

Basic Picking Technique

Interestingly, having looked at dozens of guitar teaching manuals over the course of many years, I have noticed that virtually no book dedicates any great amount of space for trying to describe or demonstrate the picking motion. Perhaps due to this, many teachers tend to take this task for granted. Having taught numerous students who had some previous guitar lessons, I have on many occasions, had to return those students to the basic elements of their technique, mainly the picking. You must keep in mind that it is the picking hand which is producing the sound, volume and timbre (tone quality) of your playing.

Hold the pick between the side of the curled index finger and the pad of the thumb. Refer to the photos and observe a teacher demonstration for clarification. When playing single notes (strings) the tip of the pick only has to move a small fraction of an inch. The initial tendency will be to move the entire hand from the wrist joint or maybe even the whole arm all the way back from the elbow joint. Both the wrist and the elbow will ultimately play a role in the picking but my suggestion is to use the tip joint of the thumb as the primary motion.

Execute the downward pick stroke by folding the tip joint of the thumb. For most students, this wiggling motion of the thumb will at first seem rather awkward and slow. It is indeed an unusual motion for the thumb and even at its fastest, it will most likely not be fast enough. Ultimately, as you begin developing the picking to a faster speed, you will have to abandon most of that thumb wiggling motion.

The main reason for beginning with this thumb tip motion is to relax the right hand grip on the pick. If you do the above recommended motion, you will not be able to hold the pick too tightly. The other advantage of beginning the picking process in this manner is to develop the correct angle of attack on the string. In the down stroke, the leading edge of the pick will slide momentarily along the string because the pick will hit the string at a slight angle. However, if the pick slides more than let's say a quarter of an inch, your angle of attack is too oblique and the sound on the wound strings will be very "scratchy."

As mentioned previously, when you have to attain a faster tempo, the wrist and even the right arm will come into play and only a hint of the thumb action will remain. By far the best thing here is a thorough demonstration from your teacher.

Basic Fingering Technique (left hand)

The position of the thumb is quite critical. The thumb should reside at the back of the guitar neck, approximately between the first and second frets. The fingering pressure is only countered by the thumb and the thumb is not actually used for supporting the instrument. The countering pressure should be more on the first joint of the thumb rather than against the pad of the thumb tip.

The finger tips must press the strings rather than the finger pads. Consequently, the fingers must be arched enough to clear the adjacent strings and this is particularly true in fingering chords. Bring the finger tip close to the required fret but not on top of it. This will produce the clearest sound with a minimum of fingering pressure. Notice that although the tip of the thumb can protrude slightly over the edge of the guitar neck, it should not hook over the top of the guitar neck.

Your teacher can demonstrate good technique for both hands.