

# From tab to score: teaching student guitarists how to read music

## Paul White

### Are all guitarists bad at reading music?

There's no denying the fact that there are a lot of guitarists who can't read music. (I'd like to stress that this is focused more on electric or acoustic guitarists, rather than ones who are classically taught.) As a guitarist myself, it's something that was always a weak point, and although I tried to never let it hold me back, it took a lot of hard work to bring it up to a standard where I could work confidently as a professional musician.

There have been many famous and technically gifted guitarists (and other musicians, come to that) who couldn't read a note of music, so it's not a new phenomena. But it's something that will definitely restrict what student guitarists can achieve with their instrument. Such guitar gods as Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix and Eddie Van Halen couldn't read music, so why is it so important? The argument can be made that it didn't harm them and that they were all successful and very talented musicians, so why should students learn to read music?

In fact, it's quite often said among guitarists that to have a formal training in music sometimes stifles creativity, and is not in the spirit or ethos of certain types of music. To learn something 'by the book' means that some of the individual idiosyncrasies and 'bad technique' that are developed through not following the rules are lost.

There are also whole genres of music in which it's almost frowned upon to have had a formal musical training, and I've come across many musicians who thought that to have a training in music would make you play in a certain way that was not necessarily to their taste.

Of course most of this is nonsense, and the number of professional guitarists who have had some kind of formal training is now higher than ever, since there are more ways and opportunities to learn music in schools and colleges. While the 'punk' ethos is still around, and shouldn't be quelled, the number of musicians who are willing to limit their playing in this way is quite low. I suspect that even in past years, if you were to delve a little deeper, you would often find that most musicians will have had some kind of formal music training, even if it wasn't on their chosen instrument.

When you consider that, as in most subjects, knowledge is power, it can only be of benefit to learn everything you can about a subject. This is certainly true of being able to read music. So many doors that would otherwise be closed to the non-reading guitarist are suddenly opened, and opportunities within the musical spectrum become limitless. To be able to read music is to be able to communicate with other musicians, and this will allow students to experience much more than playing in (for example) a rock band ever could. Being able to read as a guitarist means that you can play in a big band, orchestra and jazz band, do session work, play in a pit band and many more other opportunities that are usually closed off to a non-reading musician.

I was speaking to a musician friend the other day, who was trying to put together a band for an amateur musical. He had found all the other instrumentalists he needed, but was having a real problem finding a guitarist who could read music. This seems crazy to other instrumentalists who read music, because that forms such a key part of learning their instrument, but is all too common among guitarists since they have often learnt their instrument in a slightly different way.

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A lot of this stems from the fact that guitarists are often to some extent self-taught. It is quite easy to get hold of a guitar and, via YouTube or a musician friend, learn to strum a few chords without having any knowledge of how music actually works. This approach can continue into learning whole songs with melodies and even improvisation, still without having any lessons or knowing which notes are being played. It's often still the case that all you need is a guitar, a few chords, perhaps a pentatonic scale shape, to join a band and off you go!

Students often find that it's difficult to learn where the notes are on the guitar. This is true of all stringed instruments, because there's nearly always more than one way to play something, and visually you don't have the same cues as, for example, a piano, where everything is set out nicely into black and white notes.

A perfect illustration of the troubles a guitarist goes through trying to read can be found in this great comedy sketch from the 1980s ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=QelxJzdPDoA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QelxJzdPDoA)) (be aware that it includes one rude word that you might not want students to hear).

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## Tab

For a form of musical notation that has its origins in lute tablature that's been around since the 15th century, you'd think that guitar tablature would be the way to go when it comes to learning the guitar. However, guitar tab has its good and bad points, and although it does a lot of things very well, it also has significant weaknesses.

A lot of this stems from how it's used, and the proliferation of amateur written tab available on the internet. Well-written tab is a very good way of reading music for guitar, as it clearly shows students where to place their fingers on the neck while also illustrating articulation in a straightforward and easy-to-read way. Good tab will also have the rhythm clearly written out within the tab, and should also have the notes written on the staff above the tab to show what's being played. Most commercially available tab is written in this way, and it's the standard way for learning most pop music and even a lot of classical music.

The problems with guitar tab come from the fact that it's usually used as a replacement for written music and not in conjunction with it. Guitarists look at the tab and try to match what they're hearing with the numbers they're seeing on the page, and don't pay much attention to the written notes or rhythmic notation.

The greater problem with this is that when used solely in conjunction with your ears, students can happily play entire songs of terrific complexity without actually knowing any of the notes they are playing. Tab only requires students to be able to recognise fret numbers, and therefore it's not necessary to learn the names of the notes on the guitar neck, and many guitarists don't.

I have come across many students who could play pieces of Grade 5 standard and above, but couldn't tell me any of the notes they were playing. This may be fine if all they want to do is play along to songs in their bedroom, but it presents a big problem when they come to work with other musicians. An all-too-common sight is a group of guitarists in a rehearsal room trying to teach each other how to play something by pointing at their guitar necks and calling out fret numbers. If they then have to teach a part to someone who plays an instrument other than the guitar and doesn't happen to know what a fret is, they quickly come unstuck.

