

Guitar Notes for Beginners

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The simplest building block of music, and one that unfortunately is often overlooked by beginning guitar players, is the single note.

Before you get into scales, chords, melody or songs, guitar notes should be fully understood which, in turn, will allow a guitar student to develop a more complete understanding of the following concepts:

- Fretboard Navigation
- Chord Composition
- Guitar Scales

In this lesson I'll cover guitar notes in full, which will take us through a basic definition, some applicable music theory and then a process for complete fretboard memorization.

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- What guitar notes are
- What guitar chords are
- Naturals, sharps and flats
- Fretboard memorization

Let's start with a working definition of a guitar note before we get into more nuanced issues.

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Basic Definition

A guitar note can be defined as a single tone or pitch which, on the guitar, can either be a fretted note or an open string. Several notes sounding in a chronological order (either ascending or descending) are how you get melody and **scales**, while several notes sounding in unison would create a **chord**.

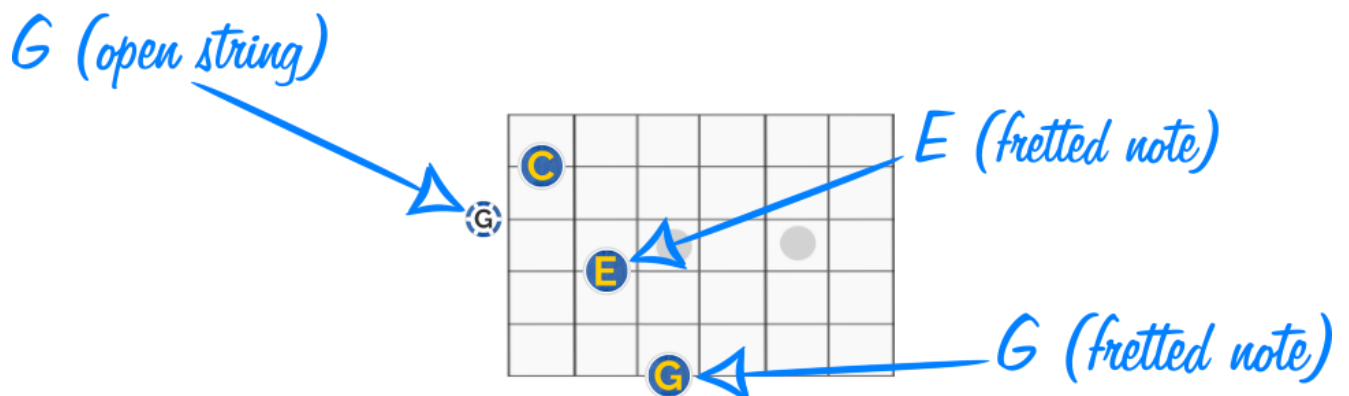
- A guitar note is a single pitch sounding from either an open or fretted string.
- Lines of single notes create melody and/or guitar scales
- Groups of notes played in unison create chords

These notes are assigned a letter value that's used to indicate pitch. That letter will always be one of the following:

A, B, C, D, E, F, G

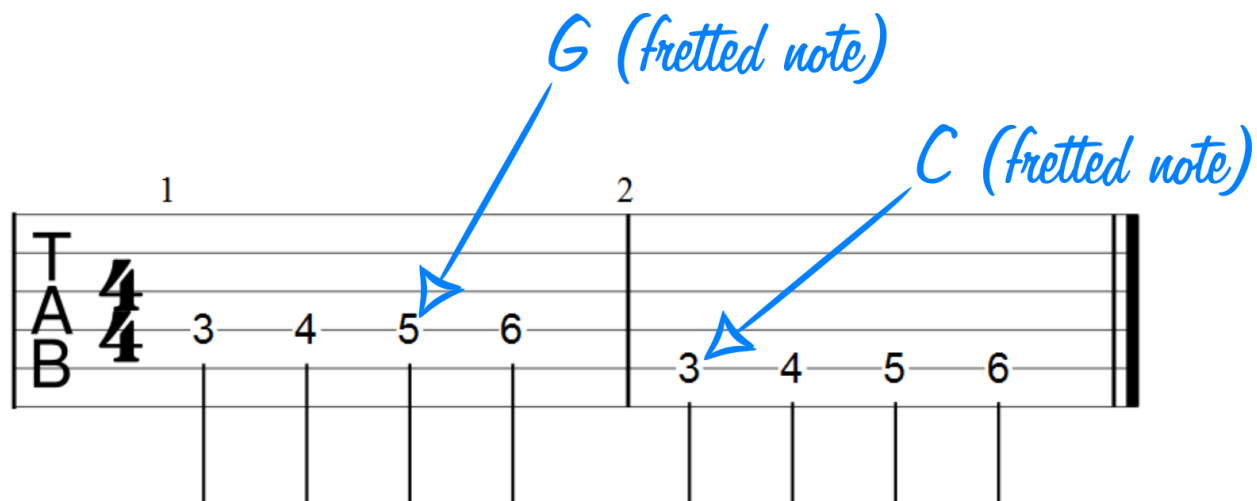
These are called natural notes, meaning they don't have any sharps or flats associated with them (more on sharps and flats later).

Here are a couple examples of how you might see notes identified in a tab or [guitar chord diagram](#):



Identifying notes in a guitar chord diagram. (View Larger Image)

And for a line of single notes (melody) in a guitar tab

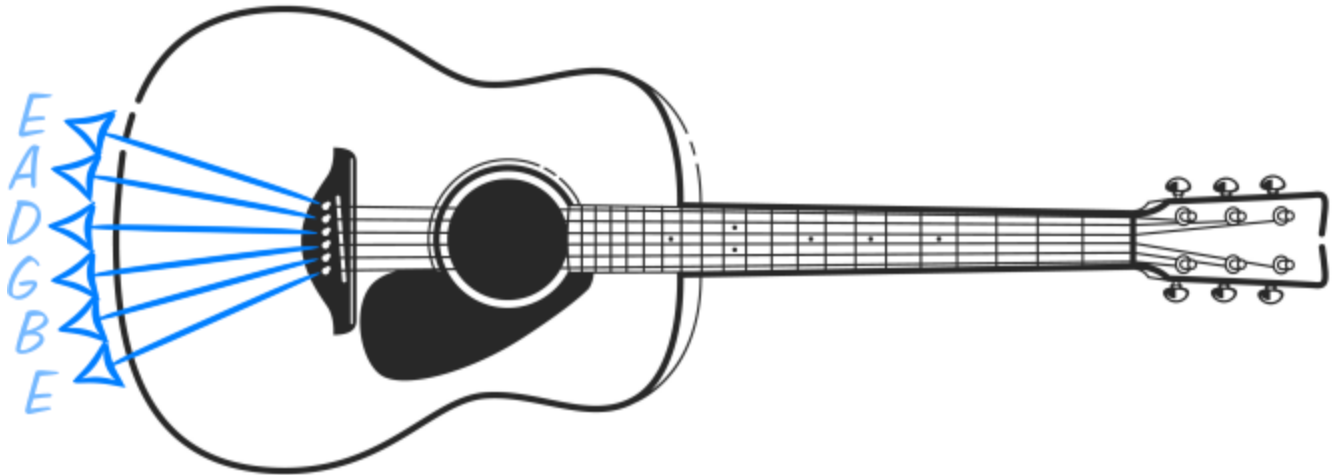


Identifying notes in a guitar tab. (View Larger Image)

Now that we've established a basic definition, we can look at guitar notes in different contexts and learn how to actually use them. We'll start with the notes for open strings in a standard tuning.

