



# Ultimate Fingerpicking Guitar Practice Tips



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## 1. START EASY

Start with the easiest patterns first. Most students have a tendency to start with the ones they like the best, but if you start with the easier ones you can focus more on getting the basic technique and sound right. This will help you tremendously when you get to the more complex patterns.

## 2. FOCUS 1ST ON TECHNIQUE AND SOUND

This is related to the 1st tip about starting easy. It's better to put more attention on getting your technique right and getting a good sound in the beginning rather than on playing complex or fast patterns.

When you try to play patterns that are difficult you're likely to develop bad habits that will cause you problems later. Things like forcing your hand into a strange position, striking the string in a less than effective way, and perhaps, most importantly, developing a lot of tension.

## 3. RELAX

I'm not talking about your mental attitude here, though it's good to stay relaxed in general rather than stressing. I'm talking about picking the string with the least amount of tension involved.

Constantly strive to avoid over tensing your right hand and fingers as you pick the string. In other words, use just enough pressure to pull the string into your palm and create a good sound... And no more.





Creating a habit of tension will slow you down and make it difficult to both play quickly and to get a good sound. Put attention on relaxing your hand. Stop if you have to and shake it out if you're getting too tense.

Another benefit to staying relaxed is that you can play for longer without getting fatigued. The same basic principle applies your left hand, but with fingerpicking I find it critical to pay attention to your right hand from the beginning.

## 4. GOOD TECHNIQUE

Paying attention to good technique from the very beginning will pay off many times over as you progress. There are two important aspects of technique that are particularly helpful to watch for.

The first is to keep your right hand roughly the same distance from the strings. Another way to say this is you don't want your hand bouncing up and down as you're fingerpicking.

Many beginners find this NOT very intuitive. They want to use their whole hand to help pull the string to make the sound. The problem is every time you move your hand it makes it more difficult to get your fingers back to the right place.



A better approach is to keep your right hand steady and pull your fingers into the center of your palm. This brings me to the second technique issue.

To get a good sound plant your finger on the string and pull slightly up and into the middle of your hand. Don't pull the string completely towards you, but rather pull your finger up and through the string.



Avoid yanking on the string (pulling directly away from the guitar). This is the #1 worst mistake you can make when learning fingerpicking. This creates a tinny unpleasant sound without making a good full note. The worst part is that it becomes a habit that's difficult to break.

Of course this will take practice. Striking the string properly to get a good pleasing sound is also a habit, and you can develop it so that it becomes second nature over time. As it does it will be easier to get your finger back to the right place on the string and to pick quickly and smoothly.

## 5. START OUT SLOWLY

It goes without saying that you should play slow at first and then pick up speed little by little. This certainly makes obvious sense, yet I find myself constantly trying to play faster than I'm ready to play.

If you think you're playing slowly already it's probably not slow enough. Go ahead and slow it down a little bit more. Also practice small sections at a time and then try putting them together. Sometimes a metronome can help you to be more conscious of how quickly you're actually playing... Or rather trying to play.

If you find yourself getting frustrated just stop... Take a few deep breaths... Slow it down just a little bit more and start up again.

## 6. GO FOR "RELAXED CLAW"

One way to think about the proper right hand position is that of a "relaxed claw" with the fingers slightly bent, relaxed, and the thumb sticking out of the side (in a relaxed way).



A technique you can use to check this is to set your hand on a flat surface like a table. Your thumb, wrist and arm should be pretty much straight. Your fingers are curved with the tips flat on the table. Now take this position and apply it to your guitar.

## 7. WHERE DO FINGERS GO?

A good rule of thumb (no pun intended) is to assign your thumb and fingers to particular strings. Doing this properly is the key to getting a smooth flowing sound as the fingers easily glide back to their home position. The idea is to know where the fingers belong and to have a place to go back to easily and quickly.

Of course this depends on which chord you're playing. For example, if you are playing an open C chord your thumb would be assigned to the fifth string for the bass note, and your fingers (1, 2 and 3) would be assigned to strings 4, 3 and 2 respectively (or 3, 2 and 1 depending on the pattern).

## 8. THUMB POSITION FOR MAGICAL BASS NOTES

There's nothing quite as magical as a good full sounding base note. To get that beautiful deep sound your thumb should stick out far enough to clear the motion of the fingers (but still be relaxed) and strike through the string as you press down.

Slide your thumb a little more towards the headstock of your guitar so it clears your first finger and doesn't compete for space. Another side benefit of this is it'll cause your fingers to be more perpendicular to the guitar strings which will help you get a better sound.



## 9. USE YOUR EARS

The bottom line is you're going for something that sounds good. In the end all the rules including which fingers to use and how to strike the notes give way to what sounds good to you.

It can help to just listen to good players and get a clear image in your mind of what you're aiming at. Sometime it's fun to record yourself and hear how close you're getting. The key is not get too hung up on self-criticism and just look for ways to improve.

Watch my video lesson [Learning Guitar Secret #1 – Listen First](#) where I talk in more detail about the important role of listening in learning guitar.

## 10. PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF

There was a time when I could just barely imagine what it would be like to play simple fingerpicking patterns without struggling and straining. Now I can play complex fingerstyle patterns without even thinking about my right hand. It's just a habit that came from years of practice and playing the guitar.

I want you to know that you can do this just as well as I can. You do need to make a choice somewhere along the way to just keep coming back at it... persistence! What seems difficult gives way to repetition.

Memorize this phrase. "What seems difficult gives way to repetition". I emphasize this because it seems to be a secret to most students of the guitar.

This idea has been one of the most powerful lessons that I've learned and continue to apply. This idea, along with patience and persistence, is really the essence of what has allowed me to play beautiful intricate guitar... Including the complex fingerpicking patterns I never imagined I'd be able to play.



The tips that I've given you and the method for practicing are meant to shorten the process. I want to give you the benefit of my experience. I believe you can get to the same place quicker than I did if you take advantage of my experience.

But whether slow or quick if you are persistent you will play beautiful fingerpicking patterns on the guitar and not only impress your friends and family but have a wonderful time doing it.

## DO I NEED FINGERNAILS FOR FINGERPICKING?

This is a common question I get from students learning to fingerpick. The short answer is you do not need to have nails to do fingerpicking. Now for the longer answer :-)

When you fingerpick without nails the sound is softer and less distinct. What I mean is that the individual notes are not as clear. When you use nails it adds a little bit of bite to each note and makes it clearer and more distinct. To some degree it depends on the style of music you're playing, but generally I prefer the sound with fingernails.



Now to be clear I'm not actually picking just with my nails. I'm hitting the string with the flesh of my finger first and then the string rolls off the tip of my nail. In essence I'm using both the fleshy part of my finger and the nail to get the sound I want. If I use just the nail the sound would be very tinny and not very pleasant.

To do this properly not only takes lots of practice but you'll need to [shape and smooth your nails](#) regularly. I recommend if you're just starting out to practice without nails. As time goes on you can decide if you want to grow your nails and shape them in the appropriate way for fingerpicking.





As a side note: if you want to play either classical or flamenco guitar properly you would definitely need to grow your nails and learn to shape them properly. It is not uncommon for a good classical guitar teacher to spend an entire session or two on shaping your nails.

## UNDERSTANDING THE WRITTEN MUSICAL NOTATION

If musical notation is new to you it would help to watch my video [Understanding Musical Symbols](#). If you need help understanding Tablature (Guitar Tab) check out this video: [Understanding Guitar Tab](#).