A stylized illustration of an acoustic guitar, showing the headstock, neck, fretboard, and body. The guitar is positioned vertically on the left side of the page. The headstock is dark brown with six tuning pegs. The neck is dark brown with a light-colored fretboard. The body is a light tan color with a dark brown soundhole and bridge.

# learn to play contemporary guitar

written and illustrated by

**bernard ng**

<http://chords-haven.blogspot.com>

*Learn to play:*

*Leaving on a Jet Plane*

*Marry You*

*The Only Exception*

*Firework*

*Baby*

*Perfect*

*Forget You*

*Last Friday Night*

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### Songlist

Leaving on a Jet Plane  
Marry You  
The Only Exception  
Firework  
Baby  
Perfect  
Forget You  
Last Friday Night

# Chapter 1: The Basics

## 1.1 Introduction

There's no denying. The basics are the least interesting part with learning any skill. But I cannot stress more on the importance of having a good foundation. So take time to read through this chapter; it'll benefit you in the long run.

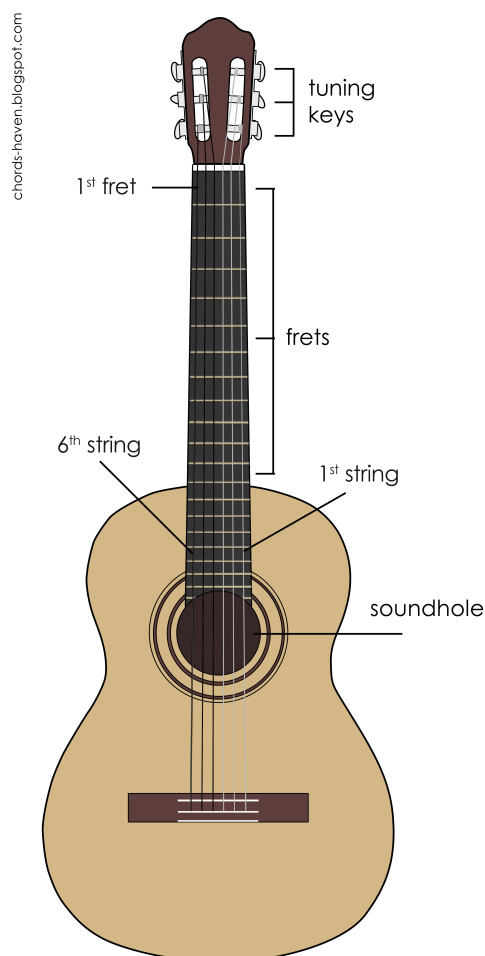
## 1.2 Types of Guitars

Guitars come in all shapes and sizes. The two most common guitars are the: (1) classical guitars (with metal + nylon strings) and (2) folk guitars (with metal strings).

To learn to play the guitar, I would strongly recommend that you use a classical guitar: (1) the strings are further apart so it is easier to position your fingers correctly for chords and (2) the strings are less painful on your fingers.

## 1.3 Parts of a Guitar

Just like you don't need to know all the parts of a car to be able to drive it, you do not need to know every single part of a guitar. Knowing the parts shown in the diagram would suffice.



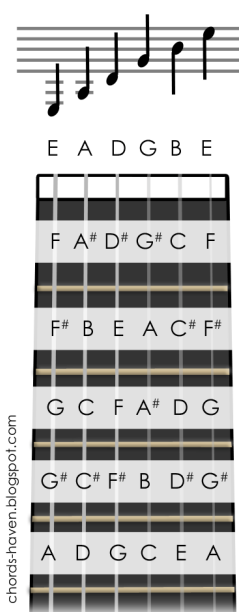
## 1.4 Basic Theory

Notes are sounded when the strings vibrate. The open strings on the guitar (without pressing on any fret) correspond to the following notes:

### Standard tuning

1<sup>st</sup> string : E  
 2<sup>nd</sup> string : B  
 3<sup>rd</sup> string : G  
 4<sup>th</sup> string : D  
 5<sup>th</sup> string : A  
 6<sup>th</sup> string : E

Pressing each higher fret corresponds to a half-step/ semitone in music theory i.e. C → C#; E → F (see diagram)



## 1.5 How to tune a guitar

As a Chinese saying goes “one must have good tools in order to do a good job”, an in-tune guitar is important for effective learning. There are many ways to tune a guitar; I'll just introduce two of them.

