

The Left-Hand Thumb

By Douglas Niedt

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The Number One Concept to Remember About the Left-Hand Thumb: THE THUMB IS A PASSIVE PARTICIPANT.

Think of the thumb as a neutral participant serving only as a passive point of contact on the back of the neck. It serves to balance, guide, and support the fingers—not to squeeze against the neck to hold down the strings. The fingers, wrist, arms, and hand are the active participants. Again, do not squeeze hard between the thumb and fingers.

The thumb must be free to move. Most of the time it exerts minimal counter-pressure to the fingers. Excessive pressure limits movement and if excessive, will cause cramping in the thumb muscles. In fact, if you experience pain in the muscles between the thumb and index finger, you are doing it all wrong!

The thumb's participation ranges from zero pressure when it is lifted entirely off the neck for some shifts, some types of vibrato, and difficult stretches, to firm pressure in infrequent instances to help play extremely difficult bar chords. **Note that for most bar chords, the thumb is a passive participant exerting minimal pressure.**

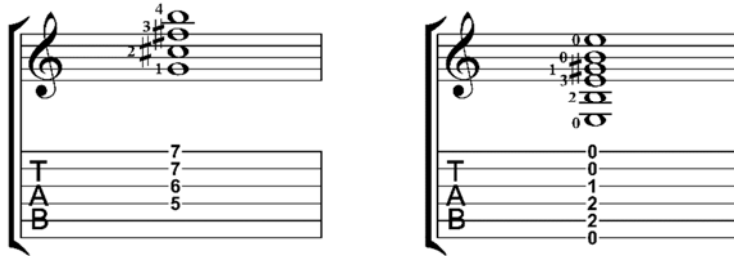
Who Needs the Thumb?

Use the force of gravity to minimize any effort the hand and thumb must make to hold down the strings. Rather than squeezing firmly between the thumb and fingers, use the weight of the left arm and hand to allow the fingers to “sink into the strings”. Instead of squeezing the strings between the thumb and fingers with brute force, *hang* on the strings to press them down. One teacher uses the image of a clothes hanger for the fingers on the fingerboard. The fingers do not press. Let the fingers' weight hang there like a clothes hanger.

IMPORTANT: The fingers can press the strings down without the thumb on the back of the neck.

Watch me demonstrate (Video #1). Here are the two chords I use in the video (Example #1).

Example #1



Video #1:



Tech Tip The Left-Hand Thumb Video #1: Holding Chords Without the Thumb

REVELATION: The left hand can hold most finger formations using only the weight of the hand and arm with a small amount of assistance from the arms pulling the guitar against the chest.

Use gravity, the weight of your hand and arm, and the abundant strength in your arms to hold the strings down. Do not engage the weak muscles in the thumb. If you do, they will become tense, fatigued, and begin to hurt.

Try playing the following basic scale (Example #2) without the thumb on the neck. Be aware, it is possible to tense up the thumb muscles even with the thumb off the neck. Wiggle it around periodically to be sure it is loose and disengaged from the rest of the hand.

Example #2

Example #2 shows a musical score for a guitar. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The scale is written in a single octave, starting on D4 (2nd fret, D string) and ending on D5 (2nd fret, D string). The notes are: D4 (2), E4 (4), F#4 (1), G4 (2), A4 (4), B4 (1), C#5 (3), D5 (4). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 in circles below the notes. The bottom staff shows the fretboard with strings T, A, B. The scale is played on the D string, with fret numbers 2, 4, 1, 2, 4, 1, 3, 2 written below the string line.

Play the scale *without* the thumb on the neck. Then, play it *with* the thumb on the neck. Alternate both ways several times. If you are using the weight of the hand and arm, allowing the fingers to sink into the strings by “hanging” on the strings, you should feel very little difference between having the thumb on the neck or not having the thumb on the neck.

