

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

Finger Formations & Flexibility

This lesson shows you how I found my own comfortable picking hand formation. We'll likely share the same common ground, but I'll also show you how to find your own comfort zone.

I first started out going the same route most learning guitarists do, which was strumming chords. As odd as this may seem, I spent many (many) years doing so without even using a guitar pic. Why? Well – I didn't actually like the way a pic felt in my hand. I still don't, but I've learned to adjust.

So, the one big problem in not using a guitar pic is figuring out how to strum a chord without it sounding so muddy. You'll get a video that details specifically how I started strumming without a pic, but the basic idea is detailed below.

The Six-String Brush

1. My thumb would brush from the low E string *all the way* downward to the high E string. This would result in somewhat of a lower to higher tone as I moved across each higher string.
2. My 1st finger would brush from the high E all the way upward to the low E string. This would result in somewhat of a higher to lower tone as I moved across each lower string.

The downward motion of my thumb toward the higher strings gave me a great little exercise (by pure accident) in where I would start targeting specific “bass” notes in a given chord. The bass note in a standard chord is just what it sounds like – the lowest tone. The lowest tone in a chord will be the root note, and that's the starting point for fingerstyle.

The upward motion of my 1st finger toward the lowest strings didn't mean much to me at first, as I was just trying to “get back” to my lower strings. However, I did start noticing something pretty neat. As I would bring my 1st finger up toward the lower strings I was able to find some common ground – a middle zone, if you will:

When I forced my thumb and 1st finger to meet together in the middle zone of my strings, it kept me from playing anything too low OR too high in tone. The process of reaching the middle zone is detailed in the video, which should help further explain all this – but the long story short is this: I developed my own sense of boom chuck (Travis picking) without even truly realizing it.

I found that my thumb was extremely comfortable on either the low E string or the A string. It just seemed second nature and a nice home base. My 1st finger was able to brush upward from the high E string to any of the lower strings and *catch* all the other notes within the chord spectrum.

While you might prefer not to brush your chords, I do highly recommend trying it at first. It will set you up in a way that helps target the most important aspect of your fingerstyle playing – the thumb. Seriously. I think it's more important than ANY other digit.

Alternative Methods For You To Consider

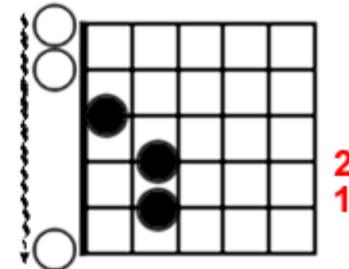
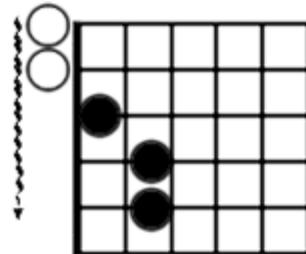
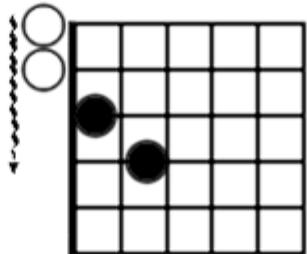
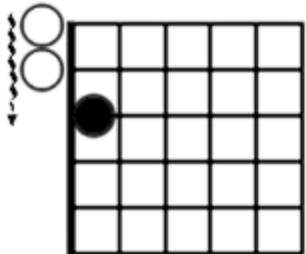
While the thumb is, in my opinion, the easiest digit to get acquainted with – it's just MY opinion. You might find that it is easier to start with two digits, which are the 1st and 2nd fingers. I know that sounds crazy, but we're not talking about playing anything exotic. We're talking about getting your finger formations down. If you find this method to be most effective, your 2nd finger actually creates the upward brush and the “bass” (thumb) is omitted entirely.... at first. This method will basically help you learn to “glue” your 1st and 2nd fingers together, which is often very difficult for those that want to learn fingerstyle beyond just 1 or 2 notes played at a time. The only problem with exclusively using the 1st and 2nd finger method is you don't have a way to work from the low strings to the high strings. You are simply moving from high to low.

Again, the video will show you how to do this – and while there's no need for tab in either aspect of this lesson, I do want to include it to help you see what I mean.

Here's an example of the thumb and 1st finger formation using a brushing method:

The diagram illustrates a fingerstyle technique using a combination of the thumb (T) and the index finger (1). The tablature shows a sequence of chords across six strings. Blue numbers represent the index finger (1), and orange numbers represent the thumb (T). Vertical arrows below the strings indicate the direction of the brush stroke. The sequence starts with a T downstroke on the 6th string, followed by a 1 upstroke on the 5th string, then a T downstroke on the 4th string, and so on, alternating between T and 1 strokes across the strings. The 1st finger is used to play the higher strings (4th, 3rd, 2nd, 1st), while the thumb plays the lower strings (6th, 5th, 4th).

Here's an example of the 1st and 2nd finger formation that excludes the thumb entirely:



While I ask that you try both to see which one suits you best, I think you'll find it MUCH easier to get acquainted with all six strings by using the thumb and 1st finger method. As mentioned earlier, there are plenty of advantages and disadvantages to both, with the advantages of the thumb and 1st finger preparing you more for a real-world application of boom chuck (Travis picking) as well as utilizing specific tones in a fingerstyle passage to get your point across.

The downside of the thumb and 1st finger pattern is that you DO have to be a bit more specific, so you'll need to be a bit more patient with the thumb and 1st finger method as you familiarize yourself with each of the 6 strings.

The upside of the 1st and 2nd finger pattern is that you aren't really picking specific tones; instead, you are quite literally getting your 1st and 2nd fingers to work "together" for your future fingerstyle needs. It will also help you get accustomed to squishing together the 1st and 2nd fingers for a consistent method of playing the higher end notes that also come with fingerstyle.

The downside of the 1st and 2nd finger pattern is that you can't really move from low to high as those fingers are somewhat stuck together. So, at the end of the day, you'll likely want to mix BOTH of these methods together. Just decide which one is easier for you first. Try that for a bit until you get bored with it and then go to the other method. Rinse, wash, and repeat.

Even though there are two options here, there's no doubt that the thumb is the MOST valuable tool in fingerstyle. After you have messed around with the two methods above, you will need to start focusing heavily on your thumb.

There's no getting around it - and that's next!