

Fingerstyle Guitar *In a Flash*: Module 1 – The Basics

Thumbs Up

Your thumb is the *most* valuable tool when learning to fingerpick. It helps maintain a steady rhythm over basic chords and progressions. Your thumb sets the pace, the framework, and even the arrangement that every other finger must lean on when fingerpicking. It's often called Travis Picking or Boom Chuck - and it's a *must learn* for any fingerstyle guitarist.

The easiest way to start making use of your thumb is to find the bass notes (which are almost always the true root note) of a given chord. My assumption here is that you are at least somewhat familiar with the overall concept of chords, or you wouldn't likely have jumped into fingerstyle. However, I will still touch upon this concept rather quickly.

A Good Rule of THUMB

When you are dealing with 6 strings, you will want to establish the bass note as *whatever note is on the low E string*.
When you are dealing with 5 strings, you will want to establish the bass note as *whatever note is on the A string*.
When you are dealing with 4 strings, you will want to establish the bass note as *whatever note is on the D string*.

Makes sense so far, right? We will call whatever note we play on each of the respective strings a “bass” note. Thus, it will be our starting point for our fingerstyle pattern.

Well, it goes even further than that, but since we are in Module 1: The Basics, I want to stick to all open chords for now.

Just keep this in mind → As I discuss the bass notes, these are, for now, purely the lowest root notes of a given chord.

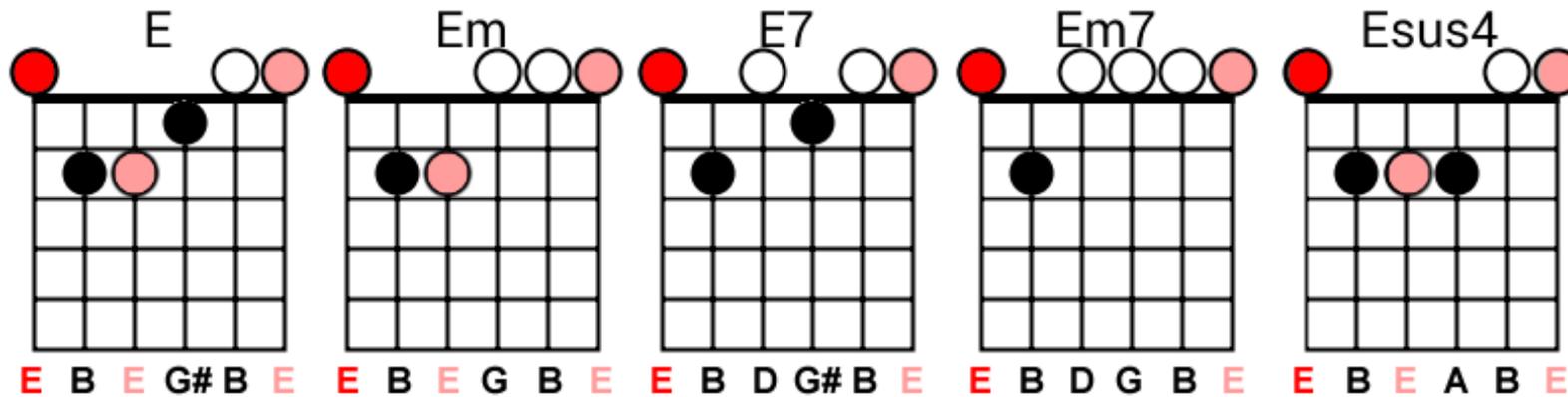
When we deal with split chords and even barre chords, this will change in some aspects. It's still pretty easy to follow.

So, if we take our most common open chord shapes (as seen below) we can quickly establish where the bass note (root note) will be found. All we need to consider is the absolute lowest note heard in each chord.

The note may or may not be fretted, but it will always be the starting point.

