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# Guitar Exercises

for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
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Build strength and consistency as you play

Practice with warm-ups, scales, arpeggios, and chords

Play full-length pieces and songs

**Mark Phillips**

Former Director of Music,  
*Cherry Lane Music*

**Jon Chappell**

Award-winning guitarist and author



# Guitar Exercises

by Mark Phillips and Jon Chappell

**for  
dummies**  
A Wiley Brand

## **Guitar Exercises For Dummies®**

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# Guitar Exercises For Dummies®

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# Introduction

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Playing guitar is an activity that has so many terrific qualities. It's artistic, expressive, inspiring, therapeutic, and even cathartic. Nothing beats the blues like playing the blues. Guitar playing is an effective and natural means for relieving stress. But it's like sports, games, and any other physical endeavors requiring strength, speed, stamina, and coordination: The more you practice, the better you become at it. And the better you are at guitar playing, the more successful your music making efforts will be.

One of the best ways to become more accomplished in the purely physical aspects of playing guitar is to exercise your fingers — the main agents of guitar playing — to get them conditioned. And that's what *Guitar Exercises For Dummies* focuses on. By picking up this book, you've agreed to send your digits off to spring training. After going through the pages of *Guitar Exercises For Dummies*, your fingers will come out faster, nimbler, stronger, and more confident, and they'll be better team players as well. And because music involves the mind as well as the body, we give you tips and advice that will get you thinking. As Yogi Berra said, "Ninety percent of the game is half mental," so we work on strengthening your gray matter, too.

In this book, we give you exercises that make sense in a musical context; that way, you learn useful things like scales, arpeggios, and chords — all of which are incorporated into the songs and pieces you play. Your brain is the coach, and the following pages are your playbook. After putting your fingers through the workout regimen of *Guitar Exercises For Dummies*, they will be lean, mean playing machines.

# *About This Book*

Because there are real physical aspects to playing guitar, we recognize that what's true for guitar playing is also true for swimming, running, golf, or Guitar Hero: You don't get better unless you practice. And practice, in terms of the physical conditioning we talk about here, is known as *exercise*. Exercise is an efficient way for your body to practice moving specific parts in the way a given activity requires. Football players lift weights to become stronger and more powerful against opponents on the gridiron. Guitar players practice scales to become more facile at playing melodies on the fretboard.

This book is a reference you can jump into and out of at will. In other words, you don't have to read from cover to cover. Just head to the table of contents to find what you need to practice at any given moment. But it's worth noting that we present scales, arpeggios, and chords in a logical, organized way that allows you to train your fingers and learn the musical vocabulary that comes up time and again in real-life musical situations. We explain the exercise presentation most thoroughly in [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) to get you up and playing, and then in later chapters we provide more great practice opportunities but with less commentary (we can almost hear you sighing with relief). Also notice that [Chapters 3](#) through [12](#) are grouped in pairs, where the first, odd-numbered chapter in the pair introduces a new concept (such as a scale or arpeggio pattern) and the second chapter has you applying that concept in a series of exercises. Both chapters in each pair include helpful exercises, but to get the most out of these chapters and be sure you can easily follow along, you may find that it's best to tackle these pairs starting with the odd-numbered chapter, where we take a little more time to explain things.

We think it's also cool that all the exercises in this book are presented in *movable* form, which means you can move them anywhere on the neck without changing the fingering, because the pattern or form uses no open strings. A movable scale, arpeggio, or chord can be transposed to any key by simply shifting your hand up or down the neck to a different starting note and playing the same pattern. So though we present these exercises in specific keys, you can move them to any fret on the neck. We remind you of the exercises' movability throughout the book, but we mention it here as well because it's an important concept in understanding how this book is organized.

Finally, most chapters end with composed pieces of music that give you a chance to play what you learn in the context of making "real music." You find these full-length practice pieces, as well as many other examples you can play along with, on the website that accompanies this book.

## ***Conventions We Use in This Book***

Because we assume that you already play the guitar a little and are familiar with practice drills and exercises, we adopt certain conventions in this book and adhere to certain accepted terms and practices for guitar playing. For example, when we say *up* we typically mean higher in pitch, whether it's referring to a string (the high E string) or to a position. So "going up the neck" means heading in the direction of the bridge, not the nut. *Down* means lower in pitch or lower on the neck (toward the nut and headstock).

