



Posture Up (Guitar Position Techniques for Acoustic)

As a guitarist, you've got a lot on your mind. Your fretting hand is trying to get your fingers on the right frets and sound the right note as clearly as you can. Meanwhile, your other hand is struggling to hold a pick, strum in time, or pick with your fingers and hit the right strings. Your brain is also working to memorize chord progressions or remember (and sing!) lyrics or to simply keep the rhythm steady.

We're so used to seeing guitarists perform in wildly exaggerated styles during concerts or in videos that we forget most of the theatrics are part of the show and not part of the actual playing. Guitar mastery starts with finesse. And we often lose sight of tiny details that, given a bit of attention, may improve our playing in a big way. Self-taught players usually (but not always) pick up these little nuggets along the way. But it's never too early to counter our bad habits by learning some good ones. They not only will help you play comfortably and cleanly, they can also keep you from falling into bad habits that you'll regret later on.

Your parents may not have had guitar playing in mind when they told you it was important to sit (and stand) straight, but they couldn't have given you better advice. Good playing starts with good posture. You want to sit or stand so that your fretting hand can move freely up and down the neck without strain or reaching too far. Your other hand should be able to comfortably reach all the strings with a flick of the wrist.

Remember that the ultimate goal is to be able to get your fingertips on the frets so that you can sound clean, clear notes. To do this, you need to pay attention to the little things you might do that hinder getting the best possible finger position.

Some guitar players learn the classical style of sitting:

See Pia Gazarek – Offermann:



The instant advantage of this position is that your fretting hand is ideally placed to finger notes and chords.

The downside of the classical position is that it's not always comfortable, particularly if you play a bigger guitar like a dreadnought. So if you play in a more conventional style, with the neck at an angle closer to 90 degrees from your upright position (sometimes referred to as "folk" position), take care not to use your leg as a wrist rest.

Doing so makes it more difficult to arch your fingers comfortably over the strings. Plus, you'll find yourself with an incredibly sore wrist after repeated practices. When you play folk style (acoustic or electric), you want to have your fretting hand about chest high so that it can easily roam about the neck. Don't hunch over your guitar. Sitting straight will help you get a better position for your fretting arm.

See Dave Matthews standing:



Dave Matthews sitting, with Tim Reynolds:



Using a guitar strap when you're sitting as well as when you're standing is another way to ensure good guitar positioning and posture. Plus, you'll have fewer worries about your guitar slipping away on you. Try to not tip the face of the guitar back toward yourself. Yes, you really want to see where your fingers go on the neck. But when you tip the guitar, you're putting a lot of strain on your wrist and, again, your fingers won't be able to arch well and get a good position. So after you look to see where your fingers go, set the guitar straight and get playing.

Try this experiment:

1. take a blank sheet of paper
2. pick it up so that your thumb is on one side and your fingers are on the other.
3. hold the paper up to the light, thumb facing you and the silhouette of the fingers coming through the paper.

You see that your thumb positions itself somewhere between your index and middle fingers. It's where your fingers tend to fall naturally, and it's where you want them positioned when you hold the guitar as well.

Ideally, you want the neck of the guitar to lightly rest on the thumb. You don't want to grip it like a baseball bat. Gripping the neck hard pulls your fingers down and away from the strings, away from their optimal position. An easy way to spot-check your grip is to see if you feel the lower edge of the neck along your palm. You should almost always have some space between your palm and the neck. If you can feel the neck pressing into your hands, then you definitely need to ease up on your grip.

Target Your Strumming, Aim Your Pick

Just because you have six strings doesn't mean you need to play them all every time you strum. Help develop a great habit early on by learning how to zero in on the strings you want to play. On chords like E, Em, and G, as well as most barre chords, you can freely strum across all six strings, but when playing position chords like A, Am, and C, it sounds better if you start your downstroke on the fifth string.

For D and Dm, try to start on the fourth string. Targeting your strumming like this helps you develop picking-hand discipline that will stay with you forever.

Similarly, you don't have to hit all the strings on your upstroke. When you hit the bass strings on your downstroke, they're going to ring out for a long, long time. So when you make your upstroke, just hit two or three of the high strings. They're all you need. Also, striking only a few strings will allow you to get your hand cocked for the next downstroke.

As you get better at fingering chords and strumming, you'll find that you can often cheat a little. Maybe you'll not need to be in perfect position to finger notes, or maybe you'll be able to hold the

guitar slightly lower or higher.

As you learn, try to keep your motions and movements simple and to a minimum. This will help you to quickly get better at your instrument. When you're confident that you can play, then you can be as theatrical or stoic as you'd like.

Taking time with these little details like posture, guitar position, fretting grip and thumb position, and easy, fluid strumming, will pay off big-time in the long run.