

# Mandolin - First Steps 1

There's no such thing, in my opinion, as an easy instrument. All instruments require a good deal of effort before one can say they can play them. It is my intention to give you a strong foundation of basic techniques from which you can build your skills on the mandolin.

At the start you need two main aptitudes. Firstly, you require **PATIENCE**. You can't pick up the mandolin and expect to be a great player in two weeks; it takes the time it takes, and to some extent that's in *your* hands.

It's also important to have **PERSEVERENCE**.

The world is full of people who gave up learning music at the first sign of difficulty. Every successful musician had the determination to get past these hurdles, and were the better for it.

Use this handout as a reference - you'll need it over the first few weeks. Hopefully I've answered a few questions, but if there's anything you're not sure of, ASK. That's how people learn.

Oh, and try to have fun - it may be hard work, but it should be enjoyable at the same time!

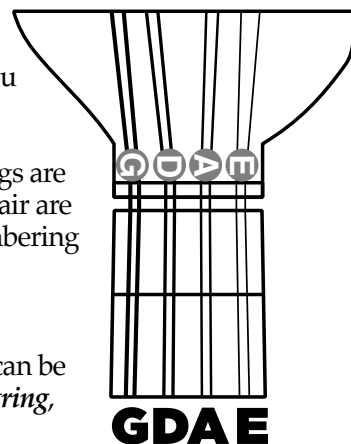
Nigel Gatherer

## The Strings

1) Usually when people talk about "a string" on the mandolin, they're meaning a pair of strings. So if I were to say "Play the A string," I'd mean you to strike both of the strings.

2) It's very useful to know the names of the strings. The thickest pair of strings are called the **G string**; the next thickest pair the **D string**. The second thinnest pair are called the **A string**, and the thinnest pair the **E string**. An easy way of remembering this is by using a phrase such as "Gregg's Doughnuts Are Excellent" or "Green Dinosaurs Are Extinct" (or even "G'day!").

3) The E string (the thinnest pair) is often called the **first string**, the A string can be called the **second string**, and so on. (The E string can also be called the **top string**, even though it's nearest the ground!)



## The Plectrum

There are lots of different opinions about the plectrum, also called the pick. Some books will advise you to use a soft pick; others will recommend a stiffer one. I'm afraid in the end it comes down to personal preference as to which pick will suit you. I would say



start with a medium pick and see how it suits you. Try others after a while and see what difference there is. Hold the pick firmly between the thumb and the index finger. The other fingers should be roughly in line. The thumb should be more or less straight

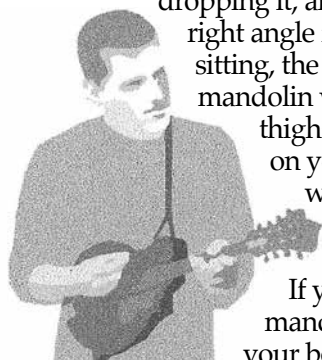
with the pointed end of the plectrum coming out at almost right angles.

It is important that the pick is held loosely. If you are dropping the pick, then it is too loose, otherwise loose is good. As you become more experienced, you will adjust to holding it with just enough tension without impairing your stroke.

## Holding the Mandolin

### Flat backs

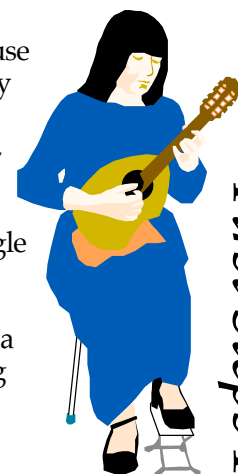
It can be a good idea to use a strap, which steadies the instrument gives you some security against dropping it, and helps in getting the right angle for the neck. If you're sitting, the lowest part of the mandolin will be between your thighs and the back will rest on your belly. The neck will be pointing up at an angle of between 30 and 45 degrees.



If you're standing, the mandolin will be in front of your body.

### Round backs

Roundback players do not use straps, and usually only play while seated. The mandolin will rest on your thighs and, with the use of a small footstool, either the left leg or both legs are raised. The angle of the neck will be between 45 and 60 degrees, and this is achieved with the help of a leather or synthetic gripping cloth placed in the lap to steady the instrument.