Notice, too, that throughout this book, we call the hand that you fret notes with the *left hand*, even though some left-handed people will turn the guitar over, string it in reverse, and fret with their right hand. But rather than say “fretting hand” and “picking hand,” we use “left hand” and “right hand,” respectively. We beg the forgiveness of southpaws everywhere.

We employ a bit of logic in the ordering of the figures presented. For example, you may notice that we introduce the major scale before the minor one. And for the three types of minor scales presented, we start with the natural minor scale. We do this because scales have a conventional order of presentation, not because, say, the major scale is necessarily easier to play than the minor scale. Also note that we always present the various patterns for both scales and arpeggios based on their starting notes — moving from low to high within a given position.

In the music figures, we introduce each new scale with a neck diagram showing you where to put your fingers on the frets and strings. The left-hand finger indications appear inside the circles (1 = index, 2 = middle, 3 = ring, and 4 = little), and the *tonic*, or name tone, of the scale appears as a white number in a black circle. The corresponding music notation is presented without bar lines. We do this to show you that it’s not meant to be played in a particular meter but instead is a figure you can use to see and hear the scale without worrying about the rhythmic context. The tab staff that’s presented below the figures shows the corresponding string and tab numbers, and below that are the letter names of the pitches, with the tonics circled.

Additionally, we always provide the starting left-hand finger, which appears just to the left of the first note in

the standard music staff. If we offer other left-hand fingers within the figure, it's to signal that you're playing an out-of-position note, or to remind you which finger takes you back into position after having just played an out-of-position note. (By the way, an *out-of-position note* is one that doesn't fall within the four-fret span defined by the position and that requires a stretch by the 1st or 4th finger to play it.) Keep in mind that these fingerings serve as gentle reminders only. If you can play out-of-position notes using fingerings that are more comfortable or more logical, please feel free to do so. Just be sure to get back on track with the correct fingering as quickly as possible so that the following notes will be played in the proper position.

We don't provide notation for the right hand because you can play these exercises either with your individual right-hand fingers or with a flatpick. If you play with your fingers, practice the scales and arpeggios by alternating your index and middle or the middle and ring fingers. If using a pick is more your style, play the scales using *alternate picking* — playing downstrokes and upstrokes in an alternating motion, starting with a downstroke on the first note. Sometimes we tell you when a certain scale or arpeggio may favor one approach over the other, but you can play any exercise in this book using either right-hand technique. Many well-rounded guitarists play both fingerstyle and with a pick, and you're encouraged to do the same with these exercises.

You'll notice black track boxes above the music figures in this book. These boxes tell you the track number that the recorded version appears on. In these boxes, we sometimes include the starting time within the track. In many instances, multiple figures are included in a single track, so the timing helps to separate them. A time of 0:00 means the figure is the first one on the track.

And don't forget about the usual *For Dummies* convention that has us italicizing any important new words that you may need for the topic at hand. These italicized words are always followed by a clear, easy-to-read definition.

## ***What You're Not to Read***

One of the things we like about *Guitar Exercises For Dummies* (if we do say so ourselves) is that the music figures — which include the chord diagrams, neck diagrams, songs, and exercises — are all self-contained. That is, you can open the book to any piece of music or exercise and know what to play without reading the text that surrounds it. That's because we provide all the components you need to put your fingers on the strings and play the piece in front of you.

However, we do think it's a good idea to read the text so that you have context and a good reason for playing the figure at hand. If you decide to take the picture book route through *Guitar Exercises For Dummies* (and only look at the figures), we suggest that you start at the beginning of a chapter. This way you're introduced to each new scale, arpeggio, and chord with graphics that show you complete fingerings, letter names, and other potentially useful information.

## ***Foolish Assumptions***

Because this book features exercises — and lots of them — we decided to keep the talk brief and focus on the music. As such, we assume that you play some guitar. If you need instruction on things like buying a guitar, tuning your guitar, or playing basic chords, check out *Guitar For Dummies*, 2nd Edition.

