

## Chapter 1

# Getting the Basics Sorted: Mandolin Fundamentals

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Checking out right-hand fundamentals
  - ▶ Using your left hand effectively
  - ▶ Following written music
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You can't play the mandolin without using your hands and fingers. So in this chapter I run through the left- and right-hand basics (check out *Mandolin For Dummies* for more details). I take the opportunity to cover the following: holding the pick, basic picking techniques, left-hand fingerings, and proper left-hand grip. I also include reading tablature, chord diagrams, and neck diagrams.

If you already know some of this material, taking a second look never hurts. Reminding yourself is usually good, unless of course it's a reminder about how awful it feels to trip over and put your foot through your favorite mandolin!

## *Tuning Up*



Before you can make beautiful music on your mandolin, you need to be in tune. Listen to Track 1 of the downloadable audio tracks ([www.dummies.com/go/mandolinexercises](http://www.dummies.com/go/mandolinexercises)) and tune to me if you like to tune by ear, or use your favorite tuning method. For further information on a variety of tuning methods be sure to have a flick through *Mandolin For Dummies*.

## *Covering a Few Right-Hand Basics*

One of the most important elements in mandolin playing is having a strong, co-ordinated, and organized right hand. This hand is responsible for rhythm, tone, dynamics, and speed. It needs to stay relaxed and loose while you're playing. Small adjustments in the way you hold the pick can dramatically change your tone or even your ability to play at faster tempos. (I give you tips on speeding up in Chapter 16.)

Another often-overlooked part of mandolin playing is maintaining proper pick direction. Many of the exercises in this book include elements that deal with pick direction to help strengthen and develop your left and right hands.

## Holding the pick

Beginners often pass over this basic skill, but sooner or later you need to come to grips with the way you hold your pick:

1. Make your right hand a loose fist with your thumb sticking up a bit.
2. Lay the pick on the side of your first finger, as shown in Figure 1-1 (a).
3. Place your thumb over the pick so that you're holding the pick between the pad of your thumb and the side of your index finger (b).
4. Hold the pick as loosely as you can.

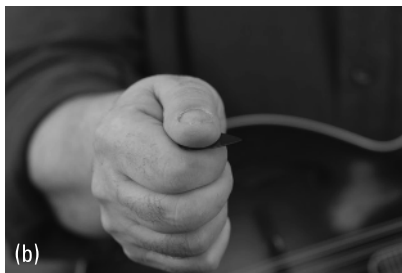
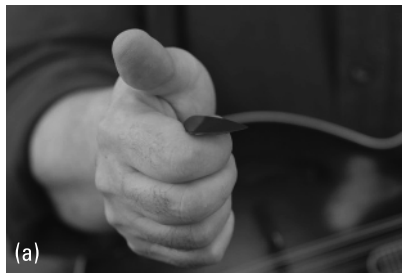


A death grip may be great for subduing aggressive Klingons, but it's no good for playing the mandolin. Too tight a grip on your pick guarantees bad tone and uneven tremolo, and may even get you thinking that you'll never be able to play quickly.

5. Position your right hand so that the pick hits the strings somewhere near the end of the fingerboard. (This is often called the 'Sweet Spot'.)

Some players support their right hand by lightly touching the bridge with the heel of the right hand. Some don't touch the bridge but support their right hand by dragging their third and fourth fingers on the top of the mandolin or the pick guard (which is sometimes called the finger rest). Some believe that you shouldn't touch the top of the mandolin at all. What all players can agree on, however, is to support the mandolin by resting your arm on the rib as shown in Figure 1-1 (c).

For more details of picks, holding the pick, and methods of support for the right hand, see Chapter 5 of *Mandolin For Dummies*.



**Figure 1-1:**  
Holding the  
pick.

## Getting up to speed with alternate picking

If you had to pick one technique that defines mandolin playing it would be alternate picking. *Alternate picking* in its simplest form is just a series of pick strokes following an even down-up, down-up pattern. Mastering this technique is essential to playing certain popular mandolin styles such as fiddle tunes, rags, bluegrass, swing, choro, Bach, and any music that has a steady, even flow of notes.

Tremolo is a well known mandolin technique based on alternate picking. Owing to the lack of sustain when playing a mandolin, mandolin players over the years have developed the *tremolo*, which is basically rapid alternate picking to imitate the continuous sustained sound of the violin bow.



