

Secrets to an Effortless, Relaxed Left-Hand Technique, Part 2

KEEP YOUR HANDS IN SHAPE

You don't need enormous strength, but it is helpful to have more than is needed for any task. The knowledge that you have a deep reservoir of strength beyond what will be needed gives you a strong psychological advantage and confidence. That alone, will help you relax physically and mentally. One of the best ways to keep your hands in shape is to maintain a repertoire and play through it regularly. See this technique tip: [How to Maintain Pieces in Your Repertoire](#).

This brings up the topic of how much strength does it really take to play the guitar. Well, it doesn't take a lot of hand strength. It requires efficient use of the entire body, but especially the shoulders, arms, and hands.

I'm sure you have seen videos of young children who play remarkably well. Obviously, they do not have much hand strength. What they have been taught or have intuitively learned is to rely on their arm strength to hold bar chords and play other difficult passages. They do not rely on squeezing between the thumb and fingers.

See the section above (and the video) titled, "USE THE CORRECT BALANCE BETWEEN USING THE THUMB, PULLING WITH ARMS, AND ARM WEIGHT".

Also, have a look at my technique tip, [Bar Chords, The Secret \("Little Jennifer's Secret"\) of How to Play Clear Bar Chords](#).

CONDITION OF THE GUITAR

A guitar that is not suited for you or that is in poor playing condition will contribute immensely to generating dysfunctional tension in your left hand.

1. Be sure the scale length of the guitar, width of the fretboard, and even the neck shape is suitable for your hands. Switching to a guitar with a shorter scale length or narrower fretboard can do wonders to eliminate excess tension and even pain in your left hand. Neck shape can also be a factor.
2. Be sure the action of the guitar is as low as possible for your playing style. Even lowering the saddle and/or nut one millimeter will make a huge difference. You will immediately notice the guitar is much easier to play.
3. Strings. Keep fresh strings on the guitar. Old strings (especially the wound strings) are harder to press down than new strings. Experiment with different string tensions. Everyone's guitar and playing style (range of dynamics, techniques used, type of music played, touch, etc.) is different and both respond differently to different string brands and tensions. Also note there is not a universal standard of string tension between manufacturers. A "medium tension" string set from one manufacturer may be

equivalent to the "high tension" string set from another manufacturer. You must test out many to find one that suits you best.

PLAY MUSIC THAT ALIGNS WITH YOUR ABILITIES

In many cases, playing pieces that are simply too difficult for your current capabilities is a large contributor to dysfunctional tension. If the left hand is constantly struggling, it will be difficult to train it to play efficiently.

Practicing pieces that are too difficult for you will *train your left hand to maintain a habit of tension*. That's the last thing you want to do.

Choose your pieces carefully. For example,

1. If you are not very good at playing bars or have just begun learning them, don't choose a piece with lots of bar chords!
2. If your hands are small or stiff, don't choose a piece with lots of difficult stretches.

In fact, it can be very helpful to play very easy pieces every day, so you can learn and recognize what it feels like to play efficiently with minimal effort. *Develop the habit of using minimal effort*.

BASIC GUITAR TECHNIQUE

- 1. Place the fingers close to the fret wire.** The further the fingertip is from the fret wire, the harder you must press down to get a buzz-less clear note.
- 2. Use good fingering.** Using fingerings that require the fingers to jump from string to string not only cause mistakes, but when done over and over, generate tension. Example #11.

Example #11. m21-24, *Siciliana* (Ferdinand Carulli)

Bad fingering can require fingers to jump from string to string. That causes dysfunctional tension.

Finger jumps Finger jumps Finger jump Finger jump

Good fingering with no finger jumps. This is functional tension.

Pull 3rd finger into position above 1st string to prepare to play F. Functional tension.

Contract 3 and 4 into hand to prepare them above 3rd fret for the F and D. Functional tension.

Squeeze 2 and 3 into 2nd fret. Functional tension.

3. Do not press down the strings excessively hard in loud passages. Yes, to avoid buzzes, you must press a little harder when you play loud or play a strongly-strummed chord. But some players use too much pressure. Remember, use no more effort than is needed to do a required job.

4. Shift technique. Shifts require physical effort, but **only for the microsecond it takes to execute the shift**. Do not tense up the playing mechanism in anticipation of the shift. And be sure to **immediately release the tension once the shift is completed**.

5. Use the weight of the arm to press down the strings. This technique is highly recommended by many teachers. And yes, it is the most efficient method to press down the strings in uncomplicated passages. Unfortunately, some erroneously say that arm weight alone is sufficient for the execution of any passage by the left hand.

In the real world, using only the weight of the arm for holding notes, intervals, and chords will not work. If you have fat arms or very muscular and therefore heavy arms, yes, arm weight will work well in many cases. But what about children and women? Arm weight is not as much of a factor for them in efficient playing.

For all players, the use of *arm pull* is far more important and efficient in the execution of bar chords and difficult passages that require substantial force to hold down the strings.

See the section above (and the video) titled, "USE THE CORRECT BALANCE BETWEEN USING THE THUMB, PULLING WITH ARMS, AND ARM WEIGHT".

6. Use a good sitting position. A bad sitting position causes tension in other parts of the body which can distract you from awareness of tension in your left hand. Tension in other body parts can also transfer directly to the left hand.

As an example, be a muscleman. Show off your biceps.



Notice that your hands involuntarily clench into a fist when the biceps are tensed. Similar reactions are caused in the hand and fingers when countless other muscles are involuntarily tensed.

Several times in this article, I mention using the weight of the arm to hold down the strings to produce clear notes. As you experiment to find your ideal sitting position, keep in mind as I demonstrated in Video #7, there is a slight mechanical advantage to leaning the guitar back rather than vertically to maximize the efficiency of using arm weight.

7. Thumb technique. Problem: the thumb becomes fatigued, tense, and at times perhaps hurts. Not only is this very bad for the thumb, but that excessive tension transfers into the left hand and fingers.

Solution: Practice without the thumb on the neck. Yes, your forearms and shoulders will experience increased tension, but that's the idea. They are far better able to handle the load than the thumb. The goal is to remove excessive tension from the thumb.

Play chords or passages with the thumb off the neck, and feel how the weight of the arm can often do most of the work to hold down the strings. Add arm pull as needed to eliminate buzzing. Then, put the thumb back on the neck but do not apply pressure. Notice how the thumb is there to only balance and stabilize the hand.

Play the chord or passage several times, thumb on the neck, thumb off the neck.

Again, notice how the thumb is a mostly passive participant. If needed, you can add thumb pressure for very difficult chords or passages. If you need to reduce the amount of arm pressure required, you can

add thumb pressure. **But for difficult chords and passages, the greatest percentage of force should always be applied by arm pull.** Arm weight is often insufficient to do the job, and the thumb becomes fatigued very easily. Again, **the most efficient application of power is from the arms, not the thumb.**

See the section above (and the video) titled, "USE THE CORRECT BALANCE BETWEEN USING THE THUMB, PULLING WITH ARMS, AND ARM WEIGHT".

8. Hand position. Use the correct hand position for a given passage. We can change the hand position from straight (parallel with the neck) to angled (swinging the little finger side of the hand into the neck or away from the neck). One position may feel more comfortable than another, but that is usually not what matters. What matters is to choose the position that minimizes finger and hand effort.

9. Elbow position. This relates to hand position because the position of the elbow will often change the position of the hand. As mentioned earlier, everyone's hands, arms, and musculature are different, so these recommendations may or not work for you.

The elbow position will frequently change, sometimes even within one phrase. However, winging the elbow out when it is not necessary will add unneeded tension to the forearm and shoulder.

In general, allowing the elbow to hang freely helps to reduce unnecessary tension in the arm and allows the efficient use of arm weight to help hold down the strings.

Winging the elbow out reduces the efficiency of using arm weight and instead requires one to engage the use of arm pull and perhaps some thumb pressure instead. But winging out is often necessary to optimize the position the left hand for many chord formations and changes.

10. Minimize finger pressure. The "Thud to Buzz to Clear Exercise" is often recommended to develop a player's sensitivity to the amount of finger pressure needed to press down the strings.

You will see variations of this exercise in many discussions of minimizing excess finger tension. Personally, I have never used it, either for myself or my students. It seems to me to be one of those hundreds of exercises where the skill that was learned in the exercise, while valuable, does not transfer easily or automatically to the real world of playing pieces.

The goal is to teach the fingers to use the minimum amount of effort needed to hold the strings down. While the exercise itself focuses on single notes, it is meant to transfer to playing intervals and chords as well.

Watch me demonstrate the "Thud to Buzz to Clear" exercise in Video 9. Be sure to watch on full screen.



Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #9: The Thud-Buzz-Clear Exercise

BAR CHORD TECHNIQUE

Bar chords are often a major cause of dysfunctional tension. Some pieces, such as J.S. Bach's *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring* (as played by Christopher Parkening) and the *Schottish-Choro* by Heitor Villa-Lobos use a very large number of bars. If a player's bar technique is not optimized for efficiency, they will not be able to get through the pieces without cramping, pain, or extreme hand fatigue.

1. Use partial bars instead of full bars. For instance, in *Study No. 3, op. 60* by Matteo Carcassi, a partial bar may be used in measure #7 instead of a flat 5 or 6-string bar. Example #12.

Example #12. m6-8, Study #3, op. 60 (Matteo Carcassi)

A partial bar in this measure requires far less power than a conventional flat bar.

Partial Bar of ⑤ ④ ③ only.

A conventional flat bar requires a lot of force to play the chords clearly. It is not very efficient.



Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #10: Efficient Partial Bar Study No. 3 (Carcassi)

Another good example of using partial bars to lessen hand tension and improve efficiency is found in *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* by Francisco Tárrega. Example #13.

Watch me demonstrate the partial bar technique in the following passage from *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* in Video 11. Be sure to watch on full screen.