

BASIC PICKING TECHNIQUE

Wrist And hand Position For The Picking Arm

The upper forearm should serve as an “anchor” point against the upper edge of the guitar. The wrist should be slightly bent unless you are using part of the hand to mute. The fingertips, side of hand (from the base of the little finger to the wrist), heel of hand, and thumb should brush against the strings, bridge or body of the guitar to judge distance.

Many players rest the “pinky” side of their hand (between the little finger and the wrist) on the bridge while picking. While this provides stability for the picking hand, it sacrifices the tone variation usually available by picking closer to the neck for bass tones or closer to the bridge for treble tones.

Wrist Sweep, Forearm Rotation And Elbow Sweep

Wrist Sweep. A sweeping, continuous down-up motion of the wrist is used for strumming chords and picking single notes. Here is an exercise to familiarize you with this motion:

- Move your hand side to side with the same movement as if your hand were palm-down on a table.
- Mute the strings with your fretting hand and strum down-up alternately on two or three strings as a group; as you would a three note chord.
- Gradually widen the stroke until you are strumming on all six strings.

Note that when strumming alternately down-up on four to six strings, the wrist movement is so wide that it involves a distinct forearm rotation (view the protruding wrist bone nearest the thumb). The weight of the hand will aid the motion of the hand in strumming.

Most players involve a slight forearm rotation in playing single notes. At the fastest rates of picking single notes, most players use a controlled muscle quiver in the forearm rotation.

Holding The Pick

There are many ways to hold a guitar pick. In the most traditional method, hold the pick between the side of the tip segment of the index finger and the flat surface of the thumb (opposite the thumbnail). Try to extend the tip of the pick less than a quarter of an inch from the thumb for fine control (many players prefer less than an eighth of an inch). Bend the first finger so its tip points toward the base of the thumb. Holding the pick in this manner should allow light pressure between the thumb and first finger.

Experiment and see what is comfortable and effective. For single-note playing, I usually hold the pick between the tips of the thumb, index and middle fingers. This gives me fine control over the pick and allows removal of the index finger for picking hand tapping. For strumming, I usually hold the pick between the side of the tip segment of the index finger and the thumb.

The Position Of The Pick

Usually, you should position the pick in a plane perpendicular (90°) to the surface of the strings (or to the guitar top), so it will glide equally well over the strings during downstrokes and upstrokes. This makes it

easier to move the pick from one string to another. It also causes the strings to vibrate parallel to the frets, providing maximum clearance and minimum buzzing. There are special situations, however, where you should tilt the pick toward or away from the floor:

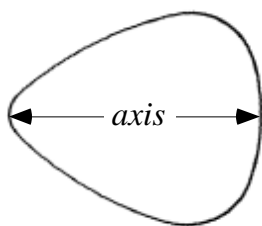
- (1) when picking the first note down on each of four or more strings, tilt the base of the pick toward the floor and;
- (2) when picking the first note up on each of four or more strings, tilt the base of the pick away from the floor and;
- (3) when picking all downstrokes or all upstrokes to intentionally cause the strings to vibrate against the frets and buzz (typically in an accented phrase).

Pluck the strings with the tip of the pick produces a purer tone than either of the long edges of the pick, which produce more “scratchy” or “breathy” tones.

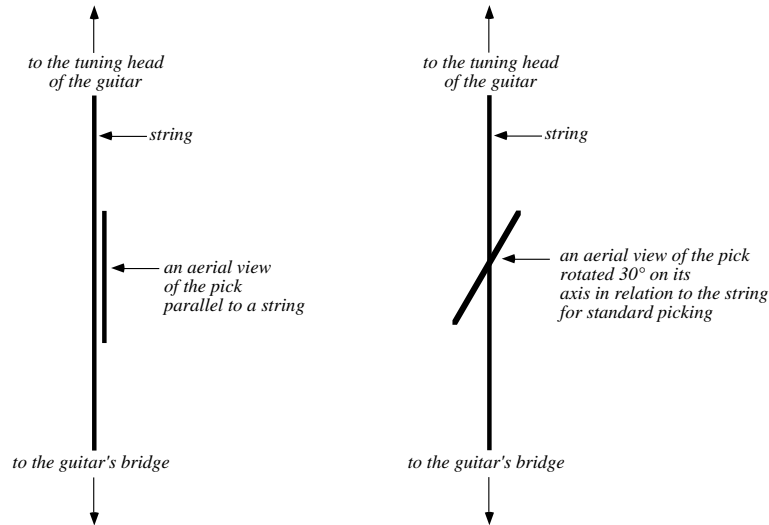
Rotating The Pick On Its Axis

To produce the purest string tone, rotate the pick on its axis so the flat surface of the pick is parallel to the length of the string. Ideally, the tip of the pick should not move past the underside of the string (nearest the guitar body), moving just close enough to the guitar body to get alongside the string.