### Chord boxes and song books

Another slightly different but very guitar-specific way of reading music is the chord box diagram. This form of music score normally comes in the form of a song book with a written score of usually the vocal or piano part, and chord symbols and/or chord boxes above the score to show which chords the guitarist needs to play.

These chords normally have no rhythmic indication of how they should be played, and require a certain amount of interpretation by the musician to get something that sounds like the original song. There are definite limitations with this approach, but it does allow for a lot of information to be written on one page, and also encourages guitarists to learn chords and chord names, and be able to listen to a song and arrange their part to fit accordingly. Being able to see chord symbols and interpret them in a way that fits the song is also a key skill that should be developed early on. Guitarists are expected to be able to both read and improvise, and both these skills should be encouraged from early on in their learning.

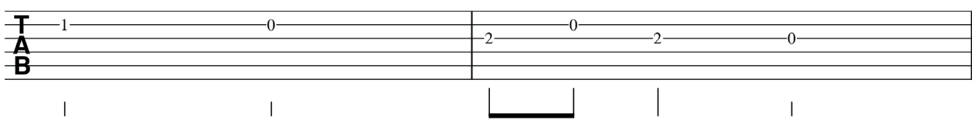
Because of the way guitars (and other stringed instruments) work, there's a degree of interpretation required as there are usually at least two ways of playing something. The reasons why something is played in one position and not another can be down to comfort and ease, but they can also be down to the tone that's created on different strings in different positions. In fact, many important musical considerations have to be taken into account to make sure each note is played in the best possible place. It's important therefore that students experiment with different ways of playing so they can see these differences for themselves.

### Using tab in a constructive way

When used in the right way, tab can be a very useful tool to help students learn pieces of music. The key thing is to use it in a balanced way. Depending on what you're trying to achieve, different forms of notation may be appropriate.

For example, you may want to focus on improving aural skills and therefore just write tab without any indication of rhythm to encourage your student to figure out the rhythm by themselves, using the tab as an indication of where to put their fingers. This approach may be helpful for beginners and younger students as it's simple to follow and requires them to listen carefully and recreate what they're hearing.

Using tab this way is a good starting point, but you should quickly branch out and include more detail. Rhythm is the next thing to add, starting with the rhythm written into the the tab itself. If you're doing this freehand, be careful to space the notes correctly to match the rhythm being played. There are various ways of doing this, and you will find rhythm is written in many different ways on the internet. I prefer either to write the rhythm as stems from the tab numbers, as in the following example, although you may find the rhythm written separately from the tab or with a lettering system to signify what note value is used.



A step up from this would be tab and music score together, which is the conventional way of writing music for contemporary guitar. In my experience, this system still encourages players to primarily read tab, and only refer to the score for rhythmic indication, but it does give more reading options.

The final option (and the one all guitarists hate!) is just music score.



## How to go from tab to the music stave

### Learn the fretboard

If they want to read music, the first thing that every guitar student needs to learn is where all the notes are on the fretboard. The process starts like this:

- 1 Learn the open strings: use an acronym, or better still, get the student to make their own one up – they'll learn it better if they do.
- 2 Learn the order of the 12 notes in an octave: most students are aware of what a piano keyboard looks like, so relate it to that in order to show the sharps and flats.
- 3 Transfer this to each string, and let the student figure out where different notes are on the fretboard. You may want to draw a large diagram of the fretboard and get the student to fill in where each note is, if that helps.
- 4 Use games to test how well the student knows the notes. A good opening game is to name a note (eg a G), and get the student to play all the Gs they can find over the entire fretboard. You may want to set a metronome to a slow speed and get them to play the notes in time with the metronome. You can then speed this up as they get better at finding the notes.

### Start reading notes on the stave

Once the student is getting good at finding notes over the guitar neck, you should start actually reading some notes on the stave:

- 1 Learn the C major scale in open position.
- 2 Learn where the open strings are on the stave.
- 3 Start reading simple stepwise melodies: begin with a simple crotchet rhythm to focus on reading the pitch of the notes.
- 4 Add small jumps of around a 3rd into the melodies.
- 5 Add some accidentals.
- 6 Learn some new scales in open position and try melodies in those keys: F, G, Am, and so on.
- 7 Learn the scales in the third position (third to sixth fret). This will be one of most common places to read melody lines since it covers most of the common notes written for guitar with room to extend top and bottom.
- 8 One of the key points to being able to read music on the guitar is knowing the major scales well. This gives your students their road map around the guitar neck, and makes reading less daunting, as they will know which notes they're going to be using. A lot of students get flustered if they can't see the scale patterns and can't recognise which note is which. To help with this, get them to say the note they're playing when they play their scales so they learn the shape and the note names.
- 9 Learn the major scales on one string. This is another way of opening up the guitar neck and helping with note recognition, and it also encourages students to think up and down the neck, not just across the strings.
- 10 Learn scales using different interval jumps between the notes. For example, in C major try: C E D F E G F A G B A C B D C (using 3rds), or C F D G E A F B G C A D B E C (using 4ths). Get the student to name the notes as they play them.