### Method 1: Use a Chromatic Tuner

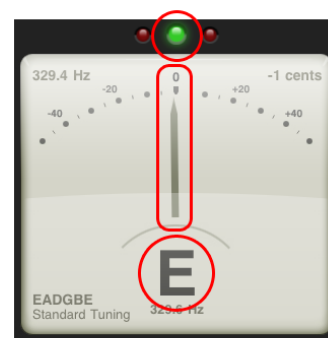
When I was learning the guitar, electronic tuners were a luxury alternative to pitch pipes and tuning forks. But thanks to the brilliance of Steve Jobs and company, there are now several (free!) chromatic tuner apps available.

#### How to use:

- Open the app and position your iPhone microphone near the guitar.
- Pluck the 1<sup>st</sup> string and check the app.
- If the string is in-tune, you should see: (1) the needle stopping at the middle of the scale for E note, and (2) a green light.
- Otherwise, tighten or loosen the tuning key for the string until you get it.
- Repeat for the rest of the strings for their respective notes.



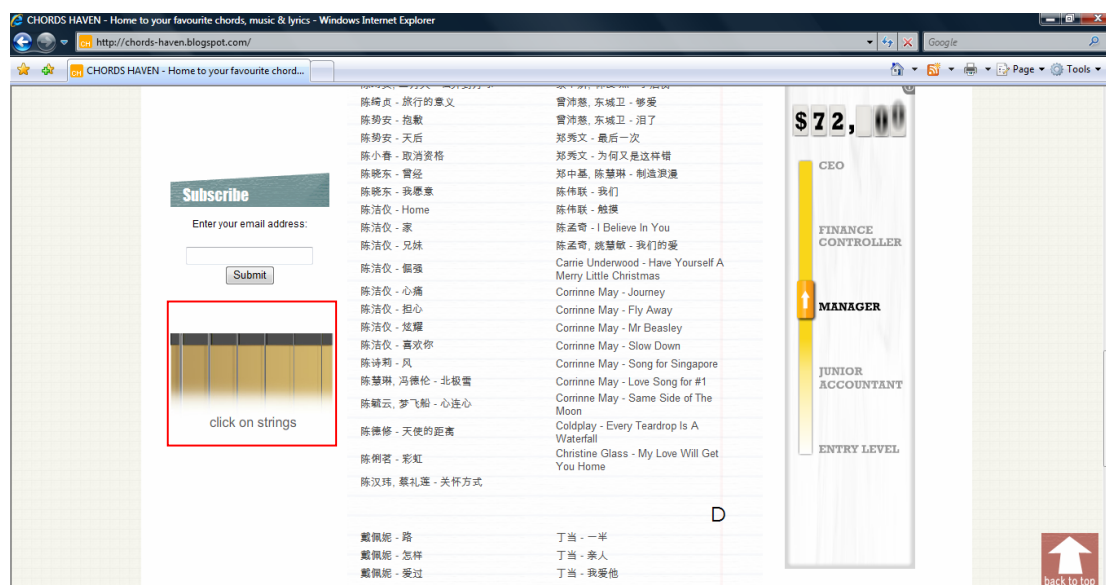
(I) pitch is too low > tighten string



(II) pitch is okay

### Method 2: By Ear

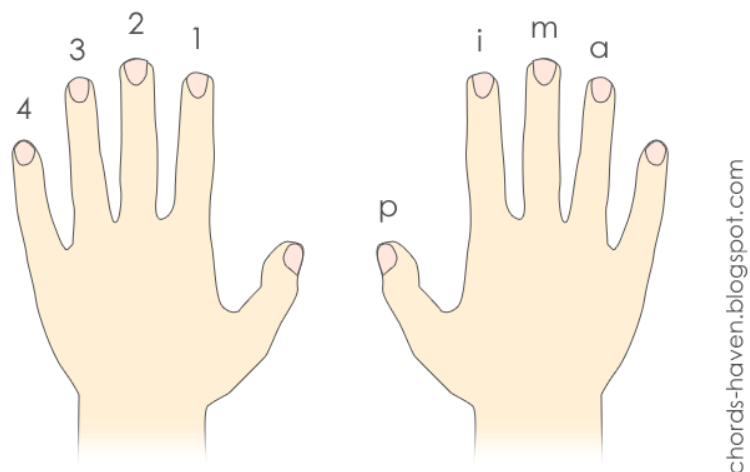
Click on the 1<sup>st</sup> string on the guitar flash (<http://chords-haven.blogspot.com>) and listen.



Adjust the tuning key and pluck the string simultaneously until you get the same pitch. Repeat for the rest of the strings.

