

Tutorial: Open Chords vs. Power/Barre Chords

There is a vast difference in the ‘feel’ of an open chord as opposed to either a power chord or a barre chord. I’ve given a great deal of thought to these three types of ‘chords’ and have determined that while the open chord is usually the ‘go to’ for beginner guitarists, it might not necessarily be the ‘best’ option at times.

The Basic Concept of Open Chords

Open chords are basically your standard in guitar. You know what they are, and odds are you know how to play most of them. You know that there must be three notes to create a chord. You know that a chord is also called a triad (which means ‘three’) and you know that barre chords are basically built from open chords in essence, because you can’t play every chord in an open position.

The Basic Concept of Power Chords

Power chords, by definition, only contain the root and the fifth. In other words, to play a D Major open chord you need the notes D, A, and F#.

The root of a D Major chord is the D, as deemed so by the chord name itself. It’s the “One” or “I” so to speak. The true root is actually the open D string, but it is doubled on the third fret of the B string as well. The “Fourth” or “IV” of the D Major chord is the F# note, which is found on the second fret of the High E string. All that is left is the “Fifth” or “V” of the D Major chord, which is the A note. This is found on the second fret of the G string and is sometimes duplicated with the open A string note, depending on how it sounds in a given progression.

So, if a TRUE power chord only contains the “I” and the “V” (or the “First” and the “Fifth”) we only need the notes D and A. In other words, we can play the D Major chord as a power chord, change the standard notation of “D” to “D5,” which allows the musician to realize it’s a power chord, and play it like this:

e ----x-----
B ----x-----
G ----x-----
D ----7-----
A ----5-----
E ----x-----

The fifth fret note on the A string is a D, which would be the “I” or the “root.”
The seventh fret note on the D string is an A, which would be the “V”.

Often you’ll see ‘more powerful’ power chords that add an octave above the root. In other words it becomes “I-V-I” instead. Basically you just look for another “root” that is an octave different. It would look like this:

e ----x-----
B ----x-----
G --- (7) -----
D ----7-----
A ----5-----
E ----x-----

I’ve included a parenthesis ONLY to show you the change. You don’t actually use the parenthesis unless you are using a form of notation to describe the value.

The seventh fret note on the G string is a D, so you have “D-A-D” or “I-V-I”.

This applies to ANY power chord, regardless on it being “I-V” or “I-V-I” so you can implement this concept for any power chord.

There is a lack of ‘fullness’ or ‘shimmer’ that comes from a power chord because basically there aren’t as many notes being played and also because you have ‘doubled’ the root note, creating a droning feel.

So, if you aren’t all about rocking out with power chords and/or heavy distortion (usually the case with an acoustic guitar – it’s just not as rewarding) you can always choose to create a barre instead.

Basic Concept of Barre Chords

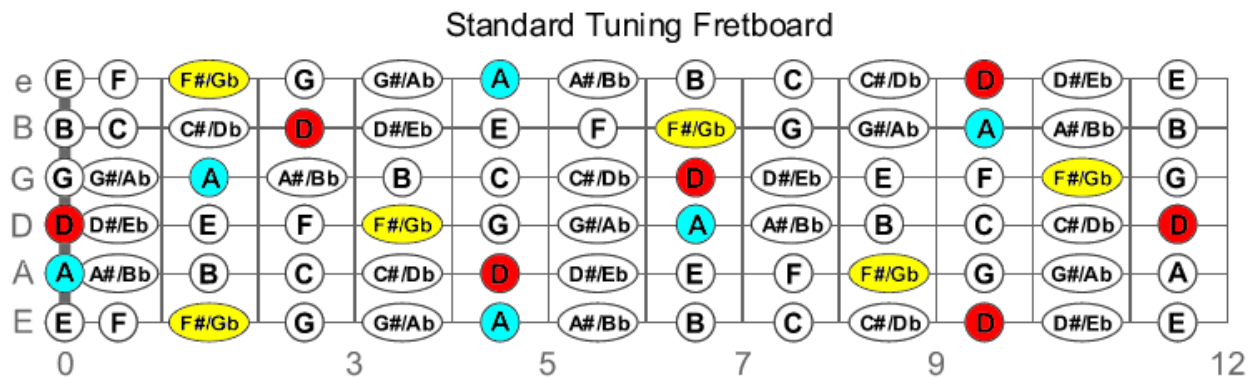
I’m not going ‘all in’ with the barre chord concept because all you are really doing is (1) adding/moving an open chord and (2) building the concept of a power chord.

In essence a barre chord attempts at filling in all possible gaps that are left from an open chord and/or a power chord.

