

---

# *The Right Hand*

---

## Tone Production

The right hand produces sound. Although the quality of tone is determined by both hands, the type of tone and the volume are controlled primarily by the right hand.

There are seven ingredients that go into tone production:

1. Nail length and shape.
2. Choice of stroke: free stroke or rest stroke.
3. Hand position and the angle of the fingers to the strings.
4. How the fingertip and nail approach the string.
5. How the fingertip and nail prepare on the string.
6. Finger pressure against the string.
7. The release of the fingertip and nail from the string.

Each of these ingredients influences all the others. One will generally determine what comes next. For instance, your choice of rest stroke or free stroke will determine your hand position, and therefore the angle of the finger to the string. This will then determine how the finger approaches the string, and thus how the finger is finally prepared on the string. All of these contribute to the security of the fingers on the string and your ability to apply the appropriate pressure; and the pressure inevitably effects how the string will be released. The length and shape of the fingernail effects how successfully you will be able to carry out all of the various parts of the stroke.

## Nail Length and Shape

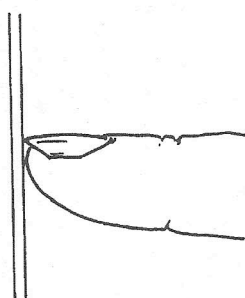
If a nail is too long, the speed and ease with which the fingertip and nail go through the string is considerably diminished. This is because the resistance has been increased. A bad nail shape can also create undesirable resistance against the string and cause some very interesting but unsavory sounds.

The reason we play with our fingernails at all is to assist us in securing and controlling the string, to enhance our volume and tone. So it is important that you grow and shape them in a way that will make it easier to play and sound good.

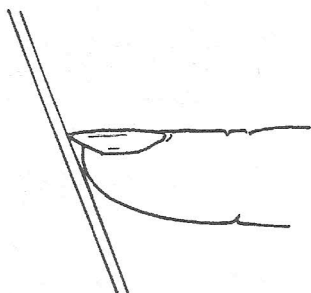
The following illustrations show some different nail types and ways to shape them. You'll also see how to gauge their length.

## Nail Length

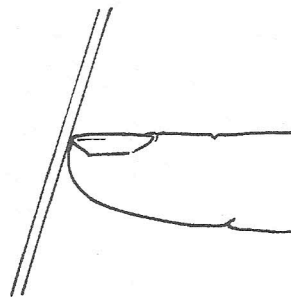
To gauge the length of your nail, hold your finger out horizontally and then place a file against the fingertip at a right angle. If the nail and flesh touch the file at about the same time, the length is good. If you have to tilt the file forward or back the nail is either too long or too short.



Just Right



Too Long



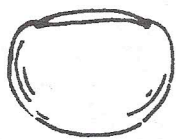
Too Short

## Nail Types

These nail types represent the four basic shapes: curved (Type A), flat (Type B), hooked downward (Type C) and bent upwards (Type D). While the curved shape is ideal, the latter three shapes are the most common.



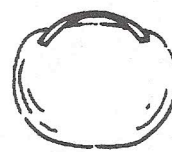
Type A  
Curved



Type B  
Flat

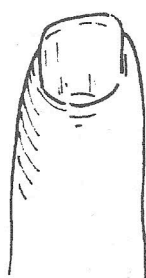


Type C  
Bent  
Downward

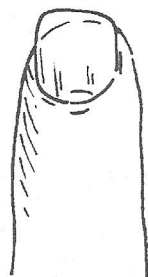


Type D  
Bent  
Upward

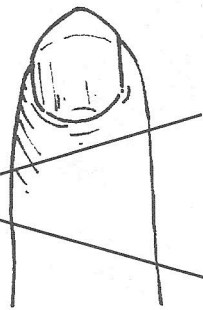
Here are the basic "do's and don'ts" for shaping the nails:



DO

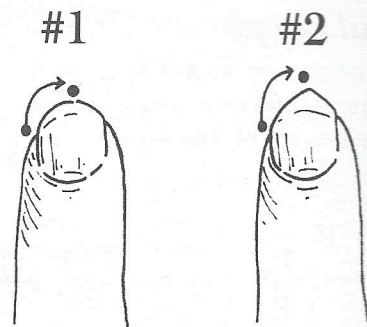


DON'T

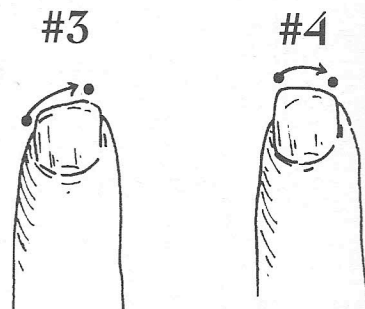




There are various reasons why a nail shape will be either advantageous or not. One of the most important issues is how the string moves across the nail. Shapes #1 and #2 to the right (the “don’ts” from the bottom of page 31) cause the string to travel “uphill” with too much resistance. These shapes also prevent us from using enough of the nail, since they release near the middle of the nail.



Either of the two shapes (#3 and #4) shown on the right allow the string to travel along a “ramp” and release from the nail more easily, at the same time using the maximum amount of nail possible. Your nail type will determine which of these two shapes is best for you, but they both enable the string to travel along desirable ramps.



The old advice that we should file our nails to match the contour of their fingertips just doesn't always work. Although it may not look all that bad to you, what the string “sees” from its angle is a hill that has to be climbed. Sometimes if it is rounded too much, as in shape #2, a point develops, creating even greater resistance and a more abrupt release point. This is absolutely devastating if your nail is a Type C, or “hooked” nail. With shapes #1 or #2, the hook is exaggerated instead of minimized.

