

How to Find the Best Length and Shape for Your Thumbnail

By Douglas Niedt

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Note: This article is for people with relatively normal nails. If your fingernails or thumbnail "hooks" or has any other aberrant characteristics, the advice in this technique tip may not work. In some extreme cases, you may be better off playing without a thumbnail or using an artificial nail.

Guitarists exhibit a multitude of various hand positions, thumb lengths, finger lengths, ratios of thumb length to index finger length, and playing styles. Because of this, it is difficult to come up with exact answers as to how a guitarist should shape the thumbnail and how long it should be. Each guitarist must find their own solution.

To figure out the best length and shape for your thumbnail, you must first understand the mechanics of how the *fingers* should contact the strings to get a great tone. Next, you must find the correct hand position to enable your *fingers* to contact the strings correctly. Finally, using that hand position, we can figure out the correct length and shape of the thumbnail.

If you are not familiar with the mechanics of the hand position and how the fingernails should contact the strings, this video (from my Technique Tip, *How to Produce a Beautiful Tone, Part 1 of 4*) explains how to play rest stroke. You can watch the whole thing or, focus on the time segment 2:52-7:12.



How to Produce a Good Tone on the Guitar With Rest Stroke

The next video (from my Technique Tip, *How to Produce a Beautiful Tone, Part 2 of 4*) shows how to play free stroke. Again, you can watch the whole thing or focus on the time segment 0:52-4:39.



How to Produce a Beautiful Tone Part 2: Free Stroke On the Treble Strings

Now that you understand the mechanics of fingernail contact and hand position, check out this next video (from my Technique Tip, *How to Produce a Beautiful Tone, Part 4 of 4*) on how the thumbnail should contact the string. It is important to understand this because guitarists sometimes complain that their thumbnail catches on the string if it is a certain length or shape. But oftentimes the length and shape are not the problem. The guitarist is simply not using the thumbnail correctly.



How to Produce a Good Tone Part 4 of 4 The Thumb Video #1 of 3

Now, We can Zero in on the Thumbnail Length

1. Set the hand in the correct position for the fingers to produce their best possible tone.
2. Set "i" on the 3rd string, "m" on the 2nd string, and "a" on the 1st string. Double-check to be certain the fingernails are contacting the strings correctly—left sides of the nails, flesh and nail together.
3. Then, set the thumb on the 6th string.

Without changing your hand position or moving the thumb, check to see if your thumbnail is touching the 6th string.

If the thumbnail is NOT touching the string, try one or more of the following:

1. Grow the thumbnail longer! The distance between the end of the thumbnail and the string is how much longer the thumbnail needs to be.
2. You may have the thumb positioned too far to the left. *Without changing the positioning of the fingers*, move the thumb along the string to the right. This will reduce the thumbnail length needed to contact the string.
3. Try bending the tip joint of the thumb to make your nail contact the string.
4. Use an artificial thumbnail of the correct length.

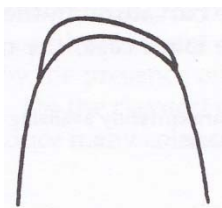
If the thumbnail IS touching the string, try either of the following:

1. Maintain the thumbnail at its current length.
2. Usually it is not a good idea to have any fingernail or the thumbnail longer than necessary. The longer the nail, the greater the chance you will break it. Experiment with shortening it as long as it still contacts the string correctly. However, even if the nail contacts the string correctly, you may experience decreased accuracy or control with a shorter nail. Go with whatever sounds and feels best.

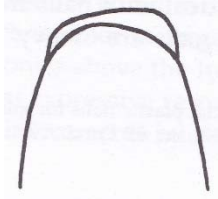
Thumbnail Shape

One of these four thumbnail shapes will usually work for most players. Looking at the thumbnail from *the string's view*:

1. A ramp, high on the left and low on the right. It can be a rather straight ramp as illustrated, or more of a gradual curve from the high point to the low point. The nail will contact the string at a point anywhere from the *center to the left side* (string's view) of the nail:



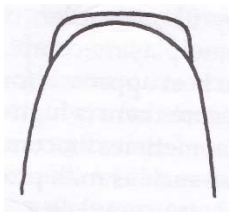
2. A ramp, low on the left and high on the right. It can be a rather straight ramp as illustrated, or more of a gradual curve from the low point to the high point. Again, the nail will contact the string at a point anywhere from the *center to the left side* (string's view) of the nail:



3. A smooth, rounded curve following the shape of the tip of the thumb. The nail will contact the string at a point anywhere from the *center to the left side* (string's view) of the nail:



4. An almost flat, straight-across shape with rounded corners. The nail will contact the string at a point anywhere from the *center to the left side* (string's view) of the nail:



It is well worth experimenting over a period of months with all four shapes to see which sounds best and works best for you in terms of comfort and control. And again, as shown in the video, the important thing to remember is:

No matter what the shape or length, the thumbnail must contact the string at a point anywhere from the center to the left side (string's view) of the nail, with the nail and flesh simultaneously. Then, the string must release smoothly off the nail.

The Thumbnail Must be a Multipurpose Tool

Fine-tune the length and shape of the thumbnail so the thumb can play flesh/nail together (the default) or all flesh with rest stroke or free stroke. However, when changing from one "tool" to another, whenever possible, minimize any change in the positioning of the fingers on their strings.

More information

For comprehensive videos on how to file your nails see my Technique Tip, [How to Shape, Sand, Finish, and Polish Your Fingernails](#).

For information on improving the health of your nails, see my Technique Tip, [Fingernail Health](#).

For information on artificial nails, see my Technique Tip, [Best Artificial Nail System Yet](#).