Now, extend the scale to include a shift (Segovia’s two-octave major scale) and play ascending and descending (Example #3):

Example #3

Example #3 shows a musical score for a guitar, consisting of two systems. The top system is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The scale is written in a single octave, starting on D4 (2nd fret, D string) and ending on D5 (2nd fret, D string). The notes are: D4 (2), E4 (4), F#4 (1), G4 (2), A4 (4), B4 (1), C#5 (3), D5 (4). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 in circles below the notes. The bottom system shows the fretboard with strings T, A, B. The scale is played on the D string, with fret numbers 2, 4, 1, 2, 4, 1, 3, 2 written below the string line. The second system shows the scale extended to two octaves, starting on D4 (2nd fret, D string) and ending on D6 (2nd fret, D string). The notes are: D4 (2), E4 (4), F#4 (1), G4 (2), A4 (4), B4 (1), C#5 (3), D5 (4), D5 (2), E5 (4), F#5 (1), G5 (2), A5 (4), B5 (1), C#6 (3), D6 (4). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 in circles below the notes. The bottom system shows the fretboard with strings T, A, B. The scale is played on the D string, with fret numbers 2, 4, 1, 2, 4, 1, 3, 2, 2, 4, 1, 2, 4, 1, 3, 2 written below the string line.

Again, play the entire scale without the thumb on the neck. Then do it again with the thumb on the neck. Alternate both methods. You should feel very little difference between the two.

Watch me demonstrate in Video #2:



Tech Tip The Left-Hand Thumb Video #2: Playing a Scale without the Thumb on the Neck

These are great exercises to teach your hand that the thumb is a passive participant. Granted, you will probably be more comfortable playing with the thumb *on* the neck, but only because the thumb serves as a stabilizer and point of contact, not because it “chokes” the string by squeezing against the neck.

Try the opening measures of *Leyenda* by Isaac Albéniz (Example #4) without the thumb on the neck:

Example #4

The musical notation for Example #4 consists of a single staff with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The melody is written on a single staff with fingerings (1-5) indicated above the notes. Below the staff are three lines for guitar strings: Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B). The bass line shows fret numbers (0, 7, 9, 10) and bar lines. The notation is divided into two systems, each with two measures.

Again, wiggle the thumb around as you play. Be certain it does not tense up and remains disengaged from the hand.

Try playing a few passages from pieces you play or are learning without the thumb on the neck.

Important: I am not saying you should always play without the thumb on the neck. These are just exercises to teach your body to use gravity and your arm muscles to hold notes and chords, instead of using the muscles in the thumb. Dependence on the weak muscles in the thumb leads to tension, fatigue, and pain.

The role of the thumb in bar chords

The thumb serves as a passive participant even on bar chords. Use the weight of the hand and arm and gravity to provide the first level of pressure on the strings. Then, use both arms and lightly pull the guitar against your chest to provide any additional strength required to play a bar chord clearly. On bar chords, the thumb serves primarily as a stabilizer and point of contact. The thumb will only be engaged on *extremely* difficult bar chords.

As a training exercise, bar chords can also be played without the thumb on the neck. Try this: hold this B major bar chord at the 7th fret (Example #5). Place the 3rd finger first. Then the 4th finger. Next, the 2nd finger. PLACE THE BAR LAST.

Example #5

Place the bar last



Take the thumb off the neck. You will tend to tense the thumb even when it is off the neck. Wiggle it around to keep it loose. Keep the thumb off the neck, and using both arms, pull the guitar lightly against your chest to play the chord clearly. Be sure to keep the rear joint of the bar finger raised. Let me show you in Video #3.



Tech Tip The Left-Hand Thumb Video #3: Playing a Bar Chord without the Thumb on the Neck

Most bar chords can be played clearly with the addition of a minimal amount of arm strength. Extremely difficult bar chords will require substantial assistance from the arms and may even require additional pressure from the thumb.

If you have some pieces in your repertoire that seem to be “hand killers” that fatigue or tax the hand, try practicing them with the thumb off the neck to train your arms to handle more of the load. Be sure to keep the thumb loose throughout the piece.

For more detailed information on playing bar chords, read my technique tip [The Secret \("Little Jennifer's Secret"\) of How to Play Clear Bar Chords](#).

