

How to Learn the Guitar
by Scott Card

The guitar is a deceptively confusing and difficult instrument. Imagine six short keyboards next to each other, all starting on different notes, all of the keys looking the same. Learning a few chords is one thing - but really understanding the guitar is another thing entirely. There are two main ways to approaching playing the guitar: "position" playing and "single-string" playing. "Position" playing uses all six strings, but only four frets. For example, we could play in the 4th position, meaning we are using frets 4-8 (one fret for each finger) with all six strings. The most common position to play in is the open position, which uses frets 1-4 and all open strings. This is where you play most chords. "Single-string" playing is, well, playing on a single string. You are allowed only one note at a time, whereas position playing allows six notes at one time. So, you can't play chords on a single string. Any good guitar player will use a healthy mixture of both of these approaches, but let's break them down a little bit in terms of complexity.

	Position	Single-string
Number of frets to deal with:	4 frets x 6 strings = <u>24 frets</u>	12 frets per string = <u>12 frets</u>
Number of strings to deal with:	<u>6</u>	<u>1</u>
Number of notes possible at 1 time:	<u>6</u>	<u>1</u>

Total possible **positions** one needs to learn : 12

Total possible **strings** one needs to learn: 6

It seems that position playing is quite a bit more complex in nature than single-string playing. Rather than learning the entire guitar as 12 unique positions, we can learn it as 6 unique strings. So, the easiest and fastest way to learn the guitar is by learning one string at a time. If the difference between position and single-string playing does make much sense, don't worry about it. We are not going to look at positions - they will arise naturally as a result of learning the strings.

The first thing to learn is the musical alphabet, specifically which notes do NOT have a sharp or flat in between them. I find it easiest to visualize a piano keyboard - white keys are "regular" notes (A-G), and the black keys are sharps or flats. The black keys are found in between the white keys, between every white key except for two pairs - B-C and E-F. If we were counting up the musical alphabet starting at A, including sharps (sharps go up, flats go down), it would go like this:

A, A#, B, C, C#, D, D#, E, F, F#, G, G#, A

Similarly, counting down the musical alphabet would look like this (now with flats - flats go down):

A, Ab, G, Gb, F, E, Eb, D, Db, C, B, Bb, A

Notice that the underlined pairs - B-C and E-F - do not have a sharp or flat between them. To translate this to the guitar, we arrive at the following:

-All natural notes have 2 frets in between them, except for B-C and E-F-

The strings are numbered from lightest (string #1) to heaviest (string #6). The notes of each string are as follows:

1 - e
2 - B
3 - G
4 - D
5 - A
6 - E

Now that we know all of the starting notes and how to find the notes within the string, we can figure out all of the notes on the entire guitar. Let's start with string #1. We are looking for the frets that have the natural notes, no sharps or flats - in the case of string #1, E until we reach E again, which will be on the 12th fret.

Notes: **E - F - (F#) - G - (G#) - A - (A#) - B - C - (C#) - D - (D#) - E**
Frets: **0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10 - 11 - 12**

The frets we are trying to learn on the 1st string are : 0-1-3-5-7-8-10-12. Including the open string (0) and the 12th fret, each string will have 8 notes. Here is the same thing for the B string (#2):

Notes: **B - C - (C#) - D - (D#) - E - F - (F#) - G - (G#) - A - (A#) - B**
Frets: **0 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9 - 10 - 11 - 12**

The frets for the 2nd string are: 0-1-3-5-6-8-10-12. Only slightly different from the 1st string! This is a fairly simple process that can easily be done on each string to learn the notes.

So, how the hell do we learn these and practice them? After you learn the notes on a string, just go up and down those notes until you really know them. **Say the notes as you play them.** When you feel like you know them, try playing the notes with skips. For example, if we are playing on the first string, I can skip every other note and play frets 0 - 3 - 7 - 10 on the way up and 12 - 8 - 5 - 1 on the way down. You can skip up a certain number of notes and then return to the next note on the string, continuing in this fashion. It would look like this : 0 - 3 - 1 - 5 - 3 - 7 - 5 - 8 - 7 - 9 - 8 - 10 - 9 - 12. This is skipping one note - you could skip two, three, etc. All the while, **saying the names of the notes as you play.** Once you feel comfortable with the string, try and have fun with it. Play the notes randomly, slide up or down, try and come up with melodies, etc, etc, etc. The possibilities are endless, even on one string!

***A note on "Practicing" ***

To learn anything, you need to be engaged but also be willing to put in some work to learn new things. The exercises above are meant to be only a part of your balanced guitar breakfast. The other part is learning songs that you love and trying to write your own songs. In the early stages of playing, go to websites like ultimate-guitar.com and learn songs that you know and love. It will build your chord vocabulary, an absolutely essential part to first learning the guitar. But, do the work too.