Guitar Notes for Each Open Guitar String in a Standard Tuning

In a standard tuning, each string has an "open" note value, which is the letter of the note when it's played without pressing down any frets. This pattern goes from the lowest (thickest) string, to the highest, as follows: **E - A - D - G - B - E**



Guitar notes for each string in a standard tuning. ([View Larger Image](#))

Here's how it sounds, from low to high:

Here's how the notes would look in a guitar tab and formal music sheet:

	1	2	3	4	5	6
T A B	0	0	0	0	0	0

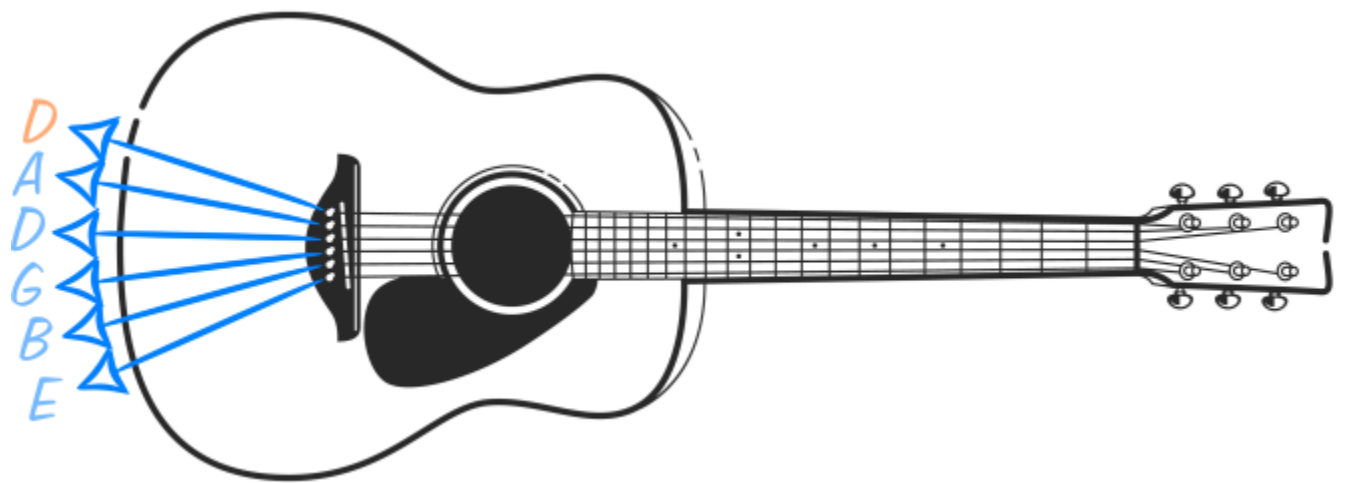
Guitar notes for open strings, left to right (low to high): E - A - D - G - B - E

([View Larger Image](#))

For those who are familiar with the term, guitar notes for the drop D tuning should also be covered.

Notes for Each Guitar String in Drop D

In the drop D tuning, which is commonly used in modern rock, the low E string is tuned down to a D note (one whole step), which then gives you the following note arrangement for your open strings:



Guitar notes for each string in drop D. ([View Larger Image](#))

In the audio sample, you can hear that the two D notes now sound the same:

The tabs and sheet music:

The image shows a musical score for guitar in drop D tuning. It consists of two staves: a standard musical staff and a guitar tablature staff. The musical staff is in 4/4 time and contains six measures, each with a single note. The notes are D (measure 1), A (measure 2), D (measure 3), G (measure 4), B (measure 5), and E (measure 6). The tablature staff shows the fret numbers for each note: 0 for D, 2 for A, 0 for D, 3 for G, 5 for B, and 7 for E. The notes are written as whole notes.

Guitar notes for open strings in the drop D tuning, left to right (low to high): D - A - D - G - B - E. ([View Larger Image](#))

Memorization Techniques

While there are acronyms you can use to memorize the open notes for the guitar, I always thought they seemed kind of childish and I personally don't like using them. Besides, it's only six notes, which doesn't take long to remember, even if you go at it head on without an aid or acronym.

You'll also notice that tuning the guitar requires you getting really familiar with these six notes, which can alone help with memorization.

