 167.*

*For more detailed slurring exercises, see my *Classic Guitar Technique: Slur, Ornament and Reach Development Exercises*, CPP-Belwin, 15800 N.W. 48th Avenue, Miami, FL 33014.