## 1.6 Finger Notations

To aid in the learning of the fingerings for the different chords and later fingerstyle plucking, the fingers on your hands are given the following notations:

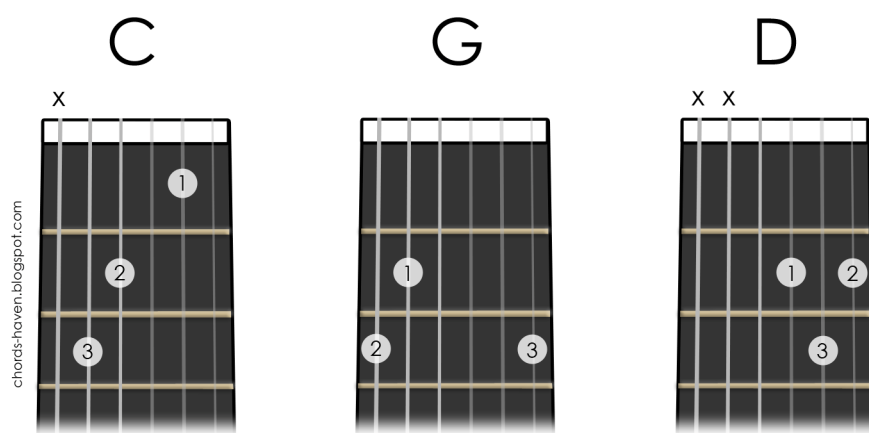


## Chapter 2: Introduction to Chords

### 2.1 Chord Basics

Chords are formed by playing three or more notes simultaneously. For instance, C chord (also called C major chord) is made up of the notes C, G and E, and G chord is made up of G, D and B.

Hence, to play a chord on the guitar, you need to press the frets that correspond to the notes that make up the chord. Let's try playing three simple chords:



The numbers represent the *suggested* fingers that you can use to press the respective frets. "x" means to avoid the string when playing the chord. Your goal is to make every note ring rather than sound muted.

Chord fingerings can also be represented as a string of numbers which stands for the frets to press from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 1<sup>st</sup> string e.g.

C: x-3-2-0-1-0

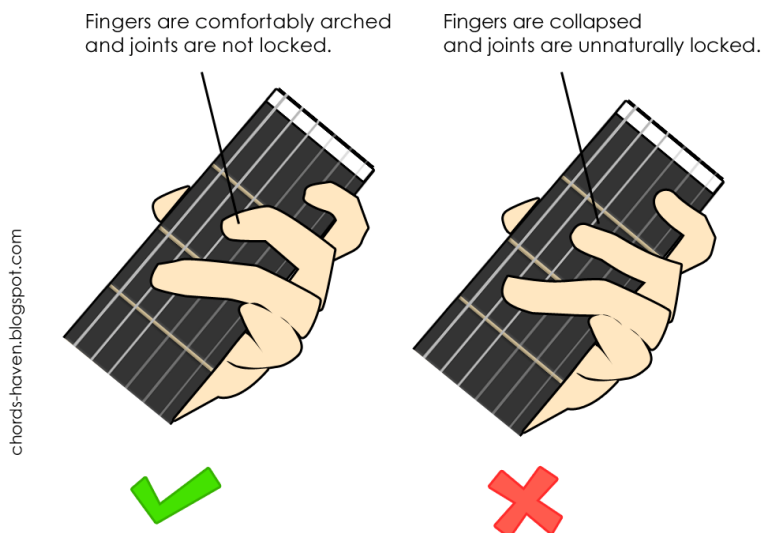
G: 3-2-0-0-0-3

D: x-x-0-2-3-2

*If you haven't noticed, mouse-over of the chords for songs in Chords Haven will show the fingerings in this format.*

#### Note:

1. Use the tip of your fingers to press the frets.
2. The most common mistake that beginners make is to allow their fingers to collapse and the joints to lock when pressing the frets. This is due to the lack of strength in their fingers. Prolonged playing with incorrect posture will lead to pain.
3. Ensure that all your fingers are rounded with no locking of joints. You may find that some notes are muted at first (due to lack of strength), but persist in pressing with the correct posture. Your finger strength will build up over time.



## 2.2 How to strum

### 1. Use your fingers

Pinch your thumb and index finger together. Use the nail of your index finger to brush the strings near the soundhole.

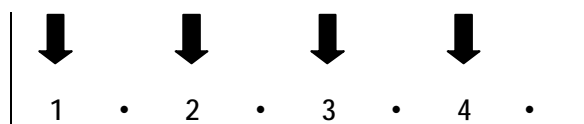
### 2. Use a pick

If you have short nails or you find strumming with your fingers painful, you might want to buy a pick (normally called a plectrum) for less than a dollar. Similarly pinch the pick between your thumb and index finger and brush the strings with the pick.



