

Douglas Niedt, Guitarist: Official Website



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**Douglas Niedt's
GUITAR TECHNIQUE
TIP OF THE MONTH**

Yes, it's "Doug's Dirty Little Secrets"



(Doug subtitled his Tech Tip as "Doug's Dirty Little Secrets" after reading someone's posted message on a guitar web forum. The writer asserted that professional virtuoso guitarists all had secrets they kept to themselves and wouldn't tell anyone else, so no one would play as well as them!)



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It contains ALL of Doug's Previous Guitar Technique Tips of the Month

SLURS ("Hammer-Ons" and "Pull-Offs")

By Douglas Niedt

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WE HAVE A SUMMARY!

This month's Tech Tip is a thorough but rather long discussion of SLURS. For those who need to start practicing in a few minutes (or do the laundry, go to work, teach a student, go to the mall, get the car fixed, go....) here is a summary of the tip: **OR, SKIP SUMMARY, TAKE ME TO PAGE 1**

Sure, you probably already know there are two basic types of slurs: ascending slurs (hammer-ons) and descending slurs (pull-offs). But did you know there are three kinds of descending slurs?

1. Rest Slur
2. Brush Slur
3. Free Slur

- There really are certain best ways to use the fingers and hold the hand to execute slurs well. "Whatever works" is not an option.
- Did you know that Safety Stops should be used for descending slurs? (No, Safety Stops aren't something that can be bought at Walmart or the hardware store.) There are two kinds:
 1. Left-hand safety stops
 2. Right-hand safety stops
- Other varieties of slurs include:
 1. Slurs of more than two notes
 2. Double-note slurs
 3. Descending cross-string slurs
- Sound quality is key. A well-played slur is one where the volume and tone quality of the second note closely matches the first. I have five ways to help you achieve this.
- Executing slurs in precise rhythm is difficult. I will show you practice methods that actually work to fix slurs that are rhythmically uneven.
- Why should slurs matter to you? I have five very good reasons:
 1. Slurs enable one to play a progression of two or more notes as legato as possible.
 2. Slurs can be used as an expressive device, especially for accentuation.
 3. Slurs aid in the execution of fast scales.
 4. Slurs are used in the execution of many ornaments.
 5. Slurs are the best exercise for developing the left hand's strength, speed, finger independence, and general control. But you have to play them correctly!

So okay, you can go and walk the dog now. But come back and read all the nitty-gritty details. Come back and watch the video clips, look at the musical examples, listen to the sound clips, and I will share with you the Dirty Little Secrets every guitarist should know to improve his slur technique.

SLURS ("Hammer-Ons" and "Pull-Offs")

By Douglas Niedt

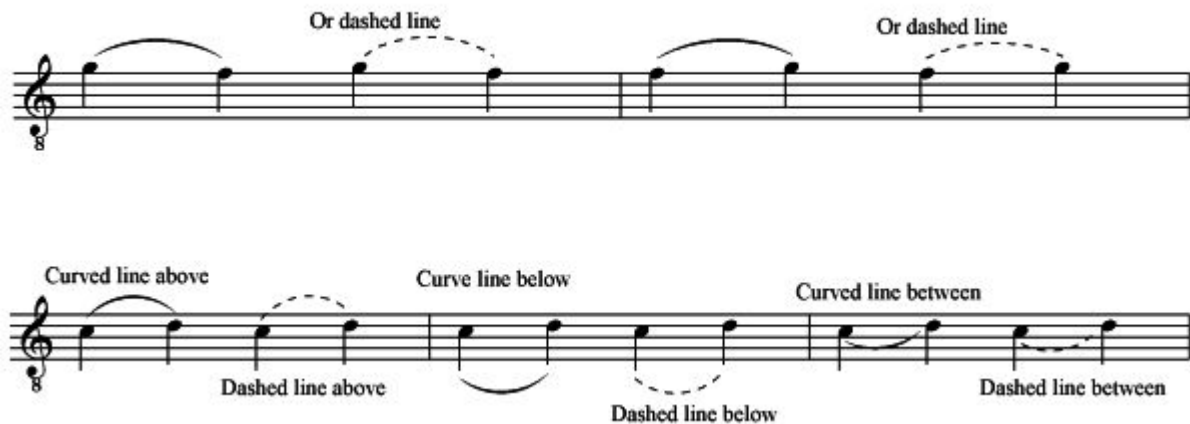
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The execution of slurs is one of the more difficult techniques in guitar playing. The descending slur or “pull-off” can be particularly tricky to execute clearly. Even the nomenclature for slurs is confusing. "Ligado" (Spanish), "Hammer-On," "Hammer," "Pull-Off," are all words guitarists use for slur. "Legado" is incorrect—you will see it, but it is simply a misspelling for the Spanish word ligado. "Legato" is also incorrect. "Legato" is the name for the effect produced by the use of slurs—it means connected in a smooth, graceful manner, the opposite of staccato.

In guitar music, two-note slurs are the most common. The two notes are always a different pitch and are joined with a curved line above, below, or between the notes. The curved line is usually solid, but in some guitar editions a broken (dashed) curved line is used to differentiate it from a phrase mark which is traditionally a solid curved line:

Example #1: Slur Notation



ON THE GUITAR, WE HAVE TWO SPECIFIC TYPES OF SLURS:

1. THE ASCENDING SLUR
2. THE DESCENDING SLUR

Execution of the Ascending Slur (“upward slur” or “hammer” or “hammer-on”)

The ascending slur is produced when a note is plucked with the right hand and then a left-hand finger falls rapidly and forcefully on a higher-pitched note on the same string. The sound of the second note is produced by the impact of the string being hammered onto the fret by the left-hand finger:

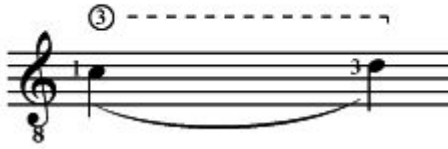
Example #2: Ascending Slurs

Left-hand finger "hammers" on to the 2nd note of slur

First note of slur is plucked with right hand

The word “impact” is an important one. Let’s look at this example:

Example #3



As you play the C on the 5th fret of the 3rd string with your 1st finger, have the 3rd finger poised, hovering above the D at the 7th fret. A common problem is that there is too much tension in the slurring finger as it is poised above the string ready to pounce. The slurring finger needs to be relaxed, empty of all tension. Hover 1/2 to 1 inch (no more than that!) above the string.