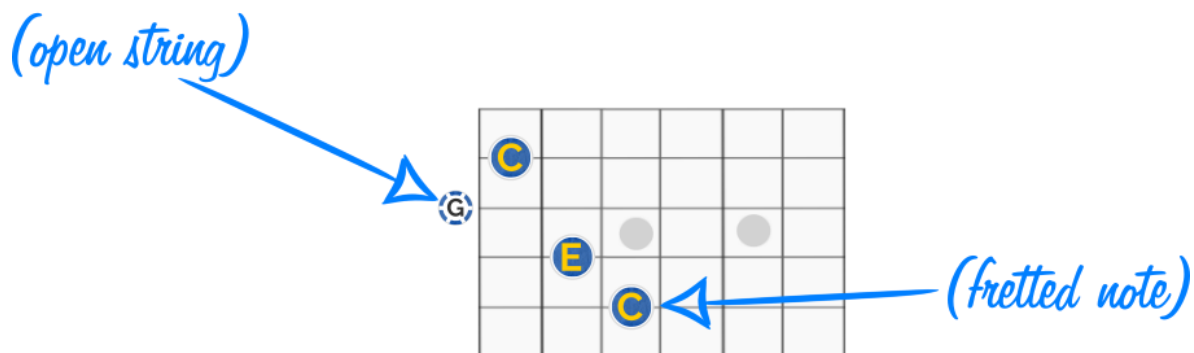
I'd recommend using [Fender's online tuner](#) to tune up and get familiar with the open notes.

Notes and Chords: How they Relate

As we've already seen, notes are a letter value of a single pitch on the guitar, which can either be an open string or a fretted note. Those single pitches can be grouped into multiple notes sounding in unison, which give us chords.

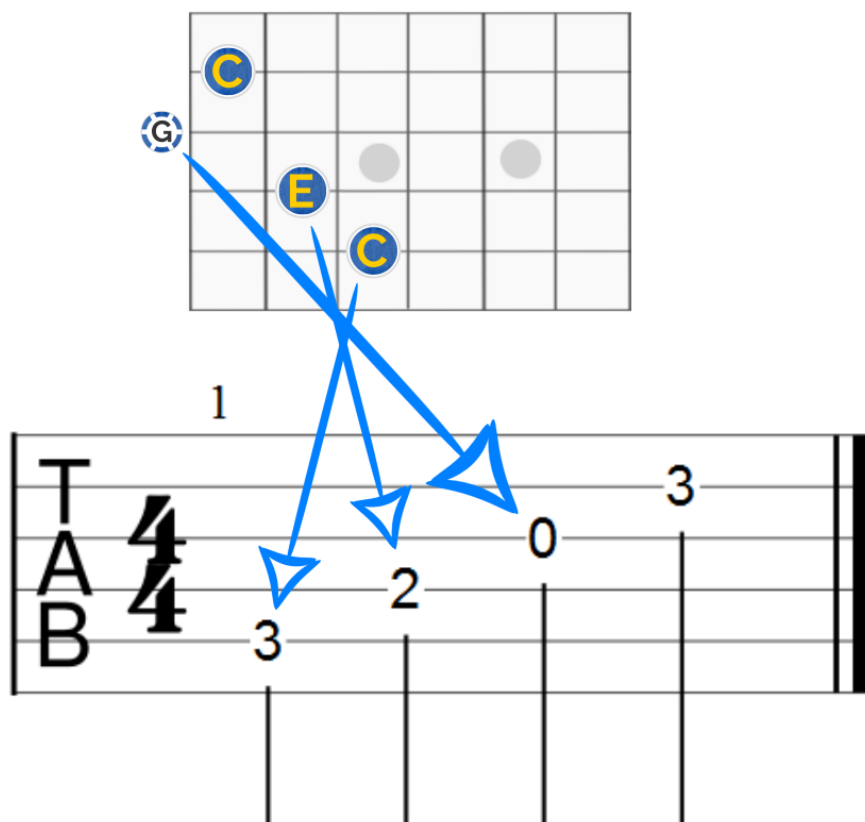
For example, the [open C major chord](#) is made up of four notes: **C - E - G - C** (octave)