We built this book to be played as much as read. Still, we didn't just throw you into the deep and say, "Okay, *arpeggiate* your way out of this one." We provide a basic review on holding the guitar, definitions for the notation system we use, and advice on warming up. We put a lot of music in this book, and we expect you to play all of it (eventually), so we want to make sure that you're properly prepared to spend some quality time with your guitar.

# ***How This Book Is Organized***

We organize the bulk of this book into three distinct aspects of playing the guitar: scales, arpeggios, and chords. Within each main category is a subcategory, which we call *sequences* for scales and arpeggios, and *chord progressions* for chords. Each of these pairs of activities (for example, scales and scale sequences) constitute a *part*, with the individual major and minor scales and their corresponding sequences breaking down into individual chapters. The following sections describe further what you find in each part.

## ***Part 1: Preparing to Practice***

In this part, we review the skills you need to play through the book. Some material we present will no doubt be familiar to you (if you've played before). However, we also cover aspects of notation that may be new to even experienced players. So even if you don't need advice on standing or sitting with the guitar, you should check out the notation definitions in [Chapter 1](#), especially the section on tab and rhythm slashes. In [Chapter 2](#), we offer ways to warm up, get your head in a good place for practicing, and bolster the complementary skills of relaxation and focus.

## ***Part 2: Scales and Scale Sequences***

This part begins the essence of *Guitar Exercises For Dummies*, where the rubber meets the road — or where the fingertip meets the fretboard, if you will. We start with the major scale and its corresponding sequences, and then head into the minor scale and its sequences. Besides learning the major and minor scales (and all the

various patterns and corresponding sequences), in this part you also get a feel for how the book is set up. We present each scale in five patterns, and we introduce the patterns in the same order for each scale.

### ***Part 3: Arpeggios and Arpeggio Sequences***

This part is where we explore the wonderful world of arpeggios — the transition point between single-note playing and chords. Technically, you play arpeggios the same way you do single notes — one at a time, just like in a scale. But with an arpeggio, you change strings more often because the spaces between the notes — which are skips instead of steps — are wider. But musically, you're really outlining chords with those single notes. So arpeggio playing is useful for getting used to how chords work in music.

### ***Part 4: Chords and Additional Exercises***

Many guitar exercise books would simply stop after presenting a healthy dose of scales, scale sequences, arpeggios, and arpeggio sequences. But that's what makes *Guitar Exercises For Dummies* so special. In [Part 4](#), we provide the bonus material: a whole chapter on chords and chord playing. We also include supplemental exercises designed just for developing speed, strength, and independence.

### ***Part 5: The Part of Tens***

If you're familiar with the grand traditions of the *For Dummies* series, you know that the Part of Tens is the fun part. It's the opportunity for the authors to take you on a bit of a side trip. In our Part of Tens, we want to give some suggestions for helping you play guitar.

However, we want these suggestions to be different. We don't want to provide you with, say, ten more ways to play scales. Because much of this book is technical, we decided to discuss some ideas in a non-technical way — even if we offer advice to take up something technical (and there's a difference ... we think). [Chapter 15](#) focuses on ways to make your practice time more efficient. After all, we feel there's a difference between *practicing* the guitar and *playing* the guitar. When you practice, you should be as brutally efficient and serious as possible. But when you're simply playing, you should have fun. [Chapter 16](#) is a similarly non-technical chapter. It offers ways to improve your musicianship, including activities that don't require a guitar.

Don't forget to check out the appendix at the back of this book! *Guitar Exercises For Dummies* comes with an accompanying website that presents recorded versions of many of the figures. The handy appendix tells you how to use the website and provides the track listing and exercise descriptions.

## *Icons Used in This Book*

In the margins of this book, you find helpful little icons that can make your journey a little easier. Here's what the icons mean:



**REMEMBER** This icon highlights important info that comes up again and again. So read this info carefully and store it in your brain's hard drive.



TIP

These handy tidbits of info are designed to make your practice sessions easier, and they're offered at no additional charge.



WARNING

When you see this icon, watch out! It points to trouble spots where you could damage your guitar or someone's ears.