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Then, with a combination of weight and momentum, whip or snap that 3rd finger onto the 3rd string D at high speed in the blink of an eye. Throughout its movement, be sure the finger retains the same curvature it would have if it were fretting a note. Be sure you land the finger vertically to the fretboard on the finger's hardest spot--its very tip (close to the fingernail). Don't think that you have to press hard as you hammer on to the string. The speed is what counts. **IMPACT**. The faster the finger is moving when it hits the string, the stronger (louder) the slurred (second) note will be.



[Watch me execute the ascending slur.](#)

There is some disagreement about exactly how to use the finger that “hammers” onto the second note. Some teachers advise to use only the finger muscles and joints. Others recommend using the hand to “help,” especially on difficult slurs or when using the 4th (pinky) finger.



[Watch me demonstrate the two ways to use the slurring finger.](#)

Should you leave the left-hand finger down on the first note—the one you pluck first with the right hand? Sometimes yes, sometimes no, and sometimes it doesn't matter. If the finger is needed immediately to play another note, then yes, absolutely lift it:

Example #4: Lifting the Fingers on Slurs

Etude #1 (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

Lift 1st finger every time so it can prepare for its next note each time 2nd finger executes a "hammer"





[Watch me play the slur passage from Villa-Lobos' *Etude#1*.](#)

If the finger could be used as a guide finger or pivot finger, leave it down:

Example #5: Leave Finger Down As Pivot Finger

Capricho Arabe (Francisco Tarrega)

The musical notation shows a descending slur passage on the first string. The first note is a quarter note on G4 (4th fret), followed by a quarter note on F4 (2nd fret), a quarter note on E4 (3rd fret), and a quarter note on D4 (0th fret). A dashed line with a circled '2' above it spans from the second measure to the end of the passage. An annotation 'Keep 1st finger down as pivot finger' with arrows points to the first and second notes of the slur.

In their effort to make the second note of a slur louder, some players pluck the first note louder. Usually, that isn't a good idea—it just accentuates the difference in volume and tone quality between the plucked note and slurred note.

Execution of the Descending Slur On The First String ("downward slur" or "pull-off")

To play a descending slur, pluck the first fretted note with the right hand. The second note is produced by plucking the string with the LEFT-HAND finger that is holding the first note:

Example #6: Executing Descending Slurs to Open String

The image shows two musical staves illustrating descending slurs to the open string. The first staff shows six measures, each with a slur from a fretted note to the open string (0). The first three measures are on the 1st fret, and the last three are on the 2nd fret. Annotations above each measure indicate 'Pluck with right hand' with an arrow pointing to the first note. Annotations below each measure indicate 'Snap (pluck) with left hand' with an arrow pointing to the second note. The second staff shows six measures, each with a slur from a fretted note to the open string. The first three measures are on the 3rd fret, and the last three are on the 4th fret. Similar annotations for 'Pluck with right hand' and 'Snap (pluck) with left hand' are present.

 [This is how to play a descending slur to the open E string.](#)

To play a descending slur from one fretted note to another fretted note on the same string, whenever possible place both left-hand fingers on their respective notes simultaneously. Again, the right hand plucks the first note. Holding the second note down firmly with the left hand, the second note is sounded by plucking the string with the left-hand finger that is still holding the *first* note:

Example #7: Three Steps to Execute Descending Slur With Two Fingers

The image shows a musical staff illustrating three steps to execute a descending slur with two fingers. Step #1: Place left-hand 1st and 3rd fingers simultaneously on 1st string. Step #2: Pluck with right hand. Step #3: Snap (pluck) with left hand 3rd finger to sound note held by 1st finger. An annotation below the staff says 'Hold string tightly with 1st finger to prevent string from moving'. The staff shows three measures, each with a slur from a fretted note to another fretted note. The first measure is on the 3rd fret, the second on the 4th fret, and the third on the 4th fret. Annotations above each measure indicate the steps.

 [Watch as I play a descending slur from a fretted note to another fretted note.](#)

Remember, be sure to press firmly on whatever finger is holding the *lower* (second) note. That finger must anchor the string, so the string is not pulled out of place by the other left-hand finger when it plucks the string.

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And again, do not pluck the first note of a slur louder, thinking it will give the slur more oomph or volume. On the contrary, that will only accentuate the difference in volume and tone quality between the two notes.

Descending Slurs On The Lower Five Strings. Things Get a Lot More Complicated. There are three types of descending slurs that can be used on the lower five strings.

First of all, remember that when we speak about “high” and “low,” we are **always referencing pitch**, not spatial relationships in regard to the floor or ceiling. We ALWAYS talk and think pitch. Therefore, the lower five strings are the 6th, 5th, 4th, 3rd, and 2nd strings. The first string is the highest string. The sixth string is the lowest string. The first fret is low, the 12th fret is high. If you ever come across a guitar book that refers, for example, to the first string being lower than the second string (because the first string is closer to the floor) burn it. Sorry, just had to get that off my chest. Believe it or not, there are a few books like that that have been published in the last few years.

1. The Rest Slur

The first descending slur goes by several names: “Rest Slur” or “Rest-Stroke Slur” or “Left-Hand Rest-Stroke Slur” or “Bump-Release Slur” or “Snap-off.”

