

Put A Capo On It

A capo is a device used on the neck of the guitar to shorten the playable length of the strings, hence raising the pitch.



There are several different capo designs, but most commercial capos consist of a rubber-covered bar that clamps to the instrument's neck in some way to hold down the strings.

You can use a capo to easily change the key of a song. A lot of people do this so that they can sing the song in a range that is comfortable. Regardless of where you place a capo, the idea is that you create a 'floating nut'.

In other words, this part of the guitar is no longer relevant because the capo takes place of the nut. The nut could be considered the outermost point that a string can sound. It limits the absolute fretting ability.

To install the capo, you'll place the capo behind the target fret. For example, if we want the capo on the 3rd fret, we'll place the capo directly behind the 3rd fret. This will cause the strings to come into contact with the 3rd fret.



Capo placed on the 3rd fret.

When a capo is placed on the 3rd fret of the guitar, the first two frets are no longer relevant to the guitar. Instead, the capo on the 3rd fret has become the nut so to speak. That being said, all you have to do is basically 'pretend' that the capo becomes the outermost and absolute point that a chord can be fingered from.

For example, let's take the song "Leaving On A Jet Plane". The chord progression is G, C, G, C, G, C, D.

G C
All my bags are packed, I'm ready to go,
G C
I'm standing here outside your door,
G C D
I hate to wake you up to say goodbye.

Let's say when playing the song, that you have trouble singing it in that particular key, so you use your capo to change the key. By placing the capo on the 2nd fret, you would change the song from the key of G to the key of A.

How does this work? Play a G chord. The G found on the 3rd fret is the root of the chord. Imagine moving that root up two frets. This would in effect turn the chord into an A chord because the root is now on A.

You don't change the chord form. It's still G, but since the capo moves everything up, placing it on the 2nd fret turns the G into A.

Of course, all the chords change:

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      A           D
All my bags are packed, I'm ready to go,
      A           D
I'm standing here outside your door,
      A           D           E
I hate to wake you up to say goodbye.
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Now, if you've learned the song using G, C, and D chords you can use the capo to change the key. You'll fret the chords like before, but now because of the capo on the 2nd fret, they sound as different chords. All the G chords are now A, the C chords are now D and the D chords are now E.

If A doesn't work for you, try a different key. Move the capo to the 3rd fret. Move it to the 5th. Just move it around until you find a key that works for you. Just remember the golden rule: all chords are relative to the capo.

Let's try a different song. Let's take a verse from "Can't You See". The song is in the key of D with a progression is D, C, G.

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D
I'm gonna find me
C
A hole in the wall
G           D
gonna crawl inside and die
D           C
That lady, mean ol' woman Lord
G           D
Never told me goodbye
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What if you wanted to play it in the key of E? You'll want to use the root note (lowest note) of the D chord to be your guide. So, what note is that? Of course, it's the D string. Now, to play in E we're going to look for the E note. It's there on that 2nd fret of the D string, so in order to play in E, you'll want to place the capo on the 2nd fret. Now you're in E!

For F, you'd place the capo on the 3rd fret.

For G, the capo goes on the 5th fret, and so on...

Obviously, it helps know the names of the notes on your fretboard, but if you're just playing on your own you don't really have to worry what the name of the key that you move it to is. Again, the notes are relative to the capo, so as long as you can sing to it you're good to go.

Things that can go wrong with the capo...

- Capos aren't hard to place, but if you don't place the capo correctly you'll find some of the strings are out of tune with each other (or worse, intonation troubles with your guitar). Most times you'll want to adjust the capo until everything is in tune. Make sure it's parallel with the fret.
- Don't use that capo unless you have to! Some people fall in love with moving and changing the key, but it's really only meant to be used as a tool and not a way of life. If you can sing a song comfortably in the original key why change it? If you struggle with a particular key, then use a capo.