Here's how those notes look in a chord diagram:



The single notes in a C chord: C - E - G - C. ([View Larger Image](#))

If we pulled these notes out of the chord and played them one at a time (this is called [an arpeggio](#)), the notes would show up in a guitar tab like this:



Notes in the C chord diagram corresponding to single notes in a tab. ([View Larger Image](#))

You can check out the following resources if you need help reading the chord or tab diagrams:

- [Guitar Chord Resource](#) (how to read chord diagrams)
- [Guitar Tab Resource](#) (how to read guitar tabs - near the end of the article)

Now that we've covered some basics about reading notes and interpreting them in both a tab and diagram, let's look at the differences between natural notes, sharps and flats.

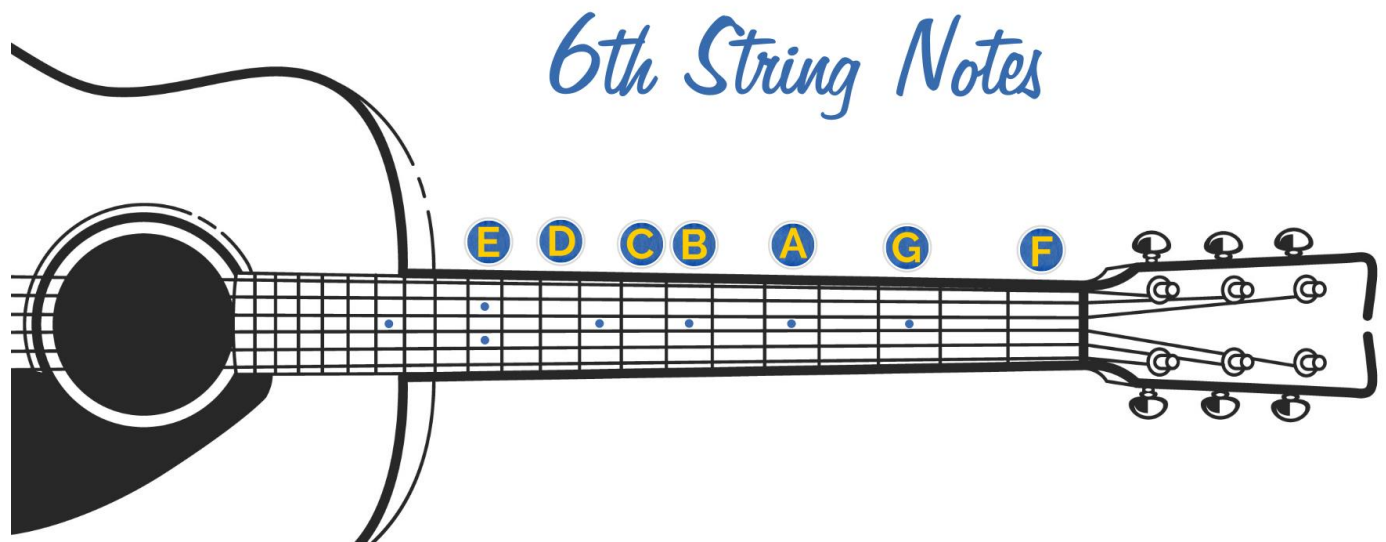
Understanding Natural Notes

As I've already mentioned, natural notes are those that do not have either a sharp or flat attached to them. This means that all natural notes will be one of the following:

A, B, C, D, E, F, G

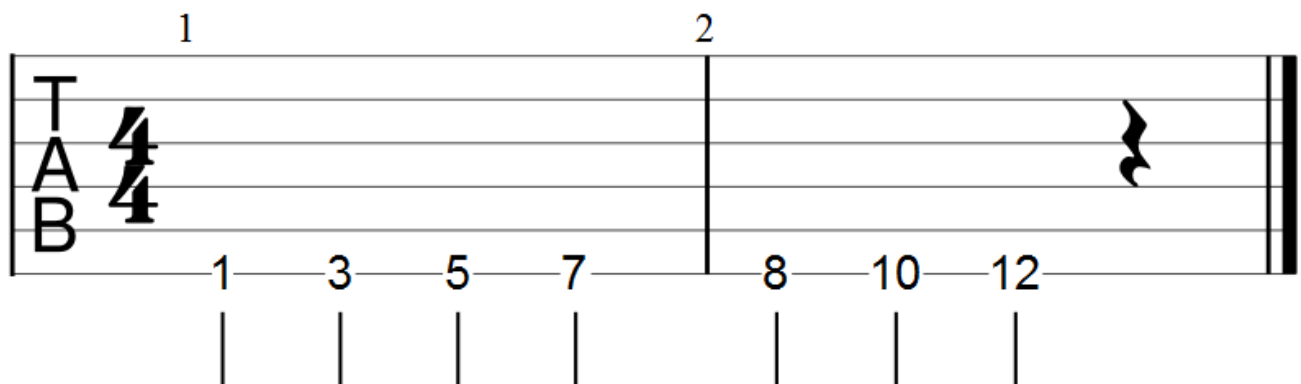
If we go back to our acoustic guitar graphic, we can use the fretboard dots to easily identify natural notes. I highly recommend you take the time to memorize these notes first, at least for the low E string.

Start with the notes on the low E string at each fret marked by a dot, plus F, C and D (located at frets that traditionally *don't* have dots), up to the 12th fret:



Notes for the sixth string based on fretboard dots. ([View Larger Image](#))

Here's how it would look on a tab sheet:



Natural notes for the sixth string in a guitar tab. ([View Larger Image](#))

And the audio:

Memorizing the position of the natural notes on the fretboard for the sixth string is an important first step, because it helps you utilize the fretboard dots and gets you familiar with many of the root notes for common chords. At that point, the fretboard dots can serve as a quick reference point for finding natural notes.

Once you've gotten familiar with the concept of natural notes, we can then place sharps and flats in relation to each natural note.

Understanding Sharps and Flats

In order to understand sharps and flats, it's helpful to first cover a quick definition of a **half step** and **whole step**:

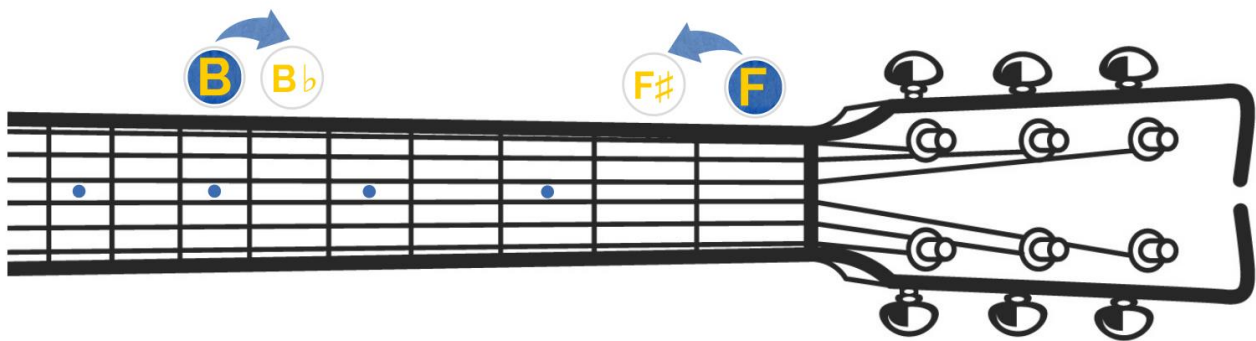
- **Half Step:** A change in pitch equaling one semitone (one fret)
- **Whole Step:** A change in pitch equaling one whole tone (two frets)

Changes in pitch are measured in half and whole step increments. Thus, you can understand sharps and flats as the following:

- **Sharp:** Change in pitch one half step higher
- **Flat:** Change in pitch one half step lower

Again, this occurs in relation to natural notes. For example, if you start with F and raise the pitch one half step, you get F#. Likewise if you're looking at B, and you lower the pitch by one half step, you get B \flat .