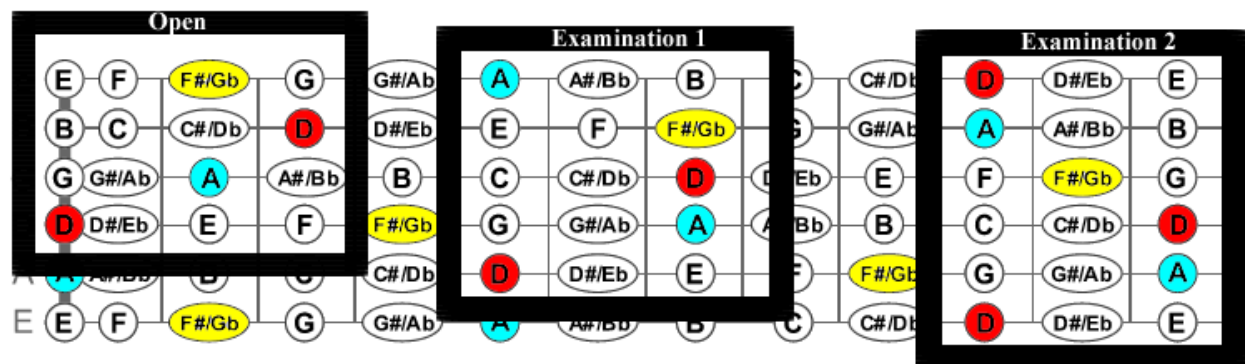
We remember that we need the notes D, A, and F# to create an open D Major chord. We also remember that to create a D5 we need (in a basic property sense) the notes D and A.

So how do we barre a D chord? We simply look at the fretboard for ALL possible notes found within the open chord shape of D Major.

While some of these patterns might not feel too great, the concept is still the same. Take a look at the fretboard and you'll see that I've highlighted EVERY D note in red. I've also added each A note in light blue, and every F# in yellow.



You'll see that all possible notes are highlighted, including the open position D Major chord. Now let's bracket these options for a clearer guide:



Open is pretty easy to identify where “(0)” indicates optional note at times:

e ----2-----
 B ----3-----
 G ----2-----
 D ----0-----
 A --- (0) ----
 E ----x-----

Examination 1 shows all possible notes to create a barre.

e ----5-----
B ----7-----
G ----7-----
D ----7-----
A ----5-----
E ----x-----

Notice this time I DIDN'T include the A string note on the fifth fret of the Low E string. Doing this tends to make the chord sound strange. Again, it is OK to do, but I wouldn't. We are focusing on the D barre chord with its ROOT on the A string.

Examination 2 shows another position to create the barre.

e ----10-----
B ----10-----
G ----11-----
D ----12-----
A ----12-----
E ----10-----

Now our focus is the root on the Low E string. If you notice the arrangement is a bit different than Examination 1's arrangement. The conventional "standard tuning" consists of perfect fourths and a single major third between the G and B strings. This is precisely the reason that when the G and B strings are used often an arrangement will change. Either way, it's still a D chord. Obviously if you were to convert these back to power chords in the same positions you would have:

G --- (7) ---
D ----7-----
A ----5-----

and/or

D --- (12) ---
A ----12-----
E ----10-----

So The Final Question Is...When and How Do You Know Which Ones To Use?

This is relative, but here's an easy way to think of it:

1. **Decide on the tone you're looking for.** If you are playing a folk or country song, odds are you want to experiment with as many OPEN chords as you possibly can. Hendrix' version of "All Along The Watchtower" took Dylan's idea completely transformed the song. He took the roots of folk and made them rock. How? He worked with barre chords and power(ish) chords. It didn't matter about changing keys or even time signatures. It was all about the way his chords changed. Rock usually employs barre/power chords more often. Jazz and/or Blues focus a great deal on even creating partial chords and even more difficult shapes.
2. **Feel free to combine ALL of them when you can.** Who says you can't play all three? Maybe you want to play a verse using open chords and then a chorus playing power chords. Maybe then you want a bridge that uses barre chords. It truly doesn't matter. It's all back to the first point I made about deciding on the tone of the song.
3. **Remember the overall rule.** An open chord tends to come out with more shimmer or effect, regardless of the 'mood' (Major, minor, diminished, suspended, etc.) and a barre chord tends to produce an even heavier effect, or a step up if you will, from the open chord concept. The power chord tends to drive or 'drone' out a given progression.

No matter how you look at it, the overall concept is still the same. If you have the notes necessary to play the chord, there is no limit to how you can incorporate virtually any chord – at any time – or at any place.

Sincerely,
Nathan Wilson
EZ Strummer