The left-hand finger is placed on its extreme tip on the first note of the slur. Whenever possible, the other left-hand finger that will hold the second note is placed simultaneously with the finger holding the first note. The right hand plucks note one. Then, the left-hand finger holding note one flexes its tip joint, *plucking* the string with a snap and **follows through into the fretboard and/or against the next string.**



[Watch me play the descending left-hand rest stroke slur.](#)



[Lucky you. Here's another view of the same technique!](#)

In his book, *Pumping Nylon*, Scott Tennant says “the finger pulls down into the fingerboard and next string...This causes the finger to pull into the next string, creating a sort of left-hand rest stroke.” In *The Art of Classical Guitar Playing* Charles Duncan concurs, telling us to “think of such slurs as left-hand rest strokes.” The tip joint of the finger flexes straight back so that the fingertip comes to rest momentarily against the next higher string. The “finger then relaxes upward and away from the fingerboard. At very slow speeds, the stroke will give the sensation of ‘bump-release.’”

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Immediately after the finger snaps the string to produce the slurred note, the finger relaxes (“empties” itself of tension) and springs back to position above the next string it is to play. Tennant tells us the snap and spring are one motion. Use the string that the finger came to rest against as a springboard—the finger doesn’t have to be forced back up into position.

This is the slur I use most often and that I see used by very fine players. In fact, it is the only one discussed by Tennant and Duncan. This technique produces the most sound with the least amount of effort. However, in some cases, it works too well. When pulling off with the 1st or 2nd fingers, sometimes too much snap or percussive noise is produced—the tone of the second note becomes a bit harsh. In those cases, I snap off a lot more gently and use a straight across horizontal movement into the next string rather than pulling into the fretboard. Or, I employ the second type of slur described below.

🔊 [Listen as I play slurs snapped off too hard with the rest-stroke slur, then played again with a gentler snap for a better sound.](#) (This will open in a new window.)

Aaron Shearer, the great American pedagogue, is rather critical of the left-hand rest stroke slur technique. In his valuable book *Slur, Ornament and Reach Development Exercises* he concedes that it “produces a powerful slur.” But he goes on to say, “But it is so restricted in movement and requires such a high degree of control that it is rather limited and impractical, especially in rapid passages.” In his newer book, *Learning the Classic Guitar Part 1*, he is a little less critical. “Although this is the most powerful slur, it’s a very restrictive movement. Thus, the rest slur is most frequently used in slower passages.”

But instead of describing it as a restrictive movement, I prefer to think of it as an efficient movement. Using the higher string to “brake” the movement eliminates excess follow through. Plus it only requires a small movement of the tip joint of the finger to produce a strong snap and therefore lots of volume. The well-defined moment in time of the “bump” tells the finger precisely when to empty itself of tension and spring back to its “ready” position.

His statement of it being impractical in fast passages has some validity. Sometimes the finger that snaps off doesn't have time to follow through fully into the next string or the fretboard. But, regardless of what form the follow-through takes, the slur comes out far more clearly **when the initial movement of the finger and the intent in the player's mind is a snap into the fretboard rather than merely across the string.**

2. The Brush Slur

The second descending slur is called the “Brush Slur” by Shearer and is probably the default slur technique used by most guitarists. After placing both left-hand fingers of the slur simultaneously (whenever possible) and plucking the first note with the right hand, the left-hand finger holding the first note pulls horizontally across the fretboard or at a very slight upward angle, plucking the string. Because of the higher angle at which it pulls off the string, the finger does not come to rest on the fretboard or against the next string. Instead, the finger lightly brushes the next string (which is being damped or muffled—see next topic) and passes over it on its follow-through.



[Watch as I execute the brush slur.](#)

Again, care must be taken to press firmly on whatever finger is holding the *lower* (second) note. That finger must anchor the string, so the string is not pulled out of place by the other left-hand finger when it plucks the string.

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We advocates of the rest stroke slur often find the brush slur to be inadequate, especially when pulling off with the 3rd and 4th fingers—the slurs lack definition and clarity. The 3rd and 4th fingers must work much harder on a brush slur to produce the same amount of volume produced by a left-hand rest-stroke slur snapping off into the fretboard. However, as mentioned above, this type of slur is fine for slurs involving the 1st and 2nd fingers where the left-hand rest-stroke slur may be too strong.

Shearer describes the brush slur as the “most rapid and practical.” Again, there would be some disagreement out there from the left-hand rest stroke advocates over that statement. The brush slur is easy to execute, yes. It is also easy to execute poorly, which is what I see 90% of the time. Players tend to pull upward too much and therefore don't get enough of a pluck or snap movement off the string to make the slurred note come out clearly. This happens especially in fast passages where finger movements tend to lose definition anyway. Players lose the horizontal snap movement and begin pulling a little more upward in their efforts to position their fingers to play the notes following each slur. The slurs become afterthoughts rather than consciously, clearly articulated snaps.

3. The Free Slur

The third type of descending slur is called the “free slur” by Shearer and the “free-stroke slur” or “left-hand free-stroke slur” or “pull-up slur” or “pull-out slur” by others. After placing both left-hand fingers of the slur simultaneously (whenever possible) and plucking the first note with the right hand, the left-hand finger holding the first note pulls upward at a sharp angle passing **above** the adjacent higher string. The important property of this slur is that on its follow through, the left-hand finger **totally clears the adjacent higher string**. It doesn't touch or brush it at all.