First Steps 1

# Mandolin - First Steps 2

## Tuning

**First Advice: Don't Panic!** Tuning is one of the first major challenges you'll face as a mandolin player; even professionals have difficulties from time to time, so don't get discouraged. These days almost everyone uses an electronic tuner. One of the advantages is that if you have difficulty with pitch, you may trust technology to help. It can keep the mandolin tuned within the range it was meant to

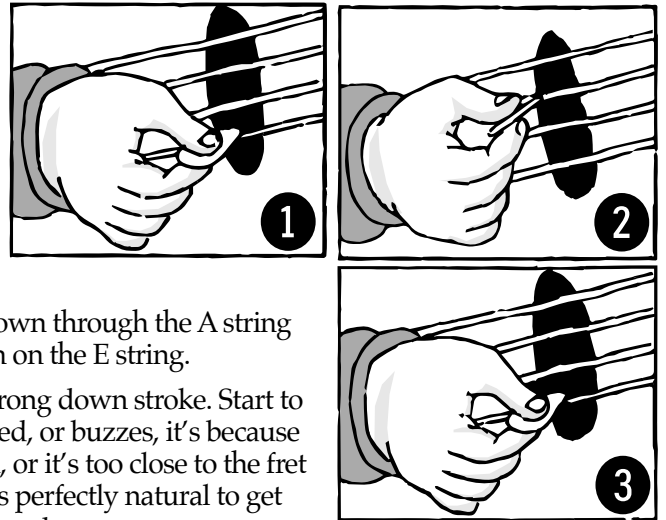
be played (E-A-D-G). Tuning higher than that risks damage to your instrument. The cheaper electronic tuners may be a little tricky to use, resulting in frustration, but it might beat the frustration of feeling unable to tune at all.



## The Down Stroke

There is a tendency for beginners to play very quietly, but it's as well to start off with a good, strong stroke. The right hand movement should be from the wrist, and the pick will be parallel with the strings. Now try this:

- 1) Rest the pick on the E string- don't strike any strings just yet; be comfortable just resting.
- 2) Now raise the pick with your wrist and run it down through the A string (both of the strings) so that it comes to rest again on the E string.

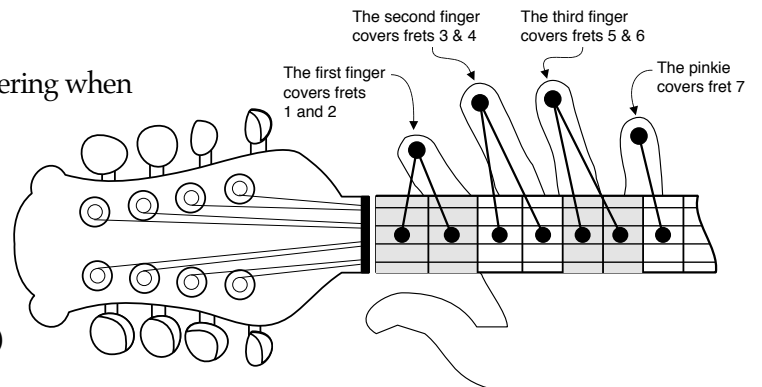


This exercise demonstrates the sound of a good, strong down stroke. Start to listen to the sound you make: if the sound is muffled, or buzzes, it's because you're not holding your finger down hard enough, or it's too close to the fret (the metal bars running across the fingerboard). It's perfectly natural to get these problems to begin with, so don't be disheartened.

## Fingering

It is important that you use the correct fingering when you play individual notes. The 1st (*index*) finger plays the notes which occur in the 1st two frets; the 2nd (*middle*) finger plays notes which occur in frets 3 and 4; the 3rd (*ring*) finger frets 5 and 6, and the 4th (*pinkie*) fret 7.

You needn't be concerned about any notes higher than the 7th fret at this stage.)



## Tablature

For a beginner, tablature is a simple method of learning tunes quickly, but it's a good idea to look at the. In the example below, you can see that the four lines of the tab correspond directly to the four courses of strings on your mandolin. Bring the mandolin up so that you are facing the fretboard: the 1st or top string would be the E, the 2nd A, 3rd D and 4th or bottom string would be the G. Now look at the tablature: the top line is the E string, the 2nd line the A, the 3rd the D and the 4th line is the G.

The numbers on the lines indicate the fret on which you are to place your fingers. The first number on the tab in the example is "0" and it is lying on the third line down, the D string. This means that you simply pick the D

string without placing your finger on any fret. When you play a string like this it is called playing it *open*; in this example you have just played an *open D string*. The next number along is another "0", but this time it's on the 2nd line, so play an open A string. Next is a "4"; place your middle finger on the D string at the 4th fret. The next three use open strings, first A, then D, the A again. See if you can play the rest of the example following the tablature.

Key of  $\square$  D; 4  $\text{♩}$  to the bar.

TAB: 0 0 4 0 0 4 0 0 2 5 2 0 2 5 2

*1) Scale in D*

tone = 2 frets  
semitone = 1 fret

*2) Scale in A*

tone = 2 frets  
semitone = 1 fret

*3) Scale in G*

tone = 2 frets  
semitone = 1 fret

*4) D Scale Exercises*