Common Open Chords and Their Respective Roots

The following chords are all based on the “E Group” of chords:



There are more variations, but these should be just fine for now. The darkest red color you see is the (1) lowest root and (2) the focus of our bass pattern. I've included the pink notes to indicate that these notes are also considered root notes, but they aren't the lowest ones you'll hear.

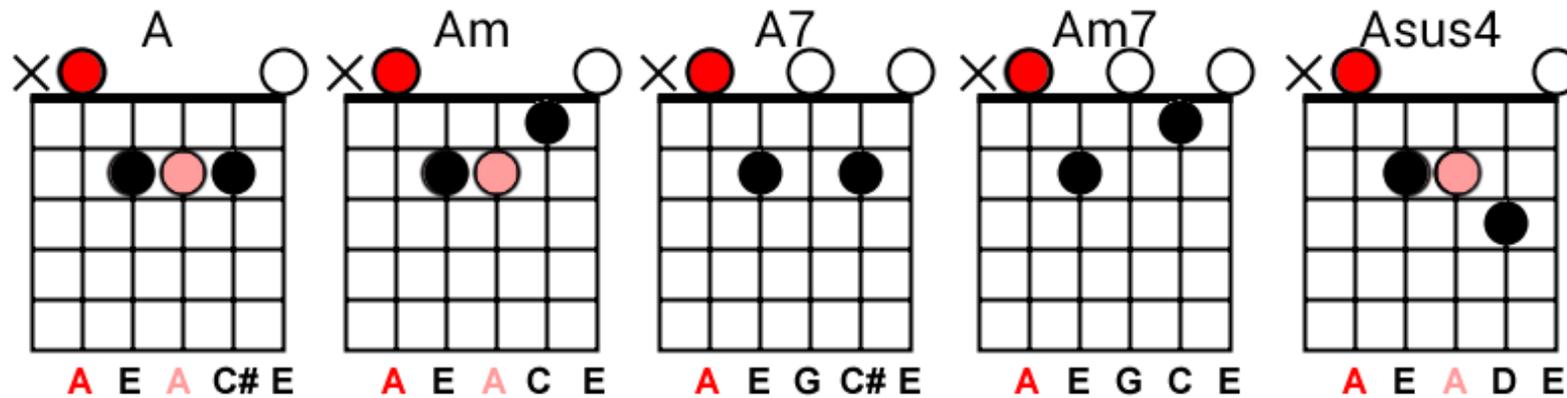
Notice that the E Major, Em and Esus4 all have three root notes available. They are on the low E, D, and high E strings. Notice that the E7 and Em7 chords have two root notes available. They are on the low E and high E strings.

Why? Well, in fingerstyle it won't matter, but in chord knowledge, it's because the E7 and Em7 use 4 notes instead of the standard 3 notes. Thus, one of the root notes gets replaced with another note.

Based on these E Group chords, you can clearly see that our low E string is our bass/root/starting point. Keep that in mind, because when we begin moving these open chords to other locations, the SAME will apply ;)

Interjection: remember that we aren't working with split chords, but when we do, this “true root” concept will change. The picking hand will NOT.

The next group of chords will be our “A Group” of chords. They will be named A Group simply because...you got it – the root will be on the A string:



The color system here is the same. The red dots indicate the lowest root. The pink ones indicate additional roots that aren't the lowest you'll hear. Just as with the E Group, there is a correlation between the following chords:

A Major, Am and Asus4 will feature two root note locations. They will be found on the A string and the G string. Since we've moved down a string from the low E to the A string, also realize that the roots have done the same. When we worked with the E group, the standard root locations for E Major, Em and Esus4 were on the low E string, the D string and the high E string.

The A Group of chords basically lose a string – at least in theory – because we are only working with 5 strings.

The A7 and Am7 chords will feature only ONE root note location instead of two. It will be on the A string (duh, right?!) simply because we have run out of strings.