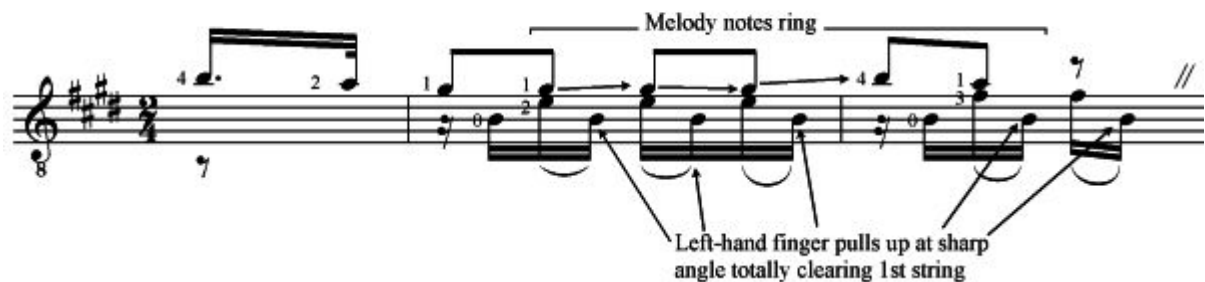


[Watch as I execute the free slur in this award-winning video clip.](#)

This pull-up or free slur is used when the adjacent higher string must continue ringing during the execution of the slur:

Example #8: Pull-Up or Free Slurs

Variations on a Theme by Mozart (Fernando Sor)



There are two opinions as to the best left-hand position to use to execute the free slur. Some favor keeping the hand in a normal close-into-the-neck position. Others recommend that the wrist be arched outward.



[Watch as I show you the two wrist positions for the free slur.](#)

It should also be pointed out that all three of these descending slur techniques can also be applied to slurs on the 1st string as regards the angle at which the left-hand finger pulls off to pluck the string. Depending on how big the stretch is between the two notes of the slur, which finger you are pulling off from or to, what other fingers are down on other notes, etc. the player can snap off the edge of the fretboard to a point below the plane of the fretboard as if executing a left-hand rest-stroke slur, pull off horizontally as in the brush slur, or pull upward as in the free slur. One of the angles will usually make the slur easier to execute or clearer than the others.

The Finger Movement for Descending Slurs

There are two schools of thought on exactly how the finger muscles and joints should be used to execute a descending slur. One favors confining the movement to just the finger. The other recommends using both the finger and hand in a symbiotic movement.

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[Watch as I show you the two ways you can use your fingers to execute a descending slur.](#)

The Left-Hand Position for Slurs

Many guitarists have trouble executing clear slurs because they are using the wrong left-hand position. A slanted, non-parallel position is usually detrimental to the clear execution of slurs, especially descending slurs. The parallel-with-the-neck position works far better.



[Let me show you why the parallel position is better.](#)

Using a “Safety Stop” or “Safety Block” for Descending Slurs: String Damping

On the lower five strings, with both the left-hand rest-stroke slur and especially the brush slur, there is a danger of producing an unwanted note from the adjacent higher string as a result of the pull-off or snap movement of the left-hand finger.

The technique used to prevent the unwanted note is a “safety stop” (some call it a “safety block.”) The safety stop is done by damping (muffling or muting) the adjacent higher string. Safety stops can be done with the left or right hand.

Left-Hand Safety Stop

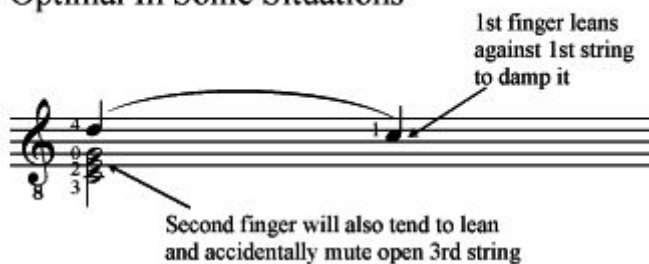
If you are pulling off to a fretted note, it is usually very easy for the finger holding that second fretted note to lean over against the higher adjacent string to damp it. Usually, the damping finger should be placed in its leaning position at the same time the first note of the slur is plucked by the right hand. Much of the time it is a very simple and convenient technique.



[This Oscar-nominated video clip is a demonstration of the left-hand safety stop.](#)

But sometimes, trying to damp a string with a left-hand finger can jeopardize the execution of the slur or the execution of other notes before, during, or after the slur. For example:

Example #9: Left-Hand Safety Stops Not Optimal In Some Situations

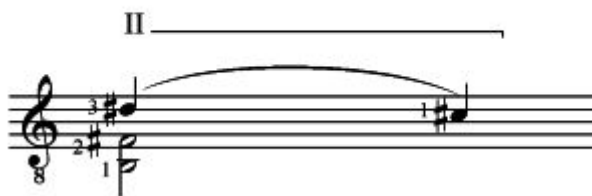


When many players try to use the first finger to damp the first string in the example above, their 2nd finger falls over slightly and buzzes the open 3rd string G.

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Or, in the case of a slur involving a bar, there may not be any left-hand fingers available to damp the adjacent string:

Example #10: No Left-Hand Fingers Available for Safety Stop



In those cases and others, use the right-hand safety stop.

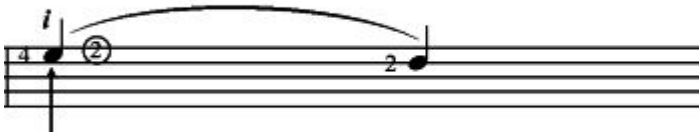
Right-Hand Safety Stops

1. Planting Right-Hand Fingers as Safety Stops

In the right-hand safety stop, an available right-hand finger is planted (placed) on the adjacent string above the slur at the same time the first note of the slur is plucked. The planted finger damps or deadens the string so no sound will be heard if the finger that is pulling off should brush, accidentally land on, or pluck the higher string.