See the following exercise for a basic set of alternate-picking drills. Many of the scale and arpeggio exercises I present in this book (see the chapters in Parts II and III, respectively) require a decent understanding of alternate picking. You can consider the following figure (which I demonstrate on Track 2) to be a test. If you're prepared to work through the exercises in this book, you can perform these four types of alternate picking: (a) eighth notes (quavers), (b) eighth-note triplets, (c) sixteenth notes (semiquavers), and (d) sixteenth-note triplets.



If you're struggling a bit with these alternate-picking drills, visit Chapter 5 of *Mandolin For Dummies*, where I describe alternate picking and tremolo in more detail.

### Track 2

(a) (b)

(c)

(d)

## Letting Your Left Hand Do the Talking

The left hand is responsible for making the actual note pitches, as well as ornaments including different types of slurs that connect notes together smoothly. Position shifts (playing in different regions up and down the neck) require a good understanding of a variety of left-hand fingerings.



Clarity and sustain require clean fretting of each and every note, which can happen only when you understand proper left-hand technique. If you aren't 100 per cent confident with your left-hand skills, take a look at Chapter 6 of *Mandolin For Dummies*.

I describe some useful finger warm-up exercises and techniques for you in Chapter 2.

## Using a proper grip

Here are a few pointers for getting the most out of your left hand:

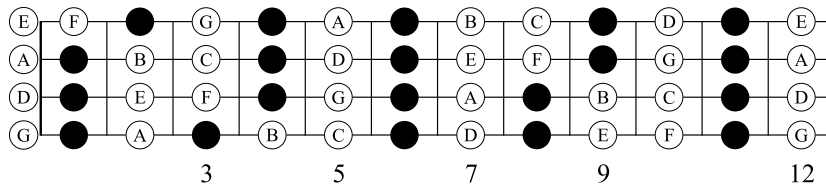
- ✔ Support the neck with your thumb and keep some space between the palm of your hand and the back of the neck, as shown in the following **Figure 1-2**.
- ✔ Try to keep your wrist fairly straight. Avoid any sharp angles by pushing your wrist up or down (see the two photographs).
- ✔ Angle your fingers so that they point back at your midsection (see the upper photo).  
Don't try to keep your fingers parallel to the frets; that's a guitar technique and doesn't work well for the mandolin.
- ✔ Bend the last knuckle in each finger so that you fret the strings with the tip of your finger (see the lower photo).



**Figure 1-2:**  
Using a  
proper grip.

## Figuring out fingerings

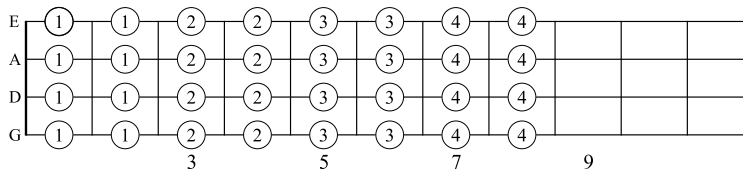
The following figure is a diagram of a mandolin fingerboard including the names of the notes. Notice that the sharps and flats are designated by black dots in a similar way to how sharps and flats on a piano are black keys.



Mandolin left-hand fingerings are much more like those of the violin than of a guitar, in that each finger is responsible for two frets. With guitar, the basic rule is one finger per fret. By looking at the following figure, you can see that for the mandolin you need to play the fifth fret with your third finger.



If your mandolin teacher suggests that you play the fifth fret with your fourth finger, you're taking mandolin lessons from a guitar player and should look for another teacher. See the following figure for basic open (or first) position fingerings.



When playing up the neck, the fingering concept remains two frets per finger. I demonstrate all scales and arpeggios in this book in moveable closed positions and open position. You may hear other mandolin players talk about 'positions' when playing up the neck. If players refer to, say, 'third position', they mean playing up the neck, and so your first finger would be at the fifth or sixth fret, which is usually played by the third finger, hence the term 'third position'.

The best way to make your fingering and positioning second nature is to practice scales day and night, driving your neighbors crazy. Check out Chapter 3 for major scales, Chapter 4 for (the no-less-important) minor scales, Chapter 5 for pentatonic and chromatic scales (great for improvising), and Chapter 6 for how to expand scales to more than one octave. For arpeggio practice, flip to Chapter 7 for major ones, Chapter 8 for minor ones, Chapters 9 and 10 for sevenths, and Chapter 11 for diminished and augmented ones. Don't worry if any of these terms are new to you; I explain everything thoroughly in each relevant chapter.

### Throwing in left-hand ornaments

Beyond just playing the notes, the left hand is also capable of adding some personality to your melody with left-hand ornaments. Rather than being knick-knacks for your mantelpiece, these ornaments include slides, hammer-ons, pull-offs, mutes, and so on. I discuss performing these techniques and recognizing what they look like in printed music in detail in Chapter 6 of *Mandolin For Dummies*. (How did you ever manage without it!)