Changing volume

The amount of pressure on the strings will vary with the volume of sound you wish to produce. When you play quietly, you can apply minimal pressure to the strings without string buzzes. But louder volumes require more pressure to avoid buzzing. One characteristic of a relaxed left hand is the application of the minimum amount of pressure required to produce clear notes. The application of extra pressure causes fatigue and a very tense left hand. Fatigue and tenseness lead to lots of wrong notes and loss of ability to play fast. Once again, do not clamp the neck between the thumb and fingers. Use the weight of the hand and arm with gravity to hold the strings down. Any additional required pressure should be provided by pulling with the arms, not squeezing with the thumb.

The role of the thumb in vibrato

There is disagreement about the position of the thumb during vibrato. In *A Conscious Approach to Guitar Technique*, Joseph Urshalmi tells us,

"The thumb has only to touch the back of the fingerboard without any pressure. Practising vibrato with the thumb in the air provokes tension in other places, such as the forearm, palm and fingers, particularly in chords with vibrato. From the beginning, therefore, one must involve the thumb in the process."

On the other hand, in his *School of Guitar*, Abel Carlevaro tells us,

"The thumb should be released from the back of the neck. Through this action the arm is able to apply direct pressure onto the fingerboard via the finger and without any opposition from the thumb." However, if several fingers are involved executing a chord with longitudinal vibrato, Carlevaro says it *"may necessitate the added opposition of the thumb, which in this case should remain in contact with the neck in order to combine its own force with that of the fingers."*

In an Oscar Ghiglia master class many years ago, I remember the maestro saying:

- To play light vibrato, leave the thumb stationary on the neck.
- For medium vibrato, keep the thumb on the neck but let it slide left and right on the neck.
- For heavy vibrato, take the thumb entirely off the neck.

I find I can get a very heavy vibrato with the thumb resting lightly on the neck with little pressure. I agree with Urshalmi that removing the thumb from the neck invites a lot of forearm tension. But experiment. Test the different thumb techniques for yourself and observe the results in both sound and ease of playing. For additional information, see my technique tip: [Whole Lot of Shakin' Goin' On: Vibrato Part 1](#).

The role of the thumb in stretches

Sometimes, difficult stretches are easier to reach with the thumb off the neck. For example, in the *Mazurka Apassionata* by Agustín Barrios Mangoré (Example #6), we have this difficult stretch in m21:

Example #6

Mazurka Apassionata (Agustín Barrios Mangoré) measures 20-21

X^③ -----

	Measure 20	Measure 21
T	10 10	17 15
A	12 12	10 10
B	0 11	0 12

For me, taking the thumb off the neck makes it much easier to play the measure. When you are faced with a difficult stretch, try playing it with the thumb on the neck and off the neck. Use the technique that works best for you.

The role of the thumb in shifting

Avoid any tendency you might have to increase the thumb pressure on the neck while shifting. In fact, as the shift is executed, the thumb should maintain zero pressure on the neck or should even lift off the neck. Some teachers describe lifting the thumb off the neck as *disconnecting* the thumb from the neck.

On descending shifts, the thumb will usually disconnect from the neck (lifting slightly, from a few millimeters to a centimeter) for anywhere from a few milliseconds to one or two seconds. Watch me (Video #4). Here is the example I am playing (Example #7):

Example #7

Example #7 musical notation and tablature. The notation is on a treble clef staff in 4/4 time. The notes are G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), and C4 (half). A circled 2 is above the first measure. The tablature below the staff shows the thumb (T) fretting 10, 8, 7, 5, and 3.

Video #4:



Tech Tip The Left-Hand Thumb Video #4: Descending Shifts without the Thumb on the Neck

On ascending shifts, the thumb maintains zero pressure on the neck. Because gravity is working with the hand and arm (the hand is moving toward the ground on an ascending shift), it is unnecessary for the thumb to disconnect from the neck as frequently as on descending shifts.