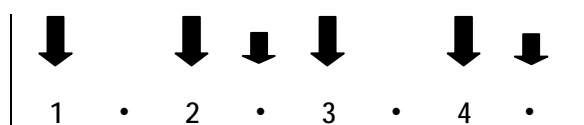
## 2.3 Let's get the music started!

This is the moment you've been waiting for! Using the chords shown earlier, let's try playing the popular song "Leaving on a Jet Plane". Try strumming once for every beat of the song:



↓ a downward strum over all strings

To add more colour to your playing, you may want to try the following strumming pattern:



↓ a downward strum over ~4<sup>th</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> string - meant to produce a subtle sound

It is perfectly normal at the beginning to have problems with changing from one chord to another. A strategy that I usually teach is play very very slowly like onnnnnnn twwoooo thhrreee foouuurrr. Get the idea? Gradually increase the tempo as you progress.

## Glee - Leaving on a Jet Plane

Key: G

G C  
All my bags are packed, I'm ready to go

G C  
I'm standin' here outside your door

G C D  
I hate to wake you up to say goodbye

G C G C  
But the dawn is breakin', it's early morn The taxi's waitin', he's blowin' his horn

G C D  
Already I'm so lonesome I could die

G C G C G C D  
~ So kiss me and smile for me Tell me that you'll wait for me Hold me like you'll never let me go

G C G C G C D  
\* 'Cause I'm leaving on a jet plane I don't know when I'll be back again Oh, babe, I hate to go

G C G C  
There's so many times I've let you down So many times I've played around

G C D  
I'll tell you now, they don't mean a thing

G C G C  
Every place I go, I think of you Every song I sing, I sing for you

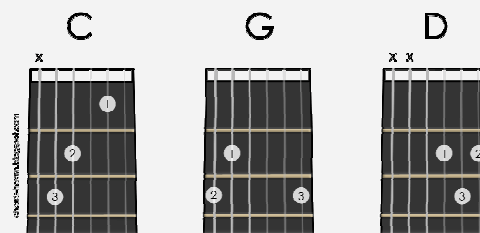
G C D  
When I come back I'll bring your wedding ring ~ \*

G C G C  
Now the time has come to leave you One more time, oh, let me kiss you

G C D  
And close your eyes and I'll be on my way

G C G C  
Dream about the days to come When I won't have to leave alone

G C D  
About the times that I won't have to say ~ \* \*

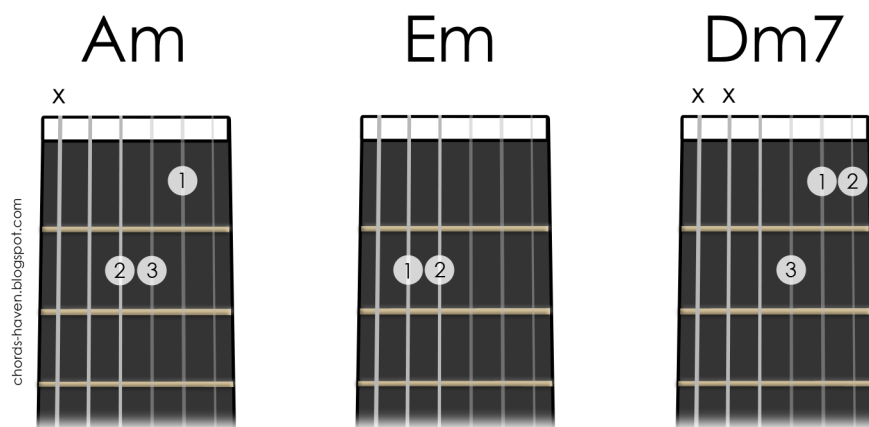


<http://chords-haven.blogspot.com/2010/10/glee-cast-leaving-on-jet-plane.html>

Congratulations! You have learned your 1<sup>st</sup> song on guitar. Ready for more?



## 2.4 More chords



Am: x-0-2-2-1-0

Em: 0-2-2-0-0-0

Dm7: x-x-0-2-1-1

For this series of lessons, I will not go into the music theory as to how the fingerings are obtained for the different chords. In fact, this is not needed if you are just looking to be a recreational guitarist.

Once you have mastered the above chords, you are now able to play the following songs! \*clap clap\*

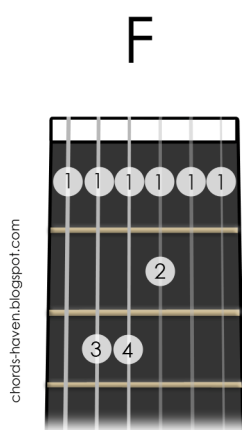
Song	Chords
Marry You	D Em G
The Only Exception	G Dm7 C
Fireworks	G Am Em C
Baby	G Em C D
Perfect	G Em C D

The scores can be found at the back of the book.