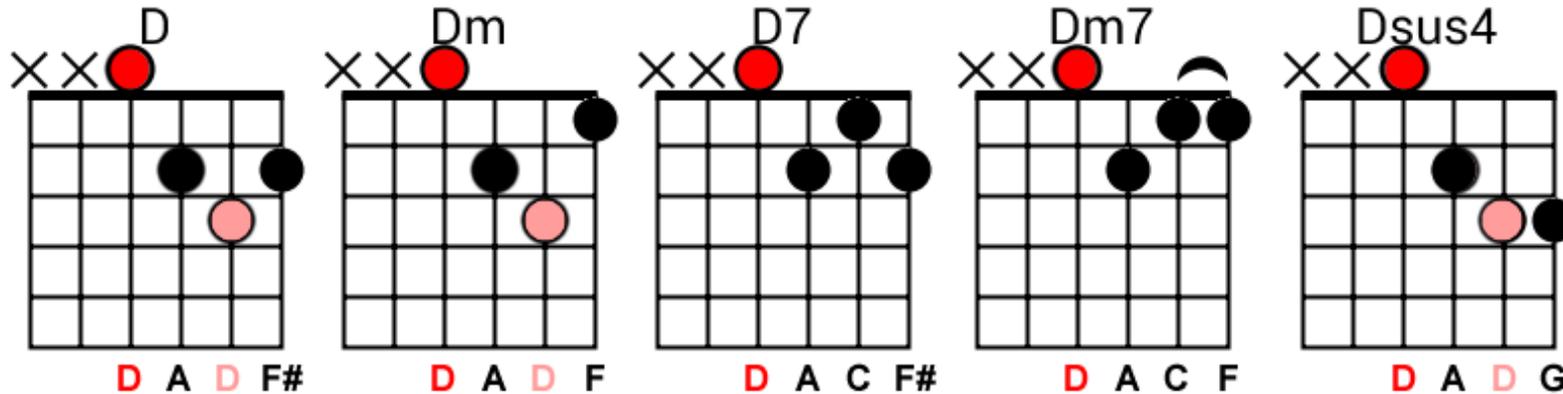
Now: a funny little thing about A Group chords → you could *technically* play all 6 strings

You won't find many folks that do this on purpose, but it's actually possible. Look back and notice that you will find an E note in every single A chord style. As a matter of fact, the ones I've shown actually contain TWO E notes that are actually heard. So, if you make a mistake and strum the low E string note while playing these chords, they won't sound bad. They WILL sound muddy and likely take away from what you are trying to play, but that's relative to your opinion.

Without going into too much detail, if you make a mistake and strum or pluck that low E string using the A Group of chords, you'll be creating an inversion in one way or another. Thus, the “E” note will sound more on top. It will override the true root.

THAT is actually how split chords work as well, but a true split chord (such as D/F# or G/B) is most often fretted as a specific note and not just randomly played as a mistake. Let's not mess with that right now.

Next is the “D Group” of chords.



Yep – our root is going to be on the D string. This time you'll notice that the E and A strings are omitted entirely. You would definitely want to avoid, at least in this group of chords, the low E string. There isn't a single “E” note in the mix. However, every single D group chord has an “A” note in it. So, yes – you could, if you wanted, use that open A string. The result would be the same as from before. It'll override the D group chord and create an inversion.

Since we are working with 4 strings now, we're starting to limit our playing field. This is perfectly fine, but it's also important to address because the D group chords are often tricky for beginner fingerstyle players. You have to squish your picking together. Some folks prefer D groups because of that reason, but I don't. That's your call.

Either way, notice that every one of these D groups use the open D string as the bass/root. The D, Dm and Dsus4 chords have an additional root on the B string. As with the two previous groups, once we move to a higher string, we lose other strings. However, the root/bass note consistency IS still there.

