



GUITAR

Basic Chords for Beginners

by Jason Vanselow

When I'm teaching beginning guitar students, I try to divide up the basic material into three categories: note reading (both in general "how to read music" sense and locating specific pitches on the guitar itself), exercises in technique, and chords. And I try to spend time on each one of these categories in each lesson or class period.

Of these three categories, playing chords seems to carry the most expectations when students start out. As it happens, learning chords is also one of the biggest challenges for beginners. Making basic chord shapes and moving between those shapes can be really hard, especially at first, hard enough in fact, that the process of learning them drives away huge numbers of frustrated students. And while chords will always present a challenge, the way we present chords can make the whole process a lot easier.

I've found that it's really important to teach groups of chords rather than one chord at a time. This might seem a ridiculously obvious statement. But because one of the things students struggle with the most is switching from one chord to the next it helps to make sure that that movement is part of the process from the very beginning.

It's also important to choose the right chord groups to start with. This also can seem obvious, but there's a catch here. In terms of general musicianship, the most obvious place to start would seem to be the I-IV-V progression in the key of C major.

But for a number of reasons, in terms of guitar, this is one of the hardest places to start. One reason is that all three of these chords require a little bit of a stretch that most beginning students aren't ready for.

Another is that the F major chord requires that the player use a barre, a challenging technique that requires quite a bit of hand strength, again uncommon for a beginning student. Lastly, in order to transition from one chord to the next, the player needs to move three or four fingers at the same time which is also very challenging for a beginner.

The first two chords I generally teach to

any beginning student are E minor and A7.

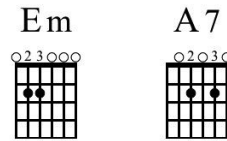


Figure #1.^[1]

These are two easier chords to master in terms of physical coordination. As you can see in Figure #1, both chords require only the second and third fingers to make the shapes. Another benefit is that in both the E minor and A7 chords both fingers are in the same fret. And while the fingers are on adjacent strings in the E minor, there is only one string between the fingers in the A7.

Because both of the chords reside in the second fret, moving back and forth between the two chords is relatively easy: both fingers are moving the same direction during the transition, neither finger is moving very far (either to the next adjacent string or skipping only one string), and the fingers are never very far away from one another which reduces the amount of independence each finger needs to have.

The A7 chord also emphasizes the importance of playing on the tips of the fingers rather than the pads. In order to get the right sound for the A7, the third string needs to sound clearly. If the second finger is placed poorly on the fourth string or the knuckle collapses to that the body of the finger touches the third string, the third string won't ring and all you hear is the clunk of a deadened string.

The next group of chords I generally have students learn is A-D-E (all major chords).

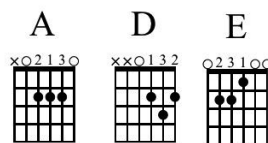


Figure #2.^[1]

This is of course, I-IV-V in A major and while the general musical relationship between them is important, there are a few guitar specific benefits to learning them next.

As you can see in Figure #2, two of these chords (A and E) are simply continuations of the chords that we've already learned. With the E, we are simply adding the first finger on the third string. In the A chord, we simply add first finger in to the third string second fret.

This particular fingering of the A chord is, believe it or not, a little controversial. There are a number of ways to finger this chord, and it is believed by many that the fingering that I am presenting here is the least common and hardest of the bunch. I don't necessarily disagree, but I stand by using this fingering in this circumstance for a couple of reasons.

The first is that this fingering is a logical progression from the A7. The second is that when switching between the A chord with this fingering and the D chord, first finger is on the third string, second fret position for both chords. Therefore first finger becomes a pivot during the transition between the two chords and you are then only moving two fingers at a time rather than three. With this fingering, it is also easier making the shift from either D or A to the E chord. First finger only needs to slide from second to first fret on the third string.

To practice this, I use the progression from John Denver's *Leaving on a Jet Plane*.

1. In reading chord diagrams for guitar, the right most vertical represents the highest sounding string (the string closest to the floor, known as the first string) and the left most vertical line represents the lowest sounding string (the string closest to the ceiling, known as the sixth string). The thick horizontal line right underneath the finger numbers represents the nut (the piece at the top of the neck which holds the strings in place) and is not a fret. Horizontal lines from there represent the frets in ascending order. A zero in the fingering area means that the string is played open (with no fingers on the frets), an X means that the string is not played. The number 1 represents the index finger, 2 the middle finger and so on.

It's eight measures long and for the first six, it alternates (one chord per measure) between A and D, and then E for the final two bars. And while it's true I don't always tell my students which song it is (sometimes we have a contest to see if anyone can figure out what song it is) it works this progression

and all of the features of it very nicely.

This initial step sets up good habits for life-long players. Going from here, students have a good basic idea of how their fingers will need to move to get from one chord to another and they can proceed to more complex chord shapes and progressions.

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