The 16 Most Important Guitar Chords

The essential chords that people need to know like the back of their hands.

by Josh Espinosa
introduction

While learning guitar chords is essential for beginners, because there are so many, it also helps to know which chords to learn first, and how many total to focus on in practice.

So, here it is: if you learn just four chords, you can probably play hundreds of songs. Eight? A few thousand.

The little secret about all your favorite songs is that they can typically be played from a pool of about 16 chords, using 3-5 at a time. Plus, if you couple these chords with a capo, you easily have all the tools necessary to play just about any song in every key. This is the foundation every guitar player must have.
how to use this guide

Here are a few tips that can help you make the most out of this guide.

Learn the Chords in this Guide in the Following Order
- Learn these concurrently first: G, C, D, Em
- Then learn: Am
- Start fiddling with F, and concurrently learn A, E, Dm
- As they come up in songs: B7, G7, E7, A7, Bm, D7
- Last: F#m

A Word About the F Chord
The F chord is by far the most difficult chord for beginners to learn, and it’s every guitar player’s rite of passage. It’s so common that it’s completely unavoidable, so it’s best just to accept the challenge and tackle it head on. Don’t avoid practicing it.

The F chord takes a little palm leverage, hand strength and practice. Once you can play it, you’ll be surprised how many songs you can play with just the key of C and the key of G.

The Key of E
While songs in the key of E are very common, the guitar chords can be relatively difficult to play. Here are a couple of the best solutions for playing in E:
- If it’s a blues song, use E or E7, A or A7 and B7. There isn’t usually a minor chord in blues.
- For any other style of music, either use D chords with a capo on the second fret or C chords with a capo on the fourth fret.

Using the Practice Progressions
The practice progressions will help you get used to landing chords from a variety of different places. One of the best ways to improve going from one chord to the next is to place a chord, play one downstroke and then move on to the next chord. Try to place the chord and play the downstroke simultaneously. When you reach the end, repeat.

Making Song Chords Easier
A lot of songs utilize slight variations of these chords for a variety of reasons.

It’s perfectly fine to make chords easier on yourself to play. If you see D/F#, Asus, Gadd9, Em7 or C7, you can just as well play D, A, G, Em and C respectively and typically, no one will ever notice.

Don’t do this with the ‘b’ or ‘#’ sign though. That means flat or sharp and is a whole different chord.

Of course, you could always learn those chords, but usually it’s not that critical, especially if you’re just playing for fun.
how to read a chord chart

The first step in playing guitar chords is knowing how to set your fingers. A chord chart shows you which fingers go on which strings and on which fret to press in order to play a chord. Study this chart religiously.

The numbered circles represent your fingers:
1 = Index
2 = Middle
3 = Ring
4 = Pinkie
5 = Thumb

Exclude Open String Note
‘X’ means do not play this string as part of the chord. When you are strumming, be mindful to skip these strings.

Include Open String Note
‘O’ means that even though a finger doesn’t go on the string, you still play it as part of the chord. The ‘O’ is often implied. If you don’t see an ‘X’ or a finger placement on a string, consider it an open string that should be played as part of the chord.
chords from the key of ‘g’

**G**

```
E   A   D   G   B   E
3   2   0   0   0   0
4   0   0   0   0   0
```

**C**

```
E   A   D   G   B   E
3   2   0   0   0   0
1   0   0   0   0   0
```

**D**

```
E   A   D   G   B   E
x   x   1   3   0   0
```

**Em**

```
E   A   D   G   B   E
2   0   0   0   0   0
3   0   0   0   0   0
```

**Practice Progressions:**

- G-C-G-C
- D-C-G-Em-C
- G-D-C-G
- G-C-D-C-G
- G-D-Em-C-G
- C-Em-G-D
chords from the key of ‘c’

C-F-C-G
C-F-Am-G
F-C-G-C-F
Am-G-F-C
F-Am-F-Am
Am-F-G
chords from the key of ‘d’

D

G

A

Bm

PRACTICE PROGRESSIONS:

D-A-D-G

D-A-Bm-G

Bm-A-Bm-D

D-G-A-G-D

G-A-Bm-A-D

G-A-D
chords from the key of 'a'

**A**

```
E        A        D        G        B        E
 0 0 0 2 3 4
```

**D**

```
E        A        D        G        B        E
 0 0 0 3 2
```

**E**

```
E        A        D        G        B        E
 0 0 0 2 3 1
```

**F#m**

```
E        A        D        G        B        E
 0 0 0 1
```

**PRACTICE PROGRESSIONS:**

- A-D-A-E
- A-D-F#m-E
- A-E-D-E-A
- A-D-E-D-E-A
- D-E-A-F#m-E
- F#m-D-F#m-E

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other common chords

E7

A7

B7

D7

Dm

G7
Of course, learning chords is only the first part of learning guitar. You also need to gain a rock-solid strum and learn how to use a capo. But once you learn all those things, you don’t really need to learn anything else unless you want to. If you just get really good at strumming your 16 chords and using a capo, you are well on your way to enjoying a lifetime of playing music on the guitar.

If you want to know how to get there, click here to check out our PDF guide, *How to Play Guitar: Complete Instructions for Beginners*. 
Approachable Music develops resources designed to bring more clarity to music education. Music has a terrible reputation for being difficult to learn, but really, the knowledge part is fairly straightforward. Being disciplined enough to practice is the hard part, and that’s something 100% controlled by the individual. Essentially, we believe that if you want to practice music, knowledge shouldn’t stand in your way.

For questions about guitar lessons in Minneapolis, St. Paul or the greater Twin Cities region, other inquiries, contact us at: info@approachablemusic.com

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