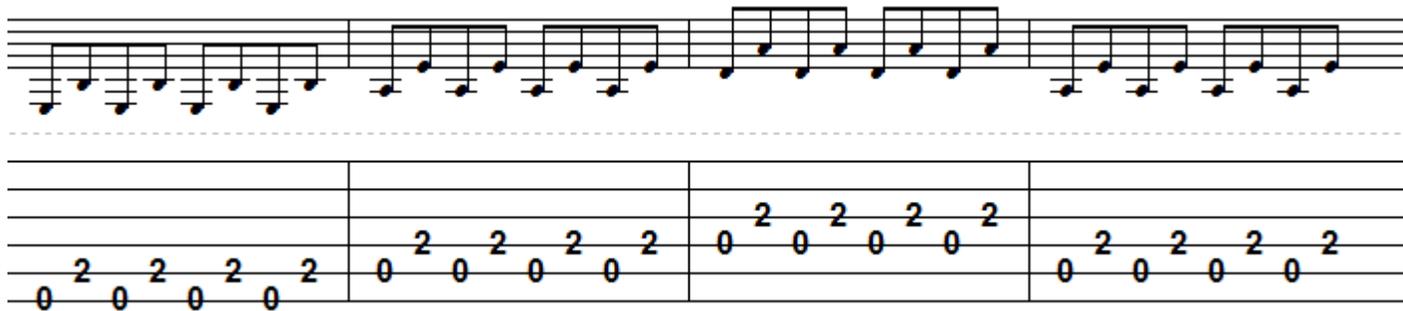
Just as with the E and A group of chords, the D7 and Dm7 chords are limited in their root notes. This is, as a refresher, because these chords use 4 notes instead of just 3 like our standard chords do.

At this point you actually know the starting point for your thumb across every standard chord group!

Thumbs Up Exercises

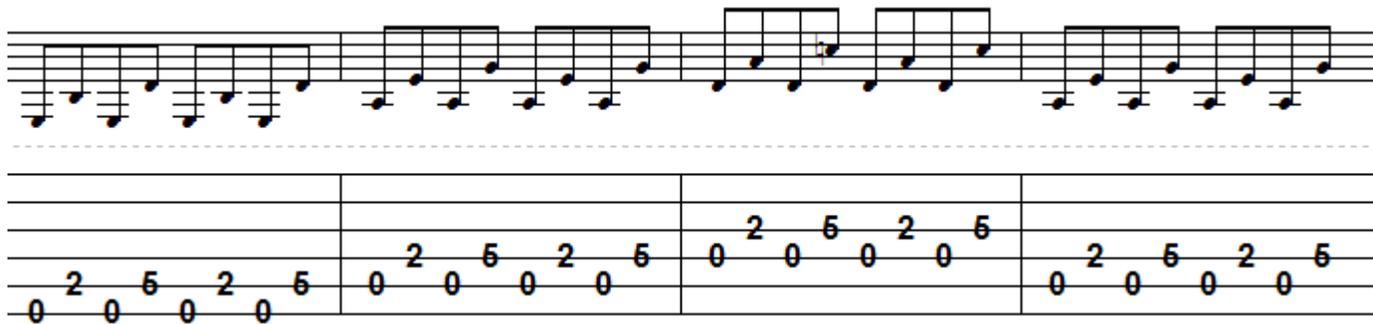
The exercises shown below are provided in the lesson video, but you won't likely need to watch it in order to play what is being asked of you. This is quite literally the basics of boom-chuck (Travis picking) using just 2 strings that are designed to trip you up just a *little* bit.

Exercise 1:



Exercise 1 musical notation. The top staff shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes on two strings. The bottom staff shows the corresponding fret numbers: 0 2 0 2 0 2 0 2 | 0 2 0 2 0 2 0 2 | 0 2 0 2 0 2 0 2 | 0 2 0 2 0 2 0 2.

Exercise 2:



Exercise 2 musical notation. The top staff shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes on two strings. The bottom staff shows the corresponding fret numbers: 0 2 0 5 0 2 0 5 | 0 2 0 5 0 2 0 5 | 0 2 0 5 0 2 0 5 | 0 2 0 5 0 2 0 5.

