

Secrets to an Effortless and Relaxed Left Hand, Parts 1 and 2

By Douglas Niedt

SECRETS TO AN EFFORTLESS, RELAXED LEFT-HAND CLASSICAL GUITAR TECHNIQUE Part 1 of 2

By Douglas Niedt

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Are you searching for the secrets to playing with a relaxed left hand?
THERE AREN'T ANY! THERE IS NO SUCH THING.

THE BEST PLAYERS DO NOT PLAY WITH A RELAXED LEFT HAND. They have EFFICIENT left-hand techniques that use only the effort needed to