If the first note of the slur is plucked with *i*; then *m*, *a*, or even *c* (pinky) can damp the string above:

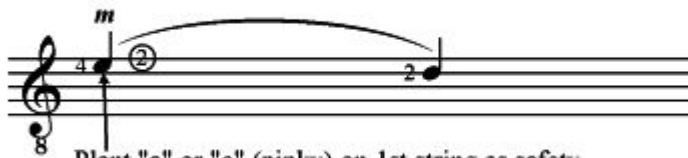
Example #11: Right-Hand Safety Stop



Plant "*m*," "*a*," or "*c*" (pinky) on 1st string as safety stop. This will damp the 1st string for the pull-off.

If the first note of the slur is plucked with *m*; then *a* or *c* can damp the string above:

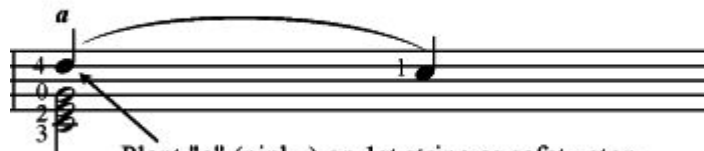
Example #12: Right-Hand Safety Stop



Plant "*a*" or "*c*" (pinky) on 1st string as safety stop. This will damp the 1st string for the pull-off.

If, as in the chordal example above, the "*a*" finger plucks the first note of the slur; "*c*" can damp the string above:

Example #13: Right-Hand Safety Stop



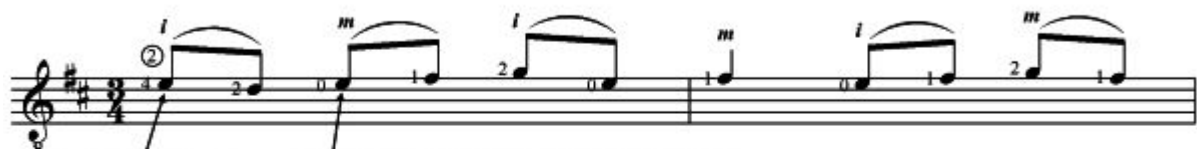
Plant "c" (pinky) on 1st string as safety stop.
This will damp the first string for the pull-off.

[Watch this video to see how right-hand safety stops are done.](#)

Here is an example of right-hand safety stops used in a typical passage containing multiple slurs:

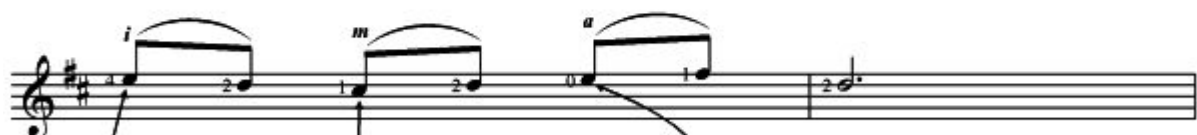
Example #14: Use of Right-Hand Safety Stops

Melody from *Saltarello* (anonymous)



Plant "m" on 1st string as safety stop.

Planting "m" on the previous beat also puts it on the 1st string ready to pluck this next note--open E.



Plant "a" on 1st string as safety stop. Leave it there to pluck open E at end of measure.

Planting "a" on previous beat on the first string keeps "m" available to pluck this C#.

When slurring to an open string from the 1st finger using the brush slur, you must use the right-hand safety stop:

Example #15: Right-Hand Safety Stop for Brush Slur from *Concierto de Aranjuez* (Joaquin Rodrigo)

Plant "i" on 4th string as safety stop.
This will damp 4th string during pull-off.

I find the right-hand safety stops to be very reliable, clean, and stable. Sometimes it seems they do a better job than the left-hand stops. Using the right hand as the safety stop also eliminates having to adjust the left-hand finger placement as often happens with the left-hand safety stops.

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It does take longer to learn how to do the right-hand stops and become comfortable using them in the context of a piece. But once learned the right-hand stop becomes automatic. In fact, whenever your left hand executes a descending slur or an ornament involving a descending slur, **the right hand will automatically damp the string above it!** I find that even when I use a left-hand safety stop, my right hand also does a stop as well.

2. Using Thumb Rest Stroke as a Safety Stop

Another effective type of right-hand safety stop is the use of thumb rest stroke. In the solo section of the *Concierto de Aranjuez* above, I think a lot of guitarists would use thumb rest stroke to play the melody of this entire section. In the example above, after plucking the 5th string rest stroke, the thumb will come to rest on the 4th string. That will mute the 4th string for the left-hand 1st finger pull-off on the 5th string. As long as thumb rest stroke is musically appropriate for the passage and a viable option technically, it is an easy way to damp the adjacent higher string for a descending slur. And remember, just as the thumb is not restricted to plucking just the wound bass strings, this safety stop is not restricted for use only on the bass strings.

Other Varieties of Ascending and Descending Slurs

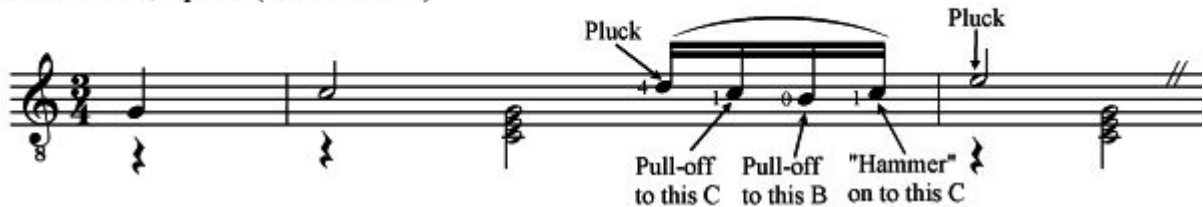
Most slurs, ascending or descending, consist of two single, consecutive notes on the same string. But there are many other types. Here are a few:

Slurs Consisting of More than Two Consecutive Notes

When more than two notes are joined by the curved slur mark, the first note is plucked with the right hand. All the remaining notes are executed with left-hand hammers and pull-offs.