## ***Where to Go from Here***

If you already have a good practice routine in place and are looking for material to start drilling those digits, skip to [Chapter 3](#). If you find something in the written figures that you don't understand, you can always flip back to [Chapter 2](#) for details about the notation. If you know scales already, you may want to look at the arpeggio and chord chapters, as much of this material isn't covered in other guitar exercise books.

## **Part 1**

# **Preparing to Practice**

## IN THIS PART ...

In this part, we quickly go over all the essential things you need to know to practice the exercises that appear in this book. If it has been a while since you have played, we offer a brief refresher course in [Chapter 1](#) on holding the guitar while sitting or standing. We also cover all the notation devices and conventions that you need to be familiar with to navigate the different types of exercises presented. The material in [Chapter 2](#) focuses on warming up. It's always a good idea in any physical endeavor (and yes, guitar playing is physical) to limber up. And because guitar playing is also a mental game, requiring focus and concentration, we give you some ways to gear up the old gray matter as well.

# Chapter 1

## Reviewing Guitar Fundamentals

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### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Holding the guitar and sitting and standing with the guitar
  - » Understanding tablature
  - » Reading chord diagrams, neck diagrams, and rhythm slashes
- 

We know you're anxious to get started, but before you lock and load, bear down, and start drilling away on the hundreds of exercises that await you in this book, take just a moment to first ensure that you're properly set up to do the job. In this chapter, we offer a few gentle reminders regarding some guitar basics. We also provide a refresher on guitar notation. Even if you play guitar often and understand notation, you should check out the "[Brushing Up on Guitar Notation](#)" section so you understand how the written music examples in this book work.

## *Perfecting Your Practice Posture*

You probably think we're going to tell you that you *must* practice guitar sitting on the edge of a sturdy (or, in other words, hard) chair with your back straight and

your feet flat on the floor. While this posture *is* proper, the truth is that you can practice guitar in whatever position feels natural to you. After you've figured out your favorite posture, you next have to focus on holding the guitar and the pick properly. We give you pointers in this section.

Truth be told, you won't find any benefit to either sitting or standing when you practice. But it usually is more comfortable to sit if you plan to spend a long time practicing. (Most people can sit for longer periods of time than they can stand.) However, you usually stand when you perform, so it's a good idea to practice while standing some of the time.



**REMEMBER** You should hold the guitar slightly differently depending on whether you're sitting or standing. Here are the general guidelines:

- » **Sitting with the guitar:** Most guitarists, when sitting, prop the guitar on their right leg and hold it in place with their right upper arm, which dangles over the side and allows the right hand to sweep the strings roughly in front of the soundhole (or the pickups if you're playing an electric guitar). You should pull the guitar against your body so that it's snug but not uncomfortably constricting. Make sure your right arm can swing freely from the elbow. If you place your guitar on your left leg, as many classical guitarists do, you may want to elevate your left leg 4 to 6 inches on a small stand, foot stool, or your hard guitar case so you can bring the neck of the guitar even closer to the center of your body. (Another approach is to use a

device called a *support*, which lifts the guitar up while allowing you to keep both feet flat on the floor.)

- » **Standing with the guitar:** To play the guitar in a standing position, you use an adjustable strap that positions the guitar to your body size and taste of playing. Some people like to have the guitar up high (above the belt), because this position makes playing easier. But it looks less cool. So many players like to lower the guitar to a position that doesn't seem quite so geeky. In some styles, such as bluegrass, it's okay to have the guitar up high. But rock 'n' rollers like it way down low. Of course, you should always base your guitar-positioning strategy on what feels most comfortable to you, not what's fashionable. After all, when has fashion ever involved your personal comfort?

Whether you practice while sitting or standing — or do both in equal measure — the key is to be consistent in the way you hold the guitar in each position. If you want a more thorough explanation of holding the guitar and sitting and standing with the guitar (including photographs), check out *Guitar For Dummies*, 2nd Edition.

## ***Brushing Up On Guitar Notation***

In this book, we use several notation methods for presenting the music examples and exercises. Keep in mind that you don't have to read music well to get some guidance from the notation. In fact, you don't really have to be able to read music at all if you just use your ears and listen to the audio tracks that accompany this book.