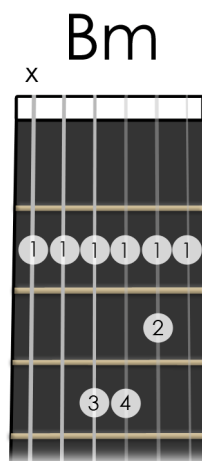
## Chapter 3: Barre Chords

Barre chords are the nemesis of all beginning guitarists. Some give up at this point; some resort to using simplified versions of the chords (don't do that for goodness sake!). But once you master barre chords, it will open you to a whole new world of music. Trust me, it is worth the time and effort!

Let's try playing the F chord:



F: 1-3-3-2-1-1



Bm: 2-2-5-4-3-2

The most common issue with barre chords is the inability to press the entire fret across all strings.

- § For a start, you might want to just try barring the fret with your index finger;
- § Ensure that your fingers are as natural as possible;
- § Practice, practice and practice some more and you should be able to hold a decent barre chord in time.

Now let's use the following songs to practice your barre chords:

Song	Chords
Leaving on a Jet Plane (in C major)	C F G
Forget You	C D7 F
Last Friday Night	G Bm Em7 A

## Glee - Leaving on a Jet Plane (C Major)

Key: C

C F  
All my bags are packed, I'm ready to go

C F  
I'm standin' here outside your door

C F G  
I hate to wake you up to say goodbye

C F C F  
But the dawn is breakin', it's early morn The taxi's waitin', he's blowin' his horn

C F G  
Already I'm so lonesome I could die

C F C F C F G  
~ So kiss me and smile for me Tell me that you'll wait for me Hold me like you'll never let me go

C F C F C F G  
\* 'Cause I'm leaving on a jet plane I don't know when I'll be back again Oh, babe, I hate to go

C F C F  
There's so many times I've let you down So many times I've played around

C F G  
I'll tell you now, they don't mean a thing

C F C F  
Every place I go, I think of you Every song I sing, I sing for you

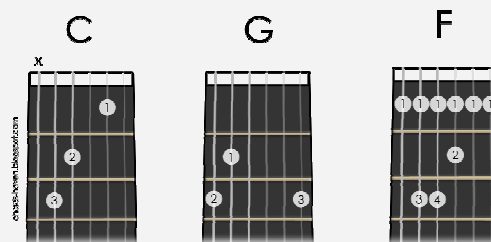
C F G  
When I come back I'll bring your wedding ring ~ \*

C F C F  
Now the time has come to leave you One more time, oh, let me kiss you

C F G  
And close your eyes and I'll be on my way

C F C F  
Dream about the days to come When I won't have to leave alone

C F G  
About the times that I won't have to say ~ \* \*



## Lesson 4: Fingerstyle Plucking

### 4.1 Let's pluck!

To do some fingerstyle plucking, it is recommended that you leave your nails on your right hand slightly longer than usual. Plucking with the tips of your fingers causes undue friction and also produces a softer, muted sound.

Now let's try some plucking using "Leaving on a Jet Plane" (in G major)

Position your fingers on the strings near the soundhole as follows:

p : 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> string  
 i : 3<sup>rd</sup> string  
 m : 2<sup>nd</sup> string  
 a : 1<sup>st</sup> string



Try playing the song using plucking patterns (1) or (2)

(1) p, i, m, a, i, m, a, i  
 (2) p, i, m, a, m, i, a, m

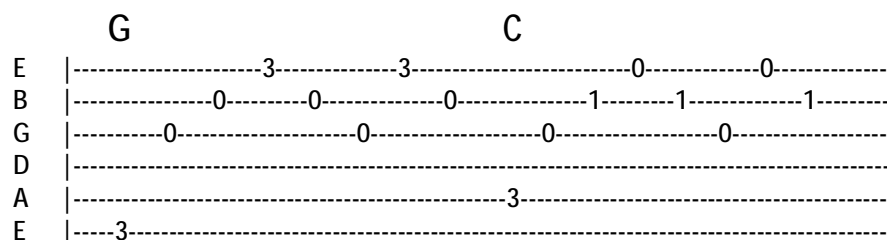
At the beginning, it takes a lot of conscious effort to "command" your fingers to move in a certain sequence. Again, use the strategy of playing very very slowly. Over time, your mind will become accustomed to the sequence and plucking becomes a breeze.

Another common question is: "How do I know which bass string to pluck? 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup>?" In most cases, the bass note of a chord is the root note i.e.