Be sure that the thumb moves with the hand. On ascending shifts, don't allow it to drag and end up positioned to the left of the 1st finger upon arriving at the new position. It should maintain its position in the range opposite the 1st to 2nd fingers. Watch me demonstrate in Video #5.



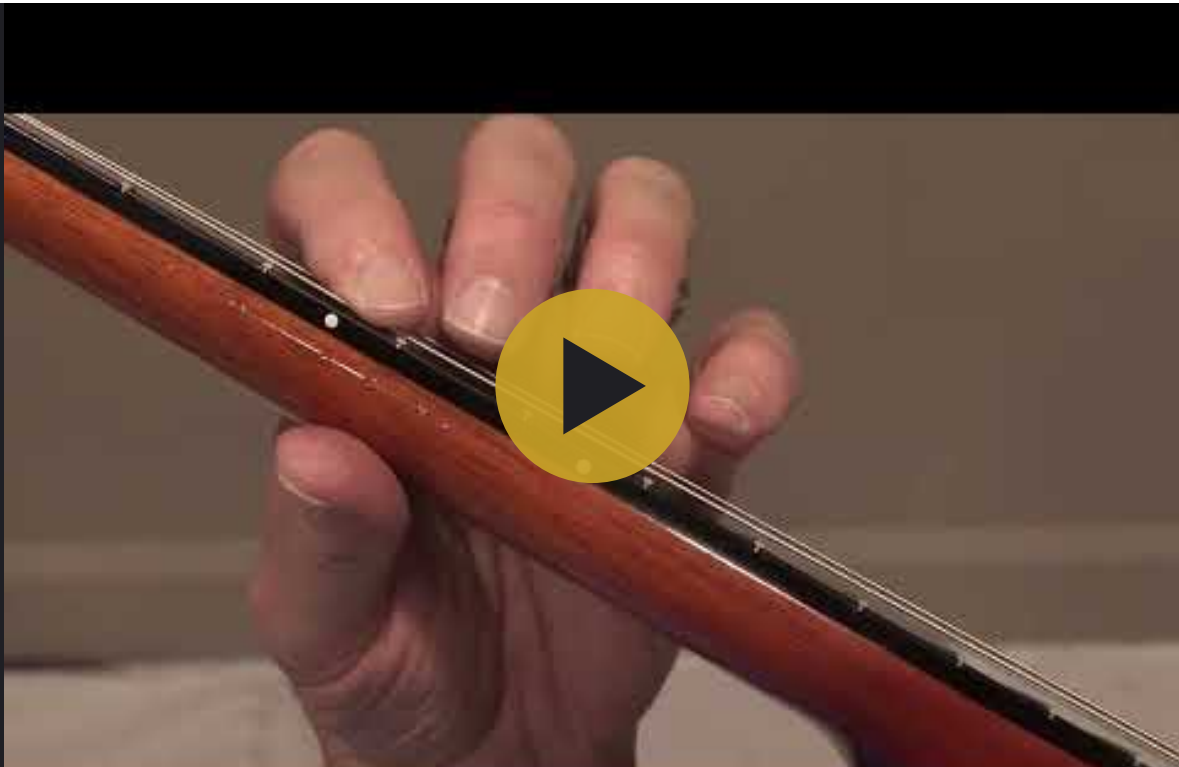
Tech Tip The Left-Hand Thumb Video #5: Ascending Shifts Thumb Moves with the Hand

On transversal shifts (moving across the fretboard rather than up and down the neck) the thumb moves with the fingers. Watch me demonstrate (Video #6) how this works using Example #8:

Example #8

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a guitar exercise. Each system consists of a standard musical staff in treble clef and a corresponding guitar tablature staff below it. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The exercise is composed of six measures, each demonstrating a transversal shift. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 above the notes. The tablature shows fret numbers 5, 6, 7, and 8. Circled numbers 1 through 6 are placed above the notes in each measure to indicate the sequence of shifts. In the first system, the shifts move from higher frets (5-8) to lower ones (4-7, 3-6, 2-5, 1-4). In the second system, the shifts move from lower frets (1-4) to higher ones (2-5, 3-6, 4-7, 5-8).