You can find an example of both of these in the lesson video.

At this point you are ready to learn more about this whole group concept, but I'm sure you are wondering this immediately:

“But what about open chords like C Major and G Major? Don't they have groups?”

Yeah – those. Ok, so here's the deal with C Major and G Major. Those two chords have a few interesting properties.

The C Major chord uses the A string as its root on the 3rd fret, but since that root note is *fretted*, there is a slight tonal property that has to change. The G Major chord uses the low E string as its root on the 3rd fret, but again – it's *fretted*.

So, while the C Major chord and G Major chord have properties built around their respective roots (C Major uses the A string on the 3rd fret and G Major uses the low E string on the 3rd fret) they DO NOT use open string roots. But yes – they are considered open chords.

Plus, trying to play an open Cm, Cm7, or a Csus4 chord is pretty insane. However, C7 isn't so bad. Here's a quick example of those:

Cm	C7	Cm7	Csus4
3	0	x	x
1	1	1	1
0	3	3	0
1	2	1	3
3	3	3	3
x	x	x	x

First, in order for a chord to be fully playable as an “open” chord, it must have at least an open string. You can immediately remove Cm7 from the possibilities. The C7 is actually one that I DO play frequently, but it's mostly just an extension of the open C Major chord itself. So, while these particular chords just so happen to use the A string as the overall root, they are fretted, which means their properties change a bit. You'll know what I mean when you view the exercises in a moment.

Some of the same issues apply with the whole G group concept, as shown below:

Gm	Gm	G7	Gm7	Gsus4
3	3	1	3	3
3	3	0	3	1
0	3	0	3	0
0	0	0	3	0
1	x	2	x	x
3	x	3	x	x

The first Gm chord is technically possible as it uses the low E string root. It's an open chord but the formation is wonky. The second Gm chord is also technically possible, but the lowest root there is an open D. Thus, it screws up the whole idea due to being an inversion. The G7 here IS absolutely normal – so yes – you can (and should) use that version. It stays completely consistent, but as far as a full logical grouping...? Nah – not just for a G Major and a G7.

Finally, the Gsus4 chord is much like the whole Gm idea. It's absolutely playable, but you are looking at an open D note being the lowest heard note.

That sure won't give you the indication of it being a Gsus4 (or the previous Gm) chord at all.

SPEAKING of indication in terms of notes.....

This is where the C Group (not really a group) and the G Group (not really a group) make things all weird. Great, right? Well, it's not all that difficult to understand. It's just about chord construction. I wish I could avoid this, but I really can't, so bear with me.

Every Chord Category Has a Unique Tone

#1 → The standard Major chord uses 1 – 3 – 5 (such as E Major: E – G# – B)

#2 → The standard minor chord uses 1 – b3 – 5 (such as E minor: E – G – B)

#3 → The Dominant 7th chord uses 1 – 3 – 5 – b7 (such as E7: E – G# – B – D)

#4 → The minor 7th chord uses 1 – b3 – 5 – b7 (such as Em7: E – G – B – D)

#5 → The suspended 4th chord uses: 1 – 4 – 5 (such as Esus4: E – A – B)

When you look across ALL of these chord categories, you can already assume that they will all have a “1” in them. Those notes are what establishes the root of the given chord. There's only one other consistent number across all of these categories.

That consistent tone is the “5” in every instance. Since the focus of this training system is to keep a certain consistency as much as possible, we need to think of ONLY the “1” and the “5” in these categories at first.

If you are familiar with power chords, that's the same idea. A power chord is NOT technically a Major or a minor because it lacks either the “3” to make it Major or the “b3” to make it minor. Furthermore, a power chord is NOT technically a chord at all for that very reason. It only uses 2 notes. Even the suspended 4th chord above has 3 tones in it, but it's not Major nor minor. Why? Well, it uses 1 – 4 – 5 instead. The “4” replaces any indication of Major or minor. Ok – enough on that.