Chords	Bass Note	Fingering
C, C7, Cm, Cm7	C	5 <sup>th</sup> string, 3 <sup>rd</sup> fret
D, D7, Dm, Dm7	D	4 <sup>th</sup> string
E, E7, Em, Em7	E	6 <sup>th</sup> string
F, F7, Fm, Fm7	F	6 <sup>th</sup> string, 1 <sup>st</sup> fret
G, G7, Gm, Gm7	G	6 <sup>th</sup> string, 3 <sup>rd</sup> fret
A, A7, Am, Am7	A	5 <sup>th</sup> string
B, B7, Bm, Bm7	B	5 <sup>th</sup> string, 2 <sup>nd</sup> fret

## 4.2 Guitar Tablatures

Tablatures (or tabs) are a simple alternative to traditional music scores and are widely used to showcase plucking patterns. Let's take a look at section of a typical tablature:



### How to read Tablatures:

- § Tablatures are made up of 6 lines; the top most line represents the 1<sup>st</sup> string and the last line represents the 6<sup>th</sup> string. Sometimes the string names are represented on the left hand margin as above.
- § The numbers on the lines represent the fret to play for that string.
- § Play the notes from left to right.
- § The chords are sometimes shown above the lines.
- § A series of numbers, stacked vertically, indicate to play all the notes at the same time.

*If it helps, the tablature above is for the first bar of "Leaving on a Jet Plane" using pattern (1).*

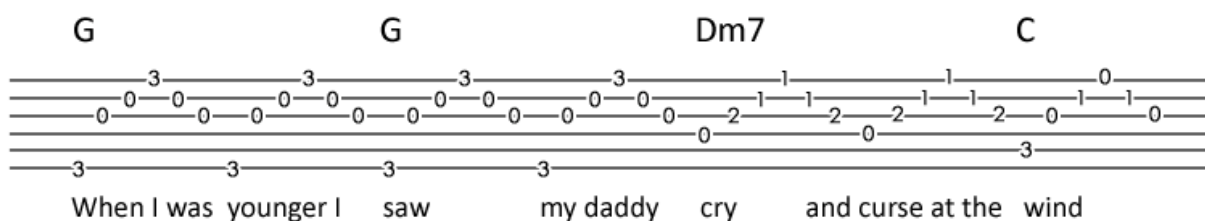
## 4.3 More Practice

Now let's try plucking "The Only Exception" which is played to a 6/8 time signature i.e. 6 counts per bar. A suitable plucking pattern would be:

p, i, m, a, m, i

To assist you in playing, I have included the tablature for the first line of the song:

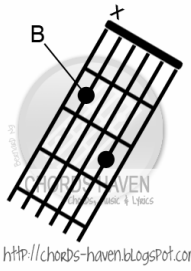
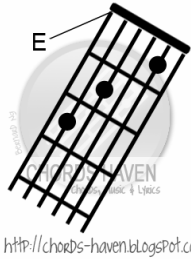
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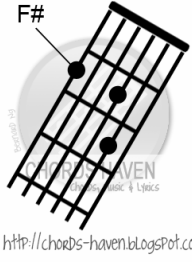
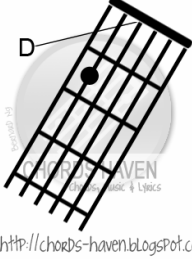


## 4.4 Slash chords

In many songs, to add colour to the music, the bass note played is not the root note. In that case, the bass note is indicated after the chord separated by a slash.

Example:

Chord	Bass Note	Fingering
G/B	B	
C/E	E	

Chord	Bass Note	Fingering
D/F#	F#	
Em/D	D	

## Lesson 5: Moving On

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### 5.1 Capo – The Power Tool

In contemporary guitar playing, the capo is the most powerful accessory around. It allows all songs to be played with relatively simpler chords.

#### Example:

A song played to E Key will invoke chords like E, B, C#m, F#m G#m.

By placing a capo on the 4<sup>th</sup> fret (Cà C#à Dà D#à E: 4 transitions), the song can now be played in the C Key and will involve chords like C, G, Am, Em, Dm which are easier to play.

### 5.2 Complex Chords

As mentioned, I will go into the music theory as to how the fingerings are obtained for the different chords. Many beginners are intimidated when they see complex chords e.g. Caug9, F7<sup>b</sup>5 etc. Well, there is no need to be. Just look up the fingering for the chord and treat it as just another chord with its own set of fingerings.

One excellent website that I use is <http://www.chordbook.com/guitarchords.php>.

### 5.3 Sustaining Motivation

Many aspiring guitarists fail because they give up after the initial enthusiasm fades off. One strategy to sustain your interest is to learn to play your favourite songs.