You can get pretty far this way, but you could do better by having at least a passing familiarity with the notation conventions we use. The following sections cover all the notation systems you encounter in this book.

## *Decoding tablature*



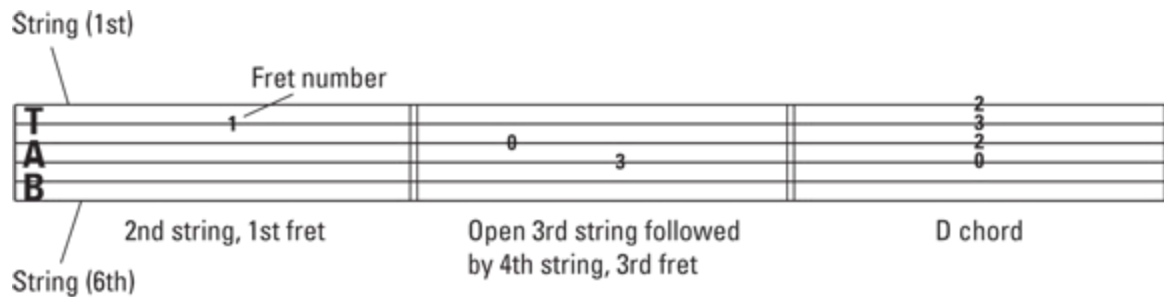
**REMEMBER** Tablature, or just *tab* for short, is a notation system that graphically represents the frets and strings of the guitar. For all the musical examples in this book that have a standard music notation staff (the one with the treble clef), you see a tab staff just beneath it. The tab staff aligns with and reflects exactly what's going on in the regular musical staff above it, but it's in guitar language. Tab is guitar specific, and it tells you what string and fret to play. Use the tab if you're ever unsure as to which fret or string a note falls on.

[Figure 1-1](#) shows a tab staff and some sample notes and a chord. Here are a few points to keep in mind when reading tab:

- » The lines of the tab staff represent guitar strings, from the 1st string on top (high E) to the 6th string on bottom (low E).
- » A numeral appearing on any given line tells you to press, or *fret*, that string at that numbered fret. For example, if you see the numeral 2 on the second line from the top, you need to press down the 2nd string at the 2nd fret (actually, the space between the 1st and 2nd fret, closer to the 2nd metal fret wire).
- » A 0 on a line means that you play the *open string* — that is, unfretted, with no left-hand finger touching the

string.

- » When you see stacked notes, as in bar 3 of [Figure 1-1](#), that notation tells you to play the fretted strings all at the same time, which produces a chord. The fretted strings in the figure form a D major chord.



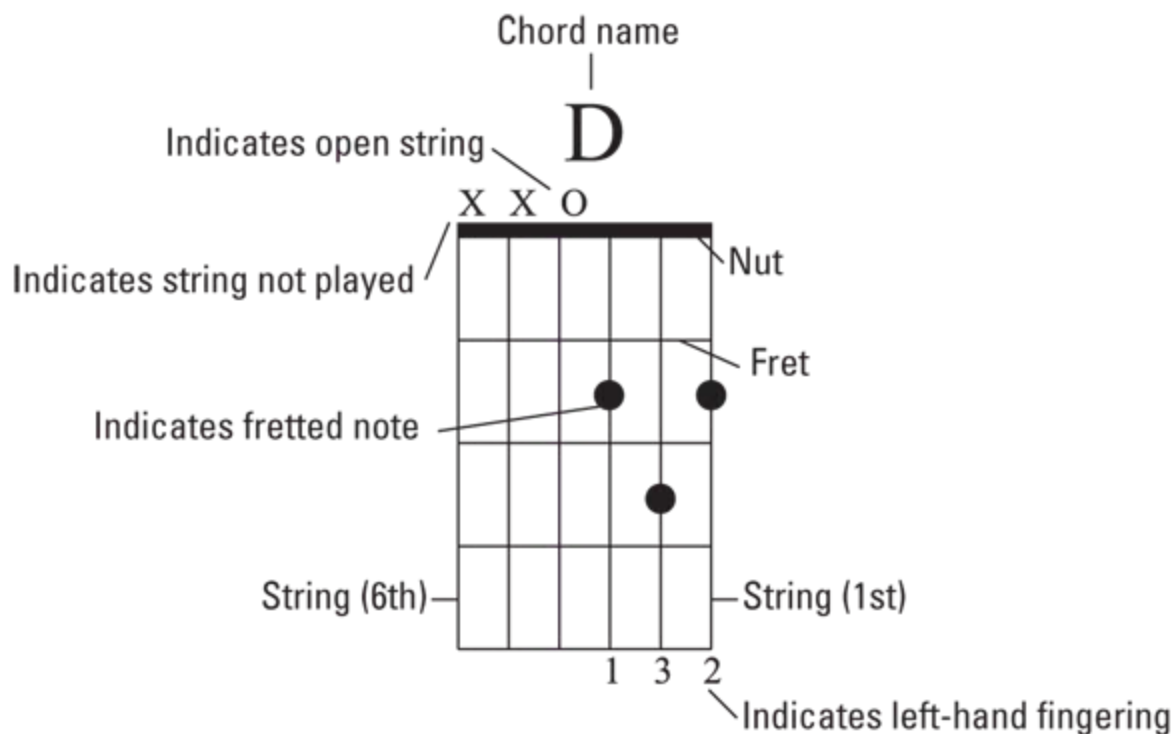
**FIGURE 1-1:** An example of guitar tablature, or *tab*.