## Adding rhythm

- 1 It generally works best to clap rhythms first before you transfer them onto the guitar. Encourage the student to tap their foot on the beat as they're clapping, so they feel the pulse of the piece.
- 2 Start with crotchets and gradually introduce more complex rhythms into your melody lines.
- 3 Work with a metronome to ensure good time keeping.
- 4 Try to read melodies that are a bit more difficult but are familiar to the student, so they have some idea of what the finished result should sound like.
- 5 Work with commonly occurring rhythmic patterns and encourage the student to recognise them and learn the sound they make.

## Tips for reading music score

### General points

- 1 Practise reading every day: the 'little and often' rule is definitely true here, and a student will develop much more quickly by practising reading every day for 20 minutes rather than once a week for two hours.
- 2 Teach the student to scan through the whole piece first, so that they have a good idea of structure and any particularly tricky sections that may need looking at first.
- 3 Look at the time signature and be aware of any places in the piece where this changes.
- 4 Look at the key signature and be aware of any place in the piece where this changes. Also look through the score to determine whether the key is major or minor, and therefore what scale should be used.
- 5 Look at the range of notes to be played and choose a suitable position on the neck in which to play them.
- 6 Encourage the student not to stop if they make a mistake, but to be aware of it and practise the particular section in isolation if it's causing them problems.
- 7 Start trying to get the student to read ahead by at least a bar early on in the reading development.
- 8 Recognise and be able to interpret phrasing.
- 9 Add articulation, dynamics and so on where appropriate.
- 10 Pitch the difficulty of the reading you're expecting your student to be able to do with care. Guitarists can be very sensitive when it comes to reading music, and you don't want your student to get disheartened and abandon it altogether.

There are some very good sightreading books available. One that I've used for many years is *Sight-Reading Jazz* by Bob Taylor. *Modern Reading Text in 4/4* by Louis Bellson is a comprehensive book covering just rhythms. And *Sight Reading Mastery for Guitar* by Joseph Alexander and Tim Pettingale is another great and more up-to-date book on sightreading that's not so jazz-focused.

### Using chord charts

Another common way to write music out for guitarists is using a chord chart. Chord charts also come in numerous different styles, some with rhythm, some without, some with chord boxes, some without.

In the professional working world, you will come across a lot of chord charts, and as with most styles of popular music, the guitarist's main job is to play chords. It's therefore very important to get your students used to reading from a chord chart from the start of their development.

Reading chord charts also forces the student to decide which version of each chord is the best for the song, since there will always be more than one way to interpret the chart. This will hopefully encourage them to increase their vocabulary of chords and not be happy to play the same chord shapes each time.

As the student's understanding grows, it's important for them to learn the common chords that will occur in each key. You can do this by teaching them the harmonised major/minor scales and using common pieces to illustrate this in practice. Knowing which chords are likely to appear in a piece also helps students to decipher chord charts quickly, and also allows you to start using the Roman numeral system in place of regular notes when referring to chords so that pieces can be learnt in every key.

Chord charts are often written with 'slash' rhythms, for example:



These are very common when reading jazz and musical/show scores, and require the student to play the chord in a particular rhythm shown by the slash notes. A useful exercise for chord charts that don't have written rhythm would be to get your student to notate the rhythm for themselves.

### Useful resources and tips

There are many great pieces of software available to buy or download freely from the internet. A popular choice is MuseScore, which allows you to write music out in a multitude of different ways. All of the music examples in this resource were created using this software, and it gives very professional results in an easy-to-use package. There are more advanced programs available, but if you're looking to start writing out music for your teaching and don't need a lot of the extra features that are included in more expensive software, MuseScore covers just about everything, and most importantly – it's free! There are also many great pieces of software that you can buy, not least Sibelius, which seems to do everything you could ever want when it comes to writing music.

There are also many websites to find tab online, but be aware that most of it is written by amateur musicians. You should therefore approach it with caution, and make sure you're aware of any mistakes in the tab or chords. It's a good idea to advise your students about the accuracy of online tab, and you might even want to ask them to see if they can find any mistakes in it as a challenge to test their listening abilities. Ultimate Guitar ([www.ultimate-guitar.com](http://www.ultimate-guitar.com)) seems to be about the most comprehensive tab site, and has an extensive library of tab and chord sheets, though there are now many different sites all with slightly differing ways of writing tab, so it's a good idea to see what's out there.

Finally, I'd like to reiterate that this resource is aimed at guitar students who, for whatever reason, haven't learnt to read music or have a disconnect between reading tab and reading music score. I'm aware that in an ideal world all guitarists should be able to read music, but unfortunately this isn't the case. To fully go into the subject of reading music on the guitar would easily fill a book, and has done many times before, but I hope this has given you some ideas to try. We can all aspire to make sure that more guitarists are better score readers in the future.