Chords Haven (<http://chords-haven.blogspot.com/>) is a repository of chords for songs loved by my readers and myself. Join me on facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/people/Chords-Haven/100000128578008>) to receive updates and request for your favourite songs!



## Glee - Marry You

Key: D

~ It's a beautiful night we're looking for something dumb to do.

Hey baby I think I wanna marry you

Is it the look in your eyes or is it this dancing juice?

Who cares baby I think I wanna marry you

Well I know this little chapel on the boulevard we can go

No one will know Come on girl

Who cares if we're trashed got a pocket full of cash we can blow

Shots of patron and it's on girl

\* Don't say no no no no-no Just say yeah yeah yeah yeah-yeah

And we'll go go go go-go If you're ready like I'm ready ~

I'll go get a ring let the choir bells sing like oooh

so whatcha wanna do? Let's just run girl

If we wake up and you wanna break up that's cool

No I won't blame you It was fun girl \* ~

Just say I do Tell me right now baby Tell me right now baby ~

<http://chords-haven.blogspot.com/2011/02/glee-cast-marry-you.html>



## Glee - The Only Exception

Key: G

G Dm7 C  
When I was younger I saw my daddy cry And curse at the wind  
G Dm7 C  
He broke his own heart and I watched As he tried to reassemble it  
G Dm7 C  
And my momma swore she would never let herself forget  
G Dm7 C  
And that was the day that I promised I'd never sing of love if it does not exist

G Dm7 C  
\* But darling, you are the only exception You are the only exception  
G Dm7 C  
You are the only exception You are the only exception

G Dm7 C  
Maybe I know somewhere deep in my soul That love never lasts  
G Dm7 C  
And we've got to find other ways To make it alone keep a straight face  
G Dm7 C  
And I've always lived like this Keeping a comfortable distance  
G Dm7 C  
And up until now I had sworn to myself that I'm content with loneliness  
C  
Because none of it was ever worth the risk \*

Am G D  
I've got a tight grip on reality But I can't Let go of what's in front of me here  
Am  
I know you're leaving in the morning when you wake up  
G D C  
Leave me with some kind of proof it's not a dream Ohh ~ \*

F C G  
And I'm on my way to believing  
F C G  
Oh, And I'm on my way to believing

<http://chords-haven.blogspot.com/2011/06/glee-cast-only-exception.html>

## Glee - Firework

Key: G

G Am Em C  
Do you ever feel like a plastic bag Drifting through the wind Wanting to start again  
G Am Em C  
Do you ever feel so paper thin Like a house of cards One blow from caving in  
G Am Em C  
Do you ever feel already buried deep Six feet under scream But no one seems to hear a thing  
G Am Em C G Em  
Do you know that there's still a chance for you Cause there's a spark in you You just gotta ignite the light  
Em C G Am Em C  
And let it shine Just own the night Like the Fourth of July

G Am Em C  
\* Cause baby you're a firework Come on show 'em what you're worth  
G Am Em C  
Make 'em go "Oh, oh, oh!" As you shoot across the sky-y-y  
G Am Em C  
Baby you're a firework Come on let your colors burst  
G Am Em C  
Make 'em go "Oh, oh, oh!" You're gonna leave 'em fallin' down-own-own

G Am Em C  
You don't have to feel like a waste of space You're original, cannot be replaced  
G Am Em C  
If you only knew what the future holds After a hurricane comes a rainbow  
G Am Em C  
Maybe you're reason why all the doors are closed So you could open one that leads you to the perfect road  
G Am Em C G Em  
Like a lightning bolt, your heart will blow And when it's time, you'll know You just gotta ignite the light  
Em C G Am Em C  
And let it shine Just own the night Like the Fourth of July \*

G Am Em C  
Baby you're a firework Come on let your colors burst  
G Am Em C  
Make 'em go "Oh, oh, oh!" You're gonna leave 'em all in awe-awe-awe"

Em C  
Boom, boom, boom Even brighter than the moon, moon, moon  
G D  
It's always been inside of you, you, you And now it's time to let it through \*

<http://chords-haven.blogspot.com/2011/02/glee-cast-firework.html>

# Glee - Baby

Key: G

G Em  
 You know you love me, I know you care Just shout whenever, and I'll be there  
 C D  
 You want my love, you want my heart And we will never, ever, ever be apart  
 G Em  
 Are we an item? Girl quit playin' "We're just friends," what are you sayin'?  
 C D  
 Say there's another and look right in my eyes My first love broke my heart for the first time