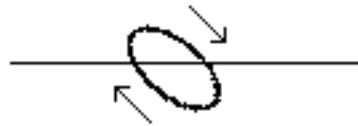
By rotating the pick on its axis to make it less parallel to the length of the string, you produce a more percussive, “breathy” or “scratchy” tone. When the pick is rotated slightly out-of-parallel position with the string, the tone becomes breathy. As the pick is rotated more out-of-parallel position with the string, the tone becomes more scratchy.



Rotating the pick on its axis to make it less parallel to the length of the string by about ten to fifteen degrees makes it easier to judge the distance between your pick and the guitar body, and therefore allows you to “glide” over the surface of the strings while picking.



Circle picking is a refined alternative to picking from the wrist. It involves very small, controlled movements in the fingers. To get the basic feeling of this technique, draw a straight line on a piece of paper, hold a pen or pencil between your thumb and index finger as you would hold a pick, and draw little clockwise ovals around the line at this angle:



Then try picking down-up on one string with the same movement. Bend the wrist to move the oval path from one string to another (to change the string you are picking on). Circle picking is only practical at slower rates of picking notes.

INTRODUCTION TO STYLES OF PICKING

The seven styles of picking are *downstroke*, *upstroke*, *alternate*, *rhythmic*, *sweep*, *economy* and *inside*.

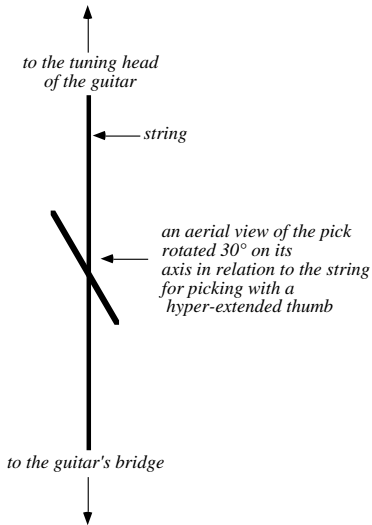
Downstroke Picking

This provides melodic emphasis and is often used in simpler guitar forms such as traditional blues and fifties rock. You will find it to be the easiest style of picking, unless you began playing with a predominant upstroke (see upstroke picking, below).

Upstroke Picking

Most players have a predominant downstroke and tend to start phrases (continuous rhythmic group of notes) with a downstroke. Some players developed a predominant upstroke, often because they liked the tone.

The common position of the pick in regard to the position on its axis is such that the end of the pick nearest the bridge is up and the end nearest the neck is down. Many of the predominant upstrokers that I have seen have the type of thumb that curves back at the tip toward the thumbnail. Let's call this a *hyper-extended* thumb. This hyper-extended thumb shape makes it easier to position the pick on its axis as shown below.



Either position of the pick can work, but be aware that the more the pick is rotated on its axis *away* from being parallel to the string, the more it scrapes the string, changing the tone.

Open-String Picking Exercise

Play this exercise with all strokes in the same direction, preferably downstrokes. If you have a predominant upstroke, it may be better to try to make a change to predominant downstroke, since most guitar styles are played with predominant downstrokes.

Alternate Picking

Play through the III position Gm7/11 pentatonic scale, ascend from sixth string, third fret “G”, picking down-up on each string. Descending from the first string, sixth fret “Bb”, pick up-down on each note as you descend to the sixth string. You should be picking two notes on each string, except three notes on the first string. Repeat through all five pentatonic fingerings.

Rhythmic Picking

Rhythmic picking is a variation of alternate picking where the picking hand assumes a regular motion and a rhythm is selected from that motion by deciding which strokes actually contact the string.

Economy Picking

Economy picking is generally the opposite of alternate picking, where you generally pick alternately, but avoid excess motion by picking in the direction of each new string you are moving toward.

Sweep Picking

Sweep picking is a variation of economy picking where you prepare your fretting such that you never have to pass a string without picking it.

Inside Picking

Inside picking is a variation of economy picking where you play a repeated series of notes on a stringset of two or more strings with a fixed pattern that keeps the pick within the range of the strings such as up-down-down for a three note series of notes on strings 3, 2 and 1.