Video #6:



Tech Tip The Left-Hand Thumb Video #6: The Thumb in Transversal Shifts

Disconnecting the thumb for relief of hand tension under conditions of high-stress

Occasionally, especially in a stressful performance, circumstances cause a player to unconsciously play with too much left-hand tension. The player may not even be aware of it until it suddenly builds up to a critical point of imminent loss of control or the sudden onset of hand or thumb pain. Immediately disconnecting the thumb from the neck will usually halt the pain and dissipate excess tension.

Back to the Basics: Thumb Position

The position of the thumb in relation to the other fingers changes constantly. It is not a fixed position. For example, watch Video #7 as I play a passage from *Spanish Dance No. 5* by Enrique Granados.



Tech Tip The Left-Hand Thumb Video #7: The Thumb in Spanish Dance No. 5 (Granados)

BEST PRACTICES

Although the position of the thumb will change constantly, here are a few best practices to observe.

1. Keep the thumb behind the neck. The neck of the classical guitar is wide. It is possible to play elementary chord formations and simple passages with the thumb wrapped around the neck. But it is impossible to keep the fingers spread apart and reach the bass strings or play bar chords unless the

thumb is behind the neck. Classical guitar music consists of a mix of bar chords and other formations where the thumb *must* be near the center of the neck. We do not want to make constant radical changes of the thumb and hand position to play a song. Therefore, always keep the thumb behind the neck. This will make it possible to play almost any finger formation without having to make major changes of the thumb and hand position. This will greatly increase the precision and accuracy of your left-hand.

2. Keep the thumb more or less perpendicular to the neck. Depending on the finger formation being held, the thumb will usually be placed within the range of 60-90 degrees to the neck.

3. Don't bend the tip joint. Allow the tip joint to collapse. In other words, bend the tip segment of the thumb away from the palm of the hand.

4. Contact with the neck is made on the pad of the thumb. Sometimes contact will be made on the flat part of the pad but more often on the left side of the pad.

5. It is most common to keep the thumb between the first and second fingers. But placement will vary. Depending on the finger formation being held, it may fall to the left of the 1st finger, opposite the 1st finger, or opposite the 2nd finger. *In general, for a given finger formation, it is best to experiment to find the exact balance point to place the thumb that supports the fingers in the strongest and most effortless way.*

Watch me demonstrate these five thumb positioning basics in Video #8.



Tech Tip The Left-Hand Thumb Video #8: Basics of the Left-Hand Thumb Position

Although it is important to remember the above general principles, it is probably best not to actively think about the positioning of the thumb while you are playing. Let it make its own changes of position naturally.

Playing at the 12th fret and above

The position of the left-hand thumb when playing in the upper regions of the fretboard past the 12th fret will be very different from how it is positioned when playing below the 12th fret. There are two primary positions of the thumb in the upper regions of the fretboard. The choice of which position to use is for the most part dependent on whether the fingers will be in the parallel-with-the-frets position or in the slanted position. Aside from that broad generalization, exactly how the thumb is positioned depends greatly upon the passage being played, the size of the player's hand, and length of the fingers.

BE CERTAIN THE THUMB IS IN CONTACT WITH SOME PART OF THE GUITAR ALWAYS! Never play with the thumb dangling in midair. See my technique tip, [Conquering Guitar Acrophobia: Playing in High Positions Past the 12 Fret](#) for more information. Here is a video from that tip in which I demonstrate the position of the thumb when playing passages past the 12th fret:



Tech Tip The Left-Hand Thumb Video #9: The Thumb Position Past the 12th Fret

Summary

- The thumb is a passive participant. This concept must be absorbed into your playing until it is second nature.
- The thumb is frequently disengaged or disconnected from the neck. This occurs when playing descending shifts, vibrato, difficult stretches, and under conditions of high hand stress.
- The thumb is a passive participant even on bar chords.
- Positioning the thumb should not require ongoing, conscious thought. Once you understand the basics of thumb positioning, allow the thumb to position itself naturally.