## ***Comprehending chord diagrams***

A *chord diagram* is a graphic representation of the guitar neck that shows you exactly where to put your left-hand fingers. [Figure 1-2](#) shows the anatomy of a chord diagram. The following list defines each of the different parts:

- » The capital letter above the diagram indicates the name of the chord. Additional letters or numbers that follow define the chord's quality (minor, seventh, and so on).
- » The grid of vertical and horizontal lines represents the fretboard, as if you held the guitar upright and faced the headstock.
- » The six vertical lines represent the guitar strings, with the leftmost line as the 6th (low E) string. The five horizontal lines represent the frets. The thick horizontal line at the top is the nut, so the 1st fret (where you can place your finger) is actually between the nut and the next horizontal line.

- » Dots on vertical lines between horizontal fret lines show you which notes to fret.
- » An *X* above a string means that you don't play it. An *O* above a string means that you play it open (unfretted by a left-hand finger).
- » The numbers below the diagram indicate the left-hand fingering.



**FIGURE 1-2:** The anatomy of a chord diagram.



**REMEMBER** Chords appearing on frets above the first four have the starting fret indicated to the right of the diagram. For example, if a chord's starting note is at the 5th fret, you see *5fr.* next to the diagram, indicating the 5th fret.

## ***Interpreting neck diagrams***

In addition to presenting written music examples on a standard music staff and a tab staff, throughout this book we also sometimes show you a pattern on a neck diagram. A *neck diagram* shows several frets of the neck with the low E string appearing at the bottom. It's as if you took a chord diagram and rotated it one quarter turn (90 degrees) counterclockwise, stretched it out sideways, and then added a few more frets. The horizontal lines represent the strings, and the vertical lines represent the frets. But unlike tab, a neck diagram doesn't represent music played over time. Instead, it shows you all the notes at once.

In a neck diagram, dots on the horizontal lines tell you where to place your fingers, and the numbers inside those circles indicate which finger to use. If a dot appears in black with a white numeral, it signifies that the note is either the root (the letter name) of the chord or arpeggio, or the tonic (the note that gives the name) of the scale. Knowing the root and tonic notes enables you to identify the names of the scales, arpeggios, and chords as you move them around the neck to different starting notes. If you aren't sure of the note names on the neck, check the 12-fret neck diagram on the Cheat Sheet. All neck diagrams are accompanied by standard music and tab staves showing the same information (and with the note names below the tab staff and roots circled), but many people find a neck diagram more useful than a staff for learning scales, arpeggios, and chords.

[Figure 1-3](#) shows a neck diagram with the notes of a two-octave major scale pattern in 4th position (meaning that your 1st finger is located at the 4th fret). Note that the roots appear in black circles and are found on the 6th, 4th, and 1st strings. To play the scale from [Figure 1-3](#) in its ascending form, start with the lowest-sounding note