6th String Notes

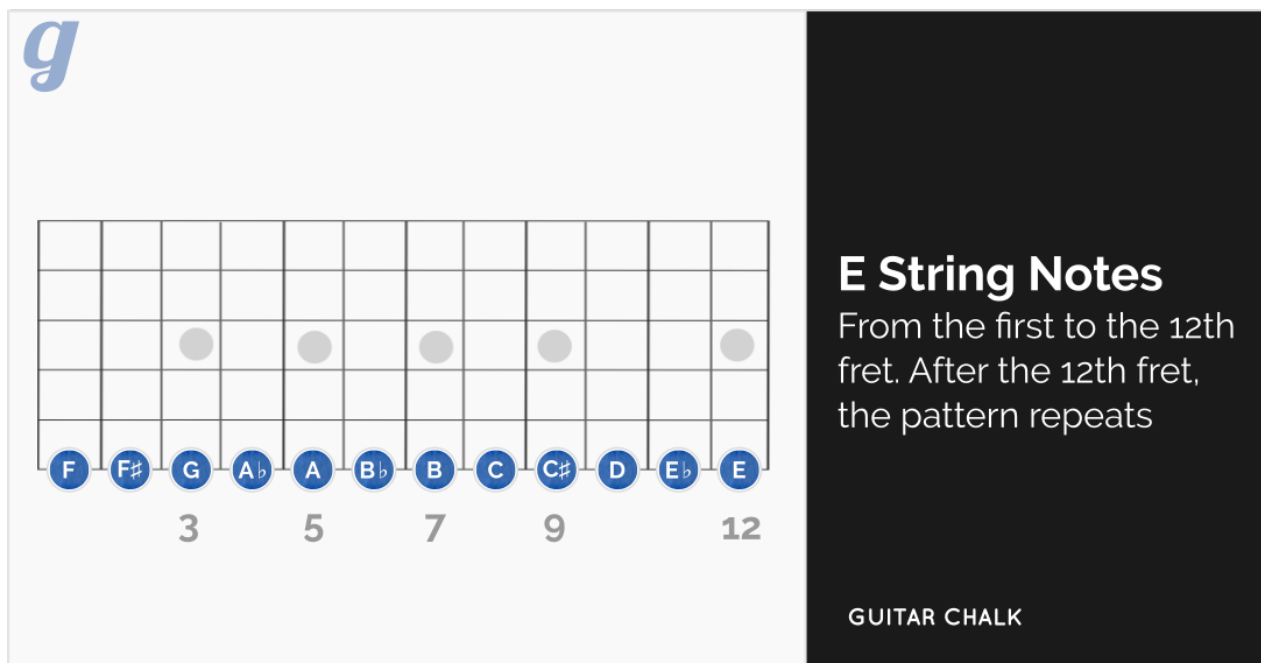


Example of a sharp and flat note on the fretboard. ([View Larger Image](#))

One question that might come up is why we wouldn't call these notes A# or Gb. The reason is that it's not theoretically correct to say that Gb and F# are the same notes. They are actually *different notes*.

It's a small, very nuanced difference that has to do with what direction you tune from.

However, on the guitar, the sharps and flats are set in stone based on fret position, meaning you've simply got to memorize it the way it is. Here's a full diagram of the notes on the sixth string, including naturals, sharps and flats:



The diagram shows a fretboard grid for the E string. The notes are: F (open), F# (1st fret), G (2nd fret), Ab (3rd fret), A (4th fret), Bb (5th fret), B (6th fret), C (7th fret), C# (8th fret), D (9th fret), Eb (10th fret), and E (11th fret). The 12th fret is marked but has no note shown, indicating the pattern repeats. A blue 'g' logo is in the top left corner.