## Reading Music in Different Formats

You can learn music from the printed page in a variety of forms. If you're coming to the mandolin from a classical instrument, you're most likely to be comfortable with reading standard notation. If you're new to the mandolin, however, you may have more success reading tablature. I also include chord diagrams and neck diagrams for many of the exercises in this book, which are basically illustrations of the fingerboard with indications of where the notes are. Any or all of these methods are useful when learning to play an instrument.



Whatever method you choose, be sure to listen to recordings of the song, lick, or exercise you're trying to master. Music is sound, and printed music is merely a way to archive and communicate music from person to person or even generation to generation. Nobody gets out sheet music and starts reading it because they like the way it makes them feel. Be sure to download all the audio demonstration tracks for this book from [www.dummies.com/go/mandolinexercises](http://www.dummies.com/go/mandolinexercises).

### Trying out tab

Tablature (tab) has been around for hundreds of years and is instrument-specific, meaning that guitar tablature or banjo tablature doesn't help a mandolin player. See the following figure for an example.

The four horizontal lines represent the four pairs of strings on the mandolin. The numbers refer to fret numbers, and so a '7' placed on the first or highest line indicates a note at the fifth fret of the e-string. By the way, the name of this note is B.

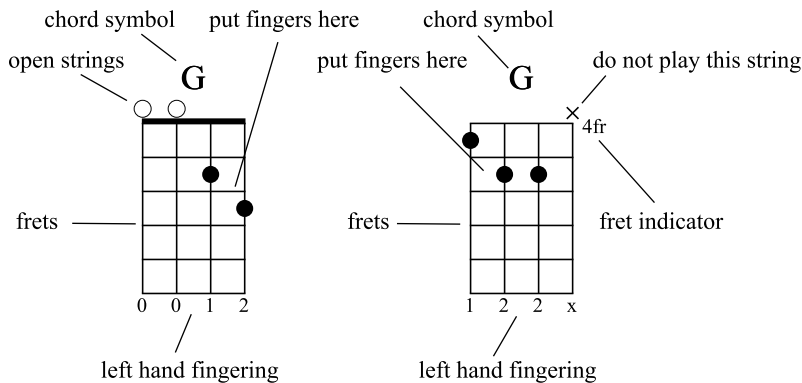
As an additional aid to the exercises in this book, I place pick-direction markings, fingerings, and note names above the tablature. Not all exercises contain all the additional markings, but I include them wherever possible to make sure that you understand the proper way to perform the exercise.

The figure shows a musical example with two staves. The top staff is standard notation in 4/4 time, showing a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, and a descending eighth-note run (B4, A4, G4, F4, E4). The bottom staff is mandolin tablature with four lines representing strings. The notes are: 4th string open (G4), 4th string 4th fret (A4), 3rd string open (G4), 2nd string 2nd fret (A4), 3rd string 5th fret (B4), 2nd string 5th fret (C5), 1st string 3rd fret (B4), and 1st string 7th fret (C5). Above the tablature, left hand fingerings (1, 3, 3, 7) and note names (G, B) are indicated. Pick direction markings (v for down, ^ for up) are placed above the notes. Labels with arrows point to specific frets: 4th string open, 4th string 4th fret, 3rd string open, 2nd string 2nd fret, 3rd string 5th fret, 2nd string 5th fret, 1st string 3rd fret, and 1st string 7th fret.

## Understanding chord diagrams

Chord diagrams are basically a vertical illustration of a certain region of the mandolin fingerboard. The dots indicate where to put your fingers to make a specific chord.

A circle placed directly above a string where the headstock of the mandolin would be indicates an open string, whereas an 'x' in that same location tells you not to play that string. Numbers along the bottom of the chord diagram indicate which fingers to use on each string. See the following figure for an example of a chord diagram.



Part IV is where it all comes together: Chapter 12 brings arpeggios and scales together with some diatonic arpeggio exercises, Chapter 13 for a serious rhythm workout using three-string chords, and Chapter 14 gives you a look at some improvised solos in different musical styles and even gives you a chance to do a bit of improvising yourself.

## Interpreting neck diagrams

Neck diagrams are similar to chord diagrams but are presented horizontally instead of vertically. Neck diagrams typically show more frets than chord diagrams do and are used more often for scales (see the chapters in Part II) and arpeggios (flip to the chapters in Part III).

The numbers inside the dots or circles are finger numbers; the numbers below the illustration are fret numbers. The following figure is an example of a neck diagram.