Example #16: Slurring More Than 2 Notes

Mimuet in C, Op. 25 (Fernando Sor)

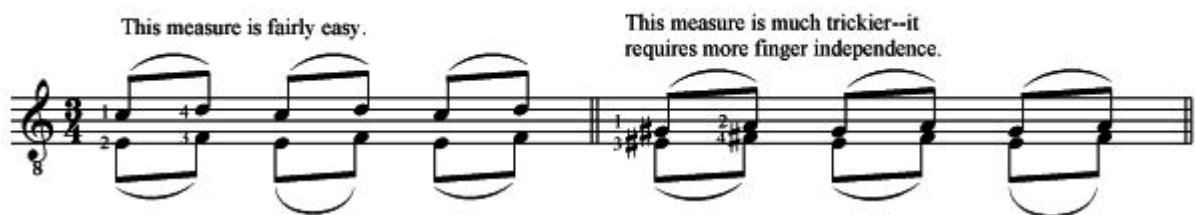


Slurs of more than three notes aren't very common in classical guitar repertoire because the quality (volume and tone quality) deteriorates rapidly as more notes are slurred. They are more common in flamenco music where "tone quality" is more subjective and indeed, aggressive and percussive or plucky slurs are part of the language.

Double-Note Slurs

Ascending double-note slurs present no special problems other than general coordination of the fingers:

Example #17: Ascending Double-Note Slurs

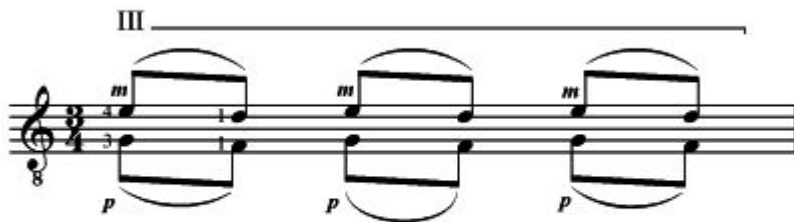


But descending double-note slurs are another story. Thank goodness they don't occur very often, but once in awhile you come across them.

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They are usually executed by both fingers using the free slur (pull-up slur). But usually, other strings adjacent to the pull-offs end up sounding notes of their own when the fingers that are pulling off accidentally brush or pluck those other strings. Therefore, it is usually crucial to use safety stops on the other strings:

Example #18: Descending Double-Note Slurs



To prevent the 1st and 3rd strings from sounding when the 3rd and 4th fingers do their pull-offs, right-hand safety stops must be used. Plant "i" on the 3rd string and plant "a" on the 1st string. Leave both fingers on their strings for the entire measure.

Descending Cross-String Slurs

Another type of slur is the descending cross-string slur. It is an infrequently used slur, seen most often in the music of the late-19th and early 20th century. Tarrega, Llobet, and Segovia all used them occasionally.

The first note of the slur is plucked by the right hand as usual. But the second note is fingered on a *different* string. The left hand “hammers” onto the note on this lower adjacent string:

Example #19: Descending Cross-String Slur

Conventional slur ("Pull-Off")

Cross-String Slur

Pluck with right hand

"Hammer" left-hand 3rd finger onto 5th string C#

Here is an example of its use in Andres Segovia's fingering of Joaquin Turina's *Garrotin* from his *Hommage a Tarrega*:

Example #20: The Cross-String Slur in the Repertoire

Garrotin (Joaquin Turina)
Fingering: Andres Segovia

V^④

Cross-String Slur

V^④

III

Cross-String Slur

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The cross-string slur can be very useful in passages where conventional slurs may be difficult to execute. However, the cross-string slur tends to be noisy. The higher up on the neck the hammer onto the adjacent string is done, the noisier it gets. However, as in Segovia's fingering above, if a bar (or other finger) is held on the string on a fret below the hammered note, the excess noise is lessened or totally eliminated.

Sound Quality of Slurred Notes versus Plucked Notes

For most players, the challenge is to make the slurred note(s) following the plucked note loud to match the volume of the first note as closely as possible. We also want to match the tone quality of the plucked note—we don't want the slurred note to sound thin or "naily" or contain distracting unmusical noise. Both problems can be solved by doing the following:

1. Choose the correct type of descending slur
2. Keep the left-hand nails short so they don't catch on the string
3. Periodically file the calluses on the left-hand fingertips to eliminate finger noises on the pull-off movements
4. Keep fresh strings on the guitar, especially the basses.
5. Don't pluck the first note louder thinking it will make the slurred note come out louder. That will only accentuate the difference in volume between the two, making matters worse.
6. Develop stronger fingers and better finger independence. How? By practicing slurs!

An Interesting Story: How Other Musicians Hear Guitar Slurs

Many years ago as part of an artist residency, I was booked to play for a string class at a university in Iowa. The class consisted of undergraduate and graduate violinists, violists, and cellists.

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I am always curious what other instrumentalists think when we guitarists play transcriptions of "their" music. What does a pianist think when they hear us play Albeniz? What does a violinist think when they hear us play the Bach *Chaconne*?

So I said to the class, "I'm going to play *Gavottes I and II* from Bach's sixth cello suite. I want you to listen and give me your brutally honest opinions of what you think of them played on the guitar. I won't be hurt or insulted by your reactions. I am not playing these in concerts, I haven't recorded them, and I have no plans to record them in the near future. So tell me what you really think—don't hold anything back."

And I played.

Everyone universally enjoyed the ease with which I was able to play them. These are very difficult pieces for a cellist to play, and the struggle often comes out in the music. On the guitar, there was no sense of struggle—it was effortless. They also liked the fact that everything was perfectly in tune.