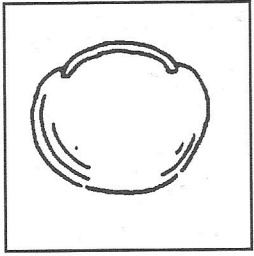
Nail shapes #3 and #4 are both good, but have different effects. Shape #3 is most common and advantageous, as it aids in pushing the string into the soundboard during a stroke. This generally results in a fuller sound. Because the ramp is angled upwards, this shape can result in much more resistance (nail to string) than shape #4. As you can see, shape #4 is angled slightly downwards, making the string travel downhill during a stroke. This allows for a very fast, smooth release; so fast, in fact, it makes some players feel that their finger is slipping off the string. Many players who use rest stroke primarily, and who play at less of an angle to the string, prefer this shape, while those who prefer using free stroke favor the #3.

If you have had a problem finding a good shape to match your nail type, the following page contains some matches you may find useful.

Nail Type

Shape

A



#3

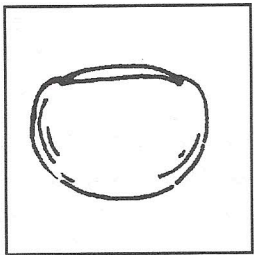


#4



*or*

B



#3

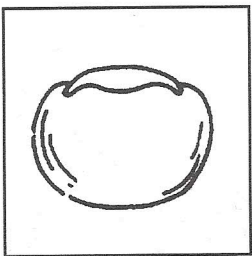


#4



*or*

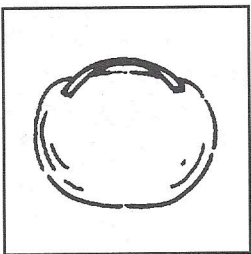
C



#3



D



#3



#4



*or*

*preferable*



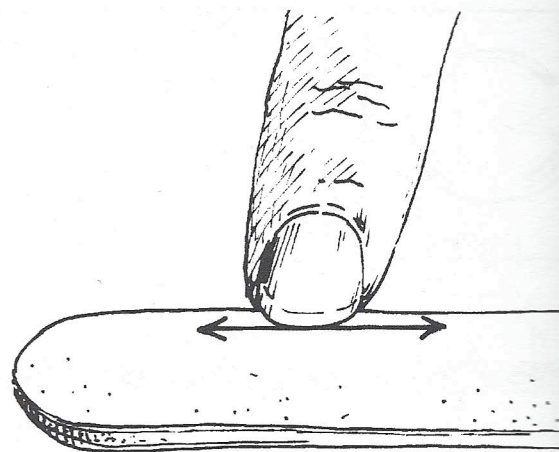
## Shaping the Nails

Always use a file, as opposed to a nail cutter, to shape the fingernails of your right hand. Nail cutters leave the fibers of your nails with jagged ends, even if you polish with sandpaper afterwards.

Always file your nails with your fingertips facing you. Position the file underneath the nail at a slight angle and look down the surface of the file. This gives you the ideal view of the edge of the nail. Try to create a straight line as seen from this angle, as illustrated on the right.

Ideally, the file will touch the edge of the nail evenly across its width, and fit securely underneath it without rocking around. If the shape of your nail is too round, you will notice a rocking motion as the file moves around the nail's edge.

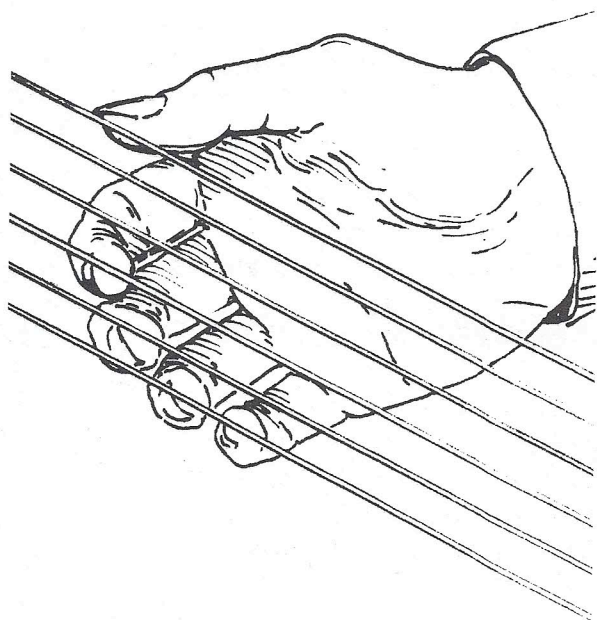
The line illustrated to the right will only be seen from this particular angle. The nail shape is not actually straight or flat. It will still appear rounded, although possibly not as round as the fleshy fingertip.



These ideas for shaping your nails are only suggestions. There are many variations on the four nail types discussed in this book. While I have found that the corresponding shapes suggested here work well consistently, experimentation is encouraged. Find out what works and feels best for you.

## Angle and Placement

In order to achieve a full, or "fat" tone, we must give special attention to the angle of the fingertips to the strings. Note that when the fingers are initially placed on the strings, only the flesh makes contact. The nail makes its contact when pressure is applied. The illustration below shows an advantageous angle.



When a finger moves straight back into the palm from this angle, it is actually moving over a healthy portion of the string surface (as the string uses the nail as a "ramp") which enhances the tone. This angle, however, creates a scraping sound on the wound bass strings, and should therefore be adjusted to a straighter angle for playing on the fourth, fifth and sixth strings.