What you want to know here is how to actually play something fingerstyle that works, right? It's actually quite easy to do this with all the open chord groups of E, A, and D using the 1 and the 5 from their groups. I'll use a really basic one first to help you see what I recommend you do.

Thumbs Up + 1: A Visual Example

This progression is a I – IV – V - I progression in E Major:

The image displays a musical progression in E Major, consisting of four measures: E5, A5, B5, and E5. The notation includes a melodic line, guitar fretboard diagrams, and fingerings. The fingerings for each measure are: E5 (0, 0, 0, 0), A5 (0, 0, 0, 0), B5 (2, 2, 2, 2), and E5 (0, 0, 0, 0). Below the fretboard diagrams, the notes for each chord are shown: E5 (E, B, G#, E), A5 (A, C#, A, E), B5 (B, F#, B, D#, F#), and E5 (E, B, G#, E). Red 'X' marks are placed under the first fret of the A5 and B5 diagrams, indicating that the root note (A and B respectively) is not played in this specific fingering.

In each measure you'll find the “1” (root) followed by the “5” in each chord. What this does is establish a generic starting point. When I say generic, that's not a bad thing. As you can expect, this particular thumb and 1st finger pattern works for ANY of the chord groups in the E or A realm. Why? Because all of them feature a “1” and a “5” - which is absolute consistency.

While NONE of these “chords” are actually chords (they only use 2 notes) they will become specific later. These are all actually “5” chords, which is another name for a power chord. So, your run above is actually E5 – A5 – B5 – E5.

Oh – and don't worry about that B5. It's only being used because it will provide a good progression. That B5 DOES give you a sneak peek into moveable shapes. It's just an open A Major chord shape that has been “moved” (aka “shifted”) to reflect a new chord. I will say that you CAN group the C and G chord as E or A groups in open position using just the 1 and the 5, but it won't work when we stack tones. I will further reiterate the full reasoning behind not using the C or G chords into being exclusively either E or A groups, but I want us to stick to the basics for now using just the 1 and the 5.

Here's another example for you using a minor version of $\dot{1} - \dot{4} - \dot{5} - \dot{1}$

You'll quickly see that the D5 chord is strange. We'll get to that. First, take a look at what I'm calling an A5. You already know that it isn't actually an Am, as we are only looking at the 1 and the 5. Funny thing is, it's the SAME pattern as the other "A" from above. The same applies with the implied Em (which is really just an E5).

That tells us something very important about fingerstyle.

#1 – the listener MUST know if a chord is going to be Major, minor, suspended, etc. ← it's our job to make it clear

We will begin stacking tones to do just that once we reach the "Crab and Bird Pinch" method.

#2 – there will be a general consistency between any chord group in respect to the strings involved.

In other words, since every chord has at least a 1 and a 5 in it, the only real changes take place when we distinguish what the chord should sound like when it comes to *open* chords.

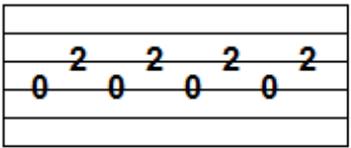
Now, I'll go back real quick and talk about that Dm (which is really just a D5)

A few reasons that Dm (D5) chord looks the way it does is found in the actual diagram of the notes. Here it is again:

D5

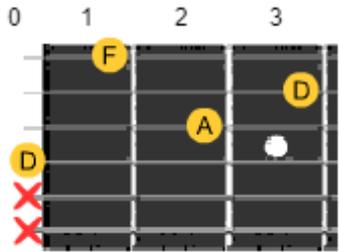


The Dm chord uses, when played fully, the notes of D – F – A. If we establish the notes as they should be read in chord construction, this results in D (1) – F (b3) – A (5).



Since any open D group chord limits our full playing field to only 4 strings, we are also limited to find the 1 and the 5. Yes, there are other ways you can find the 5 and use it, but it would result in either an inversion or a rather strange chord formation.