E String Notes
From the first to the 12th fret. After the 12th fret, the pattern repeats

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All the notes for the sixth string from the first to the 12th fret. ([View Larger Image](#))

Now that we've covered the difference between natural notes, sharps and flats, we can look at diagrams and methods for note memorization of the entire fretboard. It's easier and quicker than you might think.

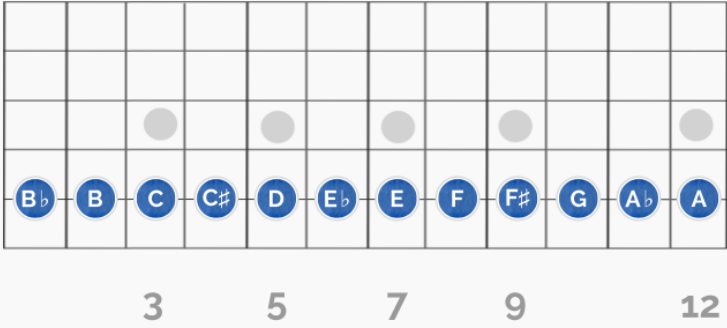
String by String Memorization

When it comes to guitar fretboard memorization, you need to take one string at a time and consider the notes at each fret up to the 12th fret, at which point the pattern repeats itself over again. Keep in mind, the pattern is the same on *each* string, but it *starts* at a different note (per our section on open string notes).

In other words, the sixth string starts with E and ascends through a pattern, while the fifth string starts at A, ascending through the same pattern.

We already covered the E string notes, so let's start this section with a diagram for the A string notes:

Memorizing the A String



The diagram shows a 12-fret section of a guitar fretboard for the A string. The notes are: B \flat (1st fret), B (2nd fret), C (3rd fret), C \sharp (4th fret), D (5th fret), E \flat (6th fret), E (7th fret), F (8th fret), F \sharp (9th fret), G (10th fret), A \flat (11th fret), and A (12th fret). The notes repeat every 12 frets. The fret numbers 3, 5, 7, 9, and 12 are labeled below the fretboard.

A String Notes
From the first to the 12th fret. After the 12th fret, the pattern repeats

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Notes for the A string on the guitar. ([View Larger Image](#))

In the above diagram it's assumed that the open string rings an A note, followed by B \flat , B, C and so on, up to the 12th fret where the pattern repeats.

Memorizing the D String

g

D String Notes
 From the first to the 12th fret. After the 12th fret, the pattern repeats

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D string notes on a guitar fretboard. ([View Larger Image](#))

We repeat the diagram for the G string:

Memorizing the G String

g

G String Notes
 From the first to the 12th fret. After the 12th fret, the pattern repeats

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G string notes on the guitar fretboard. (View Larger Image)

And the B string:

Memorizing the B String

B String Notes
 From the first to the 12th fret. After the 12th fret, the pattern repeats

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B string notes on the guitar fretboard. (View Larger Image)

We don't need another diagram for the high E string (the thinnest string) because it matches the pattern of the low E string. The two start at the same note, therefore the note-by-note increment is identical.

Conclusion

This covers all the basics of guitar notes, including the necessary music theory involved to understand them beyond basic memorization. If you take the time to understand notes, it will be far easier to then understand

chord composition, guitar scales and melody, which will make you a better guitarist and more complete musician.

Moreover, once you've memorized the fretboard notes, particularly on the low sixth and fifth strings, you'll be able to quickly recognize chord roots and bass notes.

This will help you with the following:

- Playing in a particular key
- Finding chord progressions
- Changing chords quickly

This is why I advise against beginners starting with chords and scales, which (unfortunately) many guitar lessons will instruct. Learn notes first, the building blocks of chords and scales, before moving into those topics.

It'll make the entire process much easier.

Additional Resources

- [Learning the CAGED system](#)

- [An Explanation of the Diatonic Scale for Guitar Players](#)
- [The Guitar Chalk Chords Page](#)
- [Quick Guide to Note Memorization](#)
- [Easy Guitar Tabs to Get Started With](#)

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- Guitar Tab Graphics and Audio: [Guitar Pro Software](#)