But what they didn't like—every person in the room strongly agreed—were the slurs. They said my slurs were uneven. The second note was always too weak and it sounded different in tone quality than the first. They said when they played slurs on their

bowed instruments, the second note always “spoke” clearly and the tone quality always matched. **My guitar slurs were disruptive to the line of the music.**

I don’t know what I was expecting, but I wasn’t expecting that. And don’t misunderstand. The problem was not that I wasn’t playing well or couldn’t execute slurs properly. So I thought a few seconds. “Okay,” I said. “Let me play part of the first Gavotte again with no slurs, every note plucked.”

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After playing several phrases, I stopped and looked up. Several exclaimed, “That’s it.” “Yes!” “That is so much better.” Every player in the room agreed the music sounded “right” to them without the slurs.

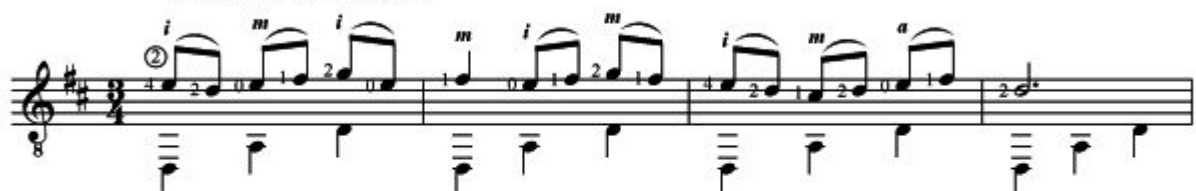
From that experience, I now think twice about using slurs in transcriptions of solo string music. In music written by guitarist-composers such as Sor or Giuliani, there is no problem. Slurs are part of the texture of the music. But I think it is a good idea to think long and hard about putting too many slurs in music transcribed from other instruments.

Rhythmic Problems


As noted above, we tend to focus on producing as strong (loud) a slur as possible. But an equally vexing problem is that of rhythmic inaccuracies that arise in slurring. The most common is that of “jumping” the slur:

Example #21: "Jumping" the Slur
Saltarello (anonymous)

Written in even 8th notes:



Rhythm that results when "Jumping" the slur
(pulling-off too quickly):

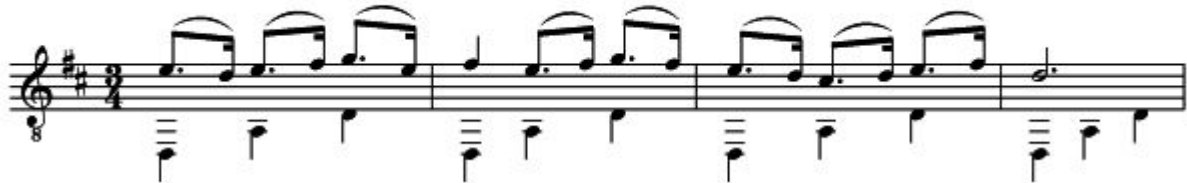


The image contains two musical staves. The top staff is titled "Written in even 8th notes:" and shows a sequence of eighth notes in a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notes are grouped into pairs, each pair slurred together. Fingerings are indicated above the notes: 'i' for the first note of each pair and 'm' for the second. There are also some circled numbers (2) and 'a' above some notes. The bottom staff is titled "Rhythm that results when 'Jumping' the slur (pulling-off too quickly):" and shows the same sequence of eighth notes, but the slurs are significantly shorter, appearing to 'jump' over the second note of each pair, resulting in a more disjointed rhythmic feel.

🔴 [This is what "jumping the slur" sounds like.](#)

A good fix for this is to intentionally learn to play the “opposite” rhythm:

Example #22: Practicing the Opposite Rhythm to Fix Faulty Rhythm



🔴 [Playing the opposite rhythm sounds like this.](#)

Sometimes it even works to try to play evenly, but as you are playing, think the opposite rhythm. Or you can try intentionally adding just enough of the opposite rhythm until your notes even themselves out.

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It is also a good idea to play a problematic passage with no slurs to hear what an even rhythm sounds like. Get that in your ear, then try to play it just as evenly with the slurs.

🔴 [Listen to me play all the notes plucked, then with the slurs.](#)

Reasons to Use Slurs

Slurs play a large role in guitar technique. Here are some of their primary uses:

1. Slurs enable one to play a progression of two or more notes as legato (seamlessly connected) as possible.

This is one of the primary functions of the slur when played on any instrument. Slurs help to create a smooth connection between notes. Think of a saxophone player playing a group of notes with one breath, not tonguing each note; or a violin player playing two or more notes with one bow stroke. Think of a vocalist singing a phrase or group of words seamlessly in one breath.

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In considering the slur's use in guitar music, keep in mind its effect when used in playing bowed instruments and woodwinds, or in singing. The end result is a fluid, very smoothly connected sound.

2. Slurs are an expressive device, used to vary accentuation.

Charles Duncan, in *The Art of Classical Guitar Playing* explains the use of slurs as accents very well. He points out that the difference in attack quality between the plucked and slurred notes of a guitar slur "can be exploited to great effect." Since slurs emphasize some notes at the expense of others, "their place in melodic phrasing may be likened to that of syllable stress in speech." They may be used to add emphasis to normally strong beats or to change the natural metric accent from the norm. Here is a very obvious and effective example:

Example #23: Using Slurs to Change the Metric Accent

Soleares (Joaquin Turina)

Written by Turina all in 3/4 meter:



The slurs bring out the underlying hemiola effect.

"Hemiola" is the switching back and forth between 6/8 and 3/4:

Musical notation for Example #23, showing a melodic line in 3/4 meter. The notation is on a single staff with a treble clef. It consists of four measures of music. The first measure has a slur over the first two notes. The second measure has a slur over the first three notes. The third measure has a slur over the first two notes. The fourth measure has a slur over the first three notes. The notes are mostly eighth and quarter notes. There are circled 6/8 time signatures at the end of the first, second, and third measures. A double bar line is between the second and third measures. A vertical line points to a slur in the second measure with the text "(Segovia indicated 'slide-slur' here)".

