

Chapter 2

Holding the Guitar

There are many instruction books that give an impression that there is only one "correct" way to sit. That might be true if everyone were the same height, had the same body type, the same hand and finger formation, and the same size guitar, chair and footstool.

What we seek is a natural way of sitting and holding the guitar that allows us to play all the music we wish without being distracted by poor posture or untenable hand positions. Although holding the guitar *looks* simple, even small differences in posture and position effect everything you do on the guitar. The exact way *you* sit will be *unique* to you, yet will draw upon some of the principles outlined below.

Before Sitting

Before sitting, stand up straight with your hands at your sides and breathe in and out a few times. Loosen up your arms and shoulders. Gently rotate left and right just a bit to fully relax the body. This way, when you sit you will have already created a grounded sense of relaxation.

Sitting

1. Sit on a comfortable straight-backed chair, towards the front edge. Lean slightly forward. Center your upper body weight over the hip bones. (Do not lounge back in the chair.) Then place a foot stool so you can elevate the left leg about 4-10 inches. You may adjust the foot stool for comfort at any time.
2. Balance the guitar over your left thigh and lean the guitar slightly towards you. This helps create a line of sight so you can see the strings and frets of your guitar.
3. The neck of the guitar should be elevated above the horizontal. If the neck is parallel to the floor it is much harder for the left hand to play.
4. Keep your lower back straight. If you hunch down your breathing will be constricted.
5. Place your right foot a little back and under the seat of the chair.
6. If you can stand up easily you are in a dynamic sitting position. If you have to adjust your body before you can stand up, you will need to experiment with how you are sitting a bit more.



Take time to explore your sitting position. Everything that happens at your fingertips is subtly influenced by how you are sitting. Expect to have a some back and shoulder discomfort initially as you learn to play. Make adjustments and over time these beginner's aches will disappear.

Your body is as important a teacher as any you will ever encounter. It always supplies you with signals for both when you need to revise an action and when what you are doing is on the right track.

Playing well always feels better than playing poorly. An amazingly rich spectrum of physical sensations are an intrinsic part of being a guitarist.

Left Arm and Hand

1. While supporting your guitar with your right arm, completely relax your left arm, letting it drop to your side. Then lift your left arm away from your body and slide your hand along the neck of the guitar, with the thumb behind the neck and your other fingers moving along in front of the strings.
2. When you have positioned your hand at the area of where the frets begin, place the thumb in the middle of the back of the guitar neck. (Use the lower illustration on this page as a visual reference.)
3. The wrist is bent just enough to allow the fingertips contact with the strings.
4. In general, the fingers are kept curved rather than straight.
5. When you press down any string to make a note, without any forcing, try to guide the fingertip to an angle *towards* a perpendicular to the fretboard. When the fingertip is pressing from that angle it requires much less pressure to hold the string down. The human hand is a miracle of engineering, so *let it guide you* to effective finger placement. Never attempt to force your fingers or hand to an artificial concept of "correct" posture. That will only hold you back in your progress, and there is no virtue accumulated by imposing an artificial ideal that does not enhance your potentials as a guitarist.
6. If the fingertips are not relatively perpendicular to the fretboard, it requires more pressure to hold down the note. Even so, when your fingers play the bass string notes, they *must* straighten somewhat in order to reach them. In that case a *slight* bend at the first joint is all that is needed to make a good contact and musical tone.
7. Whenever possible, each finger will cover the territory of one fret. The first finger plays notes in the first fret, the second finger plays notes in the second fret, and so forth.

This chapter on holding the guitar, right and left arm and hand positioning, is developed and expanded as the book unfolds. All guitarists study these subjects throughout their musical lives.



Right Arm and Hand

1. While supporting your guitar with your left hand, and with the guitar resting on your left thigh, completely relax your right arm, letting it drop to your side. Then lift your forearm by flexing from your elbow, with your wrist fully relaxed, and then rest the forearm lightly on the upper side of the guitar.

2. Rotate your wrist slightly so that your fingertips point towards the strings. Depending on your height and the length of your arm, your fingers will be within a few inches of the sound hole. Taller people will have their fingers naturally pointing to the strings more toward the fretboard, and shorter people will have their fingers pointing over the sound hole or a little ways towards the bridge.

3. Now adjust where your forearm is resting on the top of the guitar so that your fingers are just "behind" the sound hole, with the thumb extended past the rosette and into the space above the sound hole. (See the lower illustration on this page.)

4. The wrist is slightly bent. This helps to prevent undue tension within the fingers and promotes good contact points of the nails and strings.

5. The knuckles are kept roughly parallel to the strings. This orientation will *change* depending on the musical texture. For tremolo and scale playing the parallel line of the knuckles to the strings is helpful. For chords and arpeggios the knuckles adjust to a slight angle to the strings. (Don't try to over-control this aspect of technique. Your body will naturally make any necessary adjustments for you. This works very well for everyone, unless the player keeps his fingers in a tense posture. In that case the body cannot make subtle and fluid adjustments.)

6. The fingers are curved just enough to contact the strings.

7. The thumb is extended away from the action of i, m and a. Otherwise the thumb will tend to bump into the other fingers. When that happens, just re-position the thumb by extending it again towards the middle of the sound hole. The tip of the thumb contacts the string at roughly a 45 degree angle. If the thumb is positioned parallel to the string it will tend to produce a fuzzy and unfocused tone. The angled approach makes a better tone and also makes it easier to pluck all the bass strings.