G Em  
 \* And I was like baby, baby, baby, ohh Like, baby, baby, baby, no  
 C D  
 Like, baby, baby, baby, ohh I thought you'd always be mine, mine  
 G Em  
 Baby, baby, baby, ohh Like, baby, baby, baby, no  
 C D  
 Like, baby, baby, baby, ohh I thought you'd always be mine, mine

G Em  
Oh, for you, I would have done whatever And I just can't believe we ain't together  
C D  
And I wanna play it cool, but I'm losin' you I'll buy you anything, I'll buy you any ring  
G Em  
And I'm in pieces, baby, fix me And just shake me till you wake me from this bad dream  
C D  
I'm going down, down, down, down And I just can't believe my first love won't be around \*

<http://chords-haven.blogspot.com/2011/10/glee-cast-baby.html>

## Glee - Perfect

Key: G

G D Em C  
Made a wrong turn, Once or twice Dug my way out, Blood and fire

G D Em C  
Bad decisions, That's alright Welcome to my silly life

G D Em C  
Mistreated, misplaced, misunderstood Miss "no way, it's all good", It didn't slow me down

G D Em C  
Mistaken, Always second guessing Under estimated, Look, I'm still around

G D Em C  
\* Pretty, pretty please Don't you ever, ever feel Like your less than less then perfect

G D Em C G  
Pretty, pretty please If you ever, ever feel Like your nothing You are perfect to me

G D Em C  
You're so mean, When you talk, About yourself, You are wrong

G D Em C  
Change the voices, In your head Make them like you instead

G D Em C  
So complicated, Look happy, You'll make it! Filled with so much hatred Such a tired game

G D Em C  
It's enough, I've done all I can think of Chased down all my demons, I've seen you do the same \*

G D  
The whole world stares so I swallow the fear The only thing I should be drinking is an ice cold beer

Em C  
So cool in line and we try, try, try But we try too hard, it's a waste of my time.

G D  
Done looking for the critics, cause they're everywhere They don't like my jeans, they don't get my hair

Em C  
We change ourselves and we do it all the time Why do we do that? Why do I do that? \* \*

<http://chords-haven.blogspot.com/2011/10/pink-perfect.html>

## Glee - Forget You

Key: C

~ I see you driving 'round town with the guy I love and I'm like forget you! Oo, oo, ooo

I guess the change in my pocket wasn't enough I'm like forget you and forget him too!

I said, if I was richer, I'd still be with ya Ha, now ain't that some shh? (Ain't that some shh?)

And although there's pain in my chest I still wish you the best with a forget you! Oo, oo, ooo

Yeah I'm sorry, I can't afford a Ferrari But that don't mean I can't get you there

I guess she's an Xbox and I'm more Atari But the way you play your game ain't fair

I pity the fool that falls in love with you (ooh she's a gold digger) Well (just thought you should know)

Ooooooh I've got some news for you Yeah go run and tell your little girlfriend ~

Now I know, that I had to borrow, Beg and steal and lie and cheat

Trying to keep ya, trying to please ya. 'Cause being in love with you ain't cheap

I pity the fool that falls in love with you (ooh she's a gold digger) Well (just thought you should know)

Ooooooh I've got some news for you Oooh, I really hate you right now ~

<http://chords-haven.blogspot.com/2011/06/glee-cast-forget-you.html>

## Glee - Last Friday Night

Key: G

G Em  
There's a stranger in my bed There's a pounding my head

Bm A  
Glitter all over the room Pink flamingos in the pool

G Em  
I smell like a minibar DJ's passed out in the yard

Bm A  
Barbie's on the barbeque There's a hickie or a bruise

G Em Bm A  
~ Pictures of last night ended up online I'm screwed oh well

G Em Bm A  
It's a black top blur But I'm pretty sure it ruled

G Em  
\* Last Friday night Yeah we danced on tabletops

Bm A  
And we took too many shots Think we kissed but I forgot

G Em  
Last Friday night Yeah we maxed our credit cards

Bm A  
And got kicked out of the bar So we hit the boulevard

G Em  
Last Friday night We went streaking in the park

Bm A  
Skinny dipping in the dark Then had a menage a trois

G Em  
Last Friday night Yeah I think we broke the law

Bm A  
Always say we're gonna stop-op Whoa-oh-oah

G Em Bm A G Em7 Bm A  
This Friday night Do it all again This Friday night Do it all again

G Em  
Trying to connect the dots Don't know what to tell my boss

Bm A  
Think the city towed my car Chandelier is on the floor

G Em  
With my favorite party dress Warrants out for my arrest

Bm A  
Think I need a ginger ale That was such an epic fail ~ \*

<http://chords-haven.blogspot.com/2011/12/glee-cast-last-friday-night.html>