Duncan is right on the mark when he concludes by saying "Musically valid slurring always enhances fluency, rhythmic accent, or melodic contour, sometimes all at the same time."

3. Slurs aid in the execution of fast scales

The use of slurs to play fast scales probably came about when some player discovered the “happy possibility” that two or more notes could be played from just one pluck of the right hand if you used the left-hand fingers to hammer on to and pull off of the strings.

Passages that might sound monotonous if played with continuous plucking become not only easier to play, but more interesting and colorful with slurs added. They can even add variety to repeated passages:

Example #24: Using Slurs to Vary Repeated Passages

Variations on a Theme by Mozart (Fernando Sor)

All notes of the scale plucked "im" rest stroke

All notes of the same scale slurred in groups of 16th-note triplets played with right-hand thumb all flesh.

In the same passage, a slur could be added to aid the right hand in playing the scale. It provides an easy way to switch from plucking with the thumb to plucking with the fingers. The added slur from the 6th string E to F# gives the right hand time to readjust its position to begin playing im rest stroke on the G#:

Example #25: Adding a Slur to Aid Right-Hand Execution *Variations on a Theme by Mozart* (Fernando Sor)

The image shows a musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 4/8 time signature. The music starts with a half note G#4, followed by a quarter note A4, and then a series of eighth notes: B4, C#5, D5, E5, F#5, G#5, A5, B5. The notes are grouped into two measures. The first measure contains the notes G#4, A4, B4, C#5, D5, E5. The second measure contains the notes F#5, G#5, A5, B5. The notes are fingered as follows: G#4 (thumb, 't'), A4 (index, 'i'), B4 (middle, 'm'), C#5 (ring, 'r'), D5 (pinky, 'p'), E5 (thumb, 't'), F#5 (index, 'i'), G#5 (middle, 'm'), A5 (ring, 'r'), B5 (pinky, 'p'). There are two triplets: one under the first three notes (G#4, A4, B4) and another under the last three notes (A5, B5, G#5). An 'Added slur' is placed over the notes from E5 to F#5. A 'p' dynamic marking is placed under the first note of the first triplet. Below the staff, there are three annotations with arrows pointing to specific notes: 'Pluck with thumb' points to the first note of the first triplet (G#4), 'Switch to "i" and "m" rest stroke' points to the notes F#5 and G#5, and another arrow points to the note E5.

Although the scale could be played without the slur from the E to the F#, the added slur definitely makes the execution a bit easier and more dependable.

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The judicious addition (or sometimes elimination) of slurs can provide better string crossing:

Example #26: Adding Slurs to Produce Good String Crosses

Concierto de Aranjuez (Joaquin Rodrigo)

Beginning the scale with "i" (fingerings shown above staff) or "m" (fingerings shown below staff) both result in a few bad string crosses:

The musical notation shows a scale in G major (one sharp) on a treble clef staff. The scale is written in 8/8 time. Fingerings are indicated by 'i' (index) and 'm' (middle) above and below the staff. Above the staff, fingerings are: ⑤ i m, ④ i m i m, ③ i m i, ② m i m. Below the staff, fingerings are: m i m i, m i m i, m i m i, m i m i. Above the staff, labels indicate 'Bad String Cross' for the first two measures (measures 1-2 and 3-4) and 'Good String Cross' for the next two measures (measures 5-6 and 7-8). Below the staff, labels indicate 'Good String Cross' for the first two measures (measures 1-2 and 3-4) and 'Bad String Cross' for the next two measures (measures 5-6 and 7-8). A trill (trill) is marked with 'III' above the staff at the end of the scale.

Beginning the scale with "i" and adding two slurs produces all good string crosses:

The musical notation is the same as in the previous example, but with slurs added to the first two measures (measures 1-2 and 3-4) and the last two measures (measures 5-6 and 7-8). Above the staff, fingerings are: ⑤ i m, ④ i m i m, ③ i m i, ② m i m. Below the staff, fingerings are: m i m i, m i m i, m i m i, m i m i. Labels indicate 'Good String Cross' for all four measures (measures 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, and 7-8). A trill (trill) is marked with 'III' above the staff at the end of the scale.

As you can see in the example above, regardless of whether you begin the scale with *i* or *m*, at least one bad string cross will result. But, if we add slurs on the 1st and 4th beats (which musically, sounds okay to do) and begin the scale with *i*, *all* the string crosses become good string crosses. Removing slurs from a passage can have a similar effect. Either way, you just have to be careful that adding or removing slurs is not done solely for technical expediency. You must consider the musical consequences (i.e. how does it *sound* with slurs added or removed) as well.

4. Slurs are used in the execution of many ornaments

Trills, mordents, acciaccaturas, and turns are executed with varying combinations of hammers and pull-offs, usually at high speed. The techniques used to execute slurs therefore apply to ornaments as well. If the individual slurs that comprise each ornament are not done correctly, the ornament just won't sound good. The use of left-hand and right-hand safety stops applies to the execution of ornaments as well.

5. Slurs are the best exercise for developing the left hand's finger strength, speed, finger independence, and general control.

Shearer tells us, "The systematic study of slurs is one of the most rewarding and beneficial of all exercises for the development of the left hand." He is absolutely correct. Of course for stellar results they have to be practiced carefully so they develop and reinforce the correct habits and muscular movements. Be careful to thoroughly warm up before doing slur exercises and not to over practice them. They are very strenuous on the muscles, joints, and tendons.

Slurs are an important part of most guitar music. They connect notes smoothly, provide expressive accents, act as technical aids in the execution of fast notes and scales, and are essential in playing most ornaments. They are difficult to play well so must be carefully practiced. They must be used carefully so they enhance the musical effect of your playing. Misusing them will only draw attention to their shortcomings.

And, if you are looking for a **magical solution** to develop your finger independence, speed, and strengthen your joints and fingers, the practice of slurs is it.

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