Instead, we need to think of the true chord shape, which is found in the fretboard diagram. In order to make use of the lowest root in this case, we must start with the “D” played open.



The only other option would be to follow up with the 5, which is the “A” note. This particular run is actually MUCH more of a boom-chuck (Travis style) of fingerpicking, but it's not really much more than that. You will definitely notice how squishy things get when you start limiting your string usage here, and I would almost argue that you should use just your thumb for this run.

But – I'd rather you not do that here. It'll be a good exercise to see if you can manage it.

In a nutshell, this particular run is the only way to play that Dm (D5) concept without either (1) inverting the chord – which we will do later – but that also (2) breaks the consistency – and we don't want that yet.

At this point you have ONLY made use of the “1” and the “5” in each chord. While those notes won't give us a full spectrum of notes, they do help get the ball rolling in terms of using your thumb and 1st finger. You aren't working with a “crab pinch” yet, but you are utilizing the basic approach without stacking the notes.

You have also likely recognized that there hasn't been any serious deviation in the overall spectrum of notes because we have yet to incorporate the tell-tale signs of each chord being Major, minor, dominant, suspended, etc.

Now it's time to put a few of these elements to use!

Thumbs Up +1 Exercises

The following exercises are built on common chord progressions that utilize all 3 groups of chords in one way or another. You will only need to use your thumb and 1st finger here and these digits are NOT stacked together, so it should be pretty easy. Your thumb needs to take care of the bass notes (the 1, aka the root) as shown while your 1st finger takes care of the 5 notes.

*As these exercises get larger, picking hand fingerings will be included. Before you just jump into these exercises, be sure to watch the video for each one as I explain a few things you really need to know.

Exercise 1:

Exercise 1: Musical notation for a guitar exercise. The top staff shows a sequence of chords: E5, A5, B5, and E5. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of eighth notes, and the bass line consists of quarter notes. The bottom staff shows the fretting hand fingering: 0 0 0 0 for E5, 0 0 0 0 for A5, 2 2 2 2 for B5, and 0 0 0 0 for E5.

Exercise 2:

Exercise 2: Musical notation for a guitar exercise. The top staff shows a sequence of chords: A5, D5, E5, and A5. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of eighth notes, and the bass line consists of quarter notes. The bottom staff shows the fretting hand fingering: 0 0 0 0 for A5, 0 2 2 2 for D5, 0 0 0 0 for E5, and 0 0 0 0 for A5.

Exercise 3:

Exercise 3 musical notation. The top staff shows a guitar melody with four measures. Above the staff are the chord names: D5, G5, A5, and D5. The bottom staff shows a bass line with fret numbers (0, 2, 3) and a double bar line at the end.

*Be sure to watch the lesson video for a nifty idea with G Major.

Exercise 4:

Exercise 4 musical notation. The top staff shows a guitar melody with four measures. Above the staff are the chord names: C5, F5, G5, and C5. The bottom staff shows a bass line with fret numbers (0, 1, 3) and a double bar line at the end.

*Be sure to watch the lesson video for an explanation of the C Major.

Also realize that the F Major chord here isn't open, but it's easy in this format. It also just so happens to be an open E Major chord shape that has been shifted one fret higher. (oops...shhh!)

Exercise 5:

The image displays a musical score for Exercise 5, consisting of two staves. The top staff is a single melodic line in treble clef, divided into four measures. Above the staff, the chords G5, C5, D5, and G5 are indicated. The melody consists of eighth notes, with some notes beamed together. The bottom staff is a guitar accompaniment in standard tuning, also divided into four measures. The first measure has a treble clef and a dot on the first string, with four triplets of eighth notes on the first string. The second measure has a bass clef and four open strings (0). The third measure has a bass clef and a sequence of fret numbers: 0 2 0 2 0 2 0 2. The fourth measure has a treble clef and a dot on the first string, with four triplets of eighth notes on the first string.

*Be sure to watch the lesson video for an explanation of the G Major and C Major.