

Chapter 3 – The Capo: A “Magical Floating Nut”

What the heck am I talking about? A ‘magical floating nut’? That’s crazy talk, right? Wrong. Furthermore, it’s the easiest way in the world to explain how to use a capo.

The capo is a VERY simple device that takes place of the nut on your guitar. It’s that simple. But how is it used?



A capo is a clamp-like device that goes on across any fret on the guitar essentially creating a “barre” and can usually be found at any music instrument store.

It’s a tool used by many guitarists that enables them to easily change the pitch of open strings making them sound one half step higher, therefore making key changes much easier.

I won’t go into much detail on the basics of understanding notes on the guitar because hopefully you already have a general idea.

Many instructors try to explain how a capo works in a very difficult way, and I’ve never understood it to be honest.

There’s no need to alter any note names, discuss key changes, or anything like that – unless you have a fellow guitarist that chooses not to play with a capo. If that is the case, then sure a little more explanation is required. Don’t worry – I’ll briefly touch base on that.

There is a SLIGHT tonal difference when using a capo but nothing major and it works.

You might even come across some “high and all mighty” guitarists that think it’s cheating, or tell you to use barre chords instead, or even put you down for using it and say you aren’t a true guitarist.

OK.....tell that to Johnny Cash. Pretty much all of his songs use the capo and....well...you know the rest.

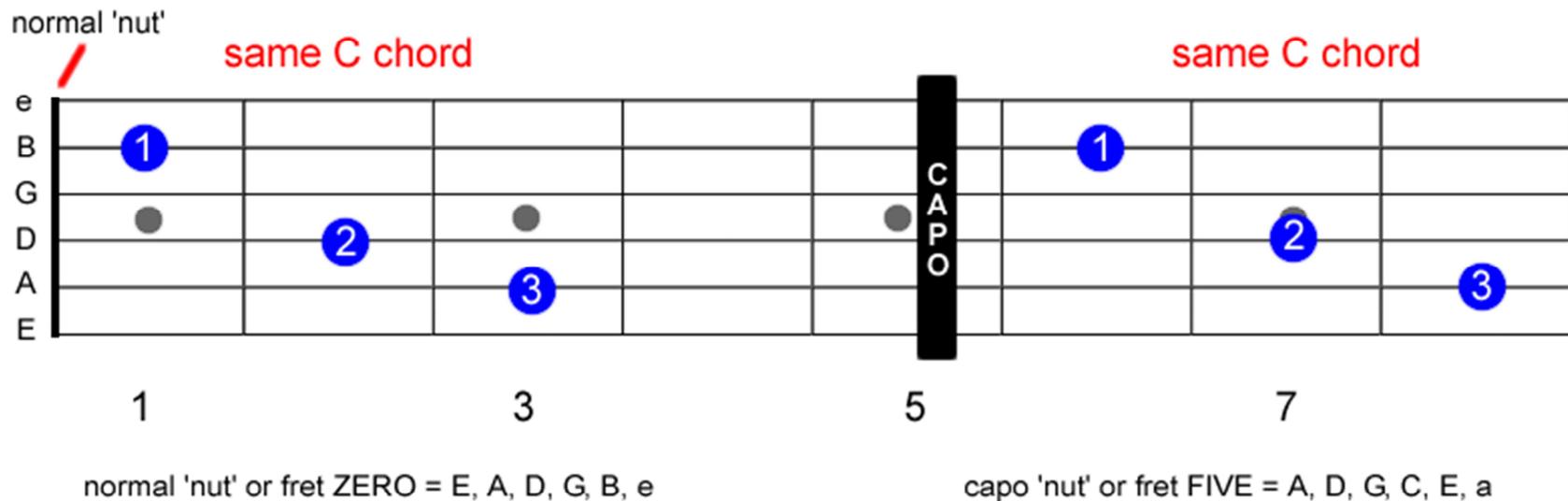
Let's take a look at a chart that unfolds the first five frets when using a capo:

Actual Sound Being Played

Capo on Fret#	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
A	A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db	D
A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb
B	C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E
C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E	F
C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E	F	F#/Gb
D	D#/Eb	E	F	F#/Gb	G
D#/Eb	E	F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab
E	F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab	A
F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb
F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb	B
G	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb	B	C
G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db

Chord Shape Being Played

Is all of this information really necessary? No. It's not. Here is the absolute EASIEST way to understand how a capo works. I'll be using the C Major chord as an example.



Here you'll see that we are using the C Major chord. The easiest way to understand the use of the capo is by realizing that not ONE single chord shape will ever change. Instead, the capo becomes the nut. Since the notes in front of the capo (in this case frets 4 back to 1) are now unplayable, the capo takes place of the nut that was in front of fret 1. In other words, E, A, D, G, B, e becomes A, D, G, C, E, and a. Note the lower case e's and a's. That signifies we're dealing with the high versions of these strings.

So the big question is...what key is this now? All you need to know are the note orders on your guitar.

There are 7 Primary Notes: A, B, C, D, E, F, G

There are 5 Secondary Notes: A#/Bb, C#/Db, D#/Eb, F#/Gb, G#/Ab

The secondary notes fill in the gaps between the primary notes. Just like creating a color.

Red (primary color) + Blue (primary color) = Green (secondary color)

There is NO space between B and C, or E and F. In other words – there is no secondary.

Since we're starting on the Low E string, let's start with that letter.

OPEN note order on the guitar:

E (open) | F | F#/Gb | G | G#/Ab | A | A#/Bb | B | C | C#/Db | D | D#/Eb | E (octave)

Fret 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

The key of an open guitar, in standard tuning, is E, because E is the lowest note on the lowest string.

CAPO note order on the guitar (at 5th fret):

A | A#/Bb | B | C | C#/Db | D | D#/Eb | E (octave)

Fret 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Since the capo is now located on the 5th fret, our key is not E, but A. That's it. Really. That's it. If it were on the 6th fret....the key would be....wait for it....wait for it....A#/ Bb.

Final Thoughts....

As you see, the capo really doesn't need much explanation. Instructors just try too hard to explain it. Of course, this is all based on the idea that you'll be playing a C Major chord, but it works with any chord. Just adjust your fingers to the fret numbers where the capo is played, and basically PRETEND that the capo is now your fret zero, or original nut of the guitar.

Exercise:

Take ANY song and apply the capo to it on any fret. Yes – ANY fret. There's no need to get into which fret works best. This is up to you. Just try to stay within the first five frets of the guitar for now. Practice singing the opening line while playing the chord that is necessary. If you sing the note and find it is too high, adjust the capo to a lower fret. If you sing the note and find it is too low, adjust the capo to a higher fret. Even if you are completely tone deaf, you'll notice the chord and know whether or not it SOUNDS too high or low for you. Just use your talking voice for now. There's no need to go all Freddie Mercury on it.