



GUITAR

Healthy and Productive Hands

by Jason Vanselow

First off, I would like to extend a huge thank you to Jim Bartsch and MNSOTA. It was great fun being a part of your summer workshop and I hope that we can connect again to talk more about great guitar education!

In this article I would like to continue talking about some basic tools for your students. This time around I would like to talk about what to look for and how to help your students develop a set of healthy and productive hands.

Left Hand

Left hand positioning is an important thing to look for early on in a student's development and there are a couple of things to look for to keep their hands healthy. One of the primary things to look for is that the student is playing on the very tip of the finger. This seems very obvious, but beginners often will let the knuckle closest to the tip of the finger collapse and play on the pad of the finger. This will make trouble later when they try to play chords and they need to play on the tips of their fingers anyway.

We also want to make sure that the left hand fingers are parallel to the frets. Again this seems like a no brainer but beginners have a habit of turning their hands so that the section of finger between the tip and the closest knuckle is resting against the edge of the fretboard. This can create a sense of security, but turning the hand that much creates a situation where the fingers in effect become shorter and they will have a harder time reaching notes on the third and fourth frets and chords will become more challenging to form.

It's also really important to encourage students to keep their wrist straight while they are playing. This will reduce the amount of pressure on the wrist and lessen the chances of a repetitive stress problem.

Where to put the left hand thumb can also be a little bit of a challenge for a lot of students. I'm a firm believer in placing the thumb in the middle of the back of

the neck.



Good left thumb position

This helps to keep the wrist straight and the fingers in the best position possible. This position is a very basic position and as a player gets involved in more complicated material, the thumb will move and adjust as needed.

There is a tendency in some students to wrap the thumb over the top of the fretboard.



Bad left thumb position

And on guitars that have narrower necks a little of this will be unavoidable. But for the most part, keeping the thumb as close to the middle of the neck as you can gives the player the most advantageous position

to work from.

Right Hand

One decision that players make at the beginning of their studies is whether to use a pick or their fingers. There are good reasons for each. Strumming is much easier with a pick and most rock and pop music uses a pick, and fingerpicking has its own traditions in many different styles of music. Ultimately, knowing a bit of both is a great advantage.

The biggest decision when using a pick is which type of pick to choose. They come in a variety of different thicknesses. In my experience, thinner picks are better for chord strumming and have a really bright sound and thicker picks are better for single note playing or more percussive chord playing. Which type you or your students use is a personal preference and you should try out several different types to see which ones you like.

Fingerpicking is a little more complex at the beginning but can also be a really rewarding experience and there are a number of tricks that make learning how to do it easier. The first thing I have my students do is to rest the left side of the tip of their thumb on the 5th string. This means that the very tip of their thumb is pointing towards the headstock of the guitar. The thumb is going to provide stability for the rest of the hand.

Then place the very tip of the index finger on the first string. For some students it is most comfortable to use the very tip of the finger, for others it is better to tilt the hand just a little so that the string hits to the left of the tip of the finger.

In this position try to make sure that your thumb is closer to the fretboard than your other fingers.



Correct right hand position



Incorrect right hand position

You also want to make sure that your thumb and index finger make an arc over the strings. The top knuckle on the hand will be at the top of the arc and that should be over the 3rd or 4th string.



When you pluck the string you want

your finger to go past the next string and in a position where your finger is almost pointing at your right elbow.

After doing this a few times with the index finger, place your middle finger on the first string and pluck a few times. Then go back and forth. Alternating between the index and middle fingers will be the main right hand tool that you use when playing single note passages.

Plucking with the thumb is also a valuable skill. Contrary to what you are doing with the rest of your fingers, simply let the tip of the thumb slide off the string that you want to play and let it come to rest on the next string closest to the floor. If you are going to play a note on the same string, circle the thumb back around to the starting point and repeat. If not, it can rest on the new string until you need it again.

When you are ready to teach arpeggios and fingerpicking patterns to go along with chords, place the tip of your index finger on the 3rd string, your middle finger on the 2nd string and your ring finger on the 1st string. Just to try it out, play thumb-index-middle-ring in a row and then put your hand back down in the position that it started. Yes this will dampen the chord when you put your fingers back down, but with enough practice you will create enough muscle memory so that your hand will come back to that original position and you won't need to worry about placing the fingers back on the strings.

In whatever type of right hand playing that you have your students use, at the beginning of their playing, there is no reason for any part of their right hand and

right hand fingers to rest on the wood of the guitar. Try to encourage them to keep their fingers either on the strings or hovering right above the strings.

Again, there are as many different ways to play as there are players, and you will always need to make adjustments to any basic technique, but hopefully this will give you a good start in maintaining healthy and productive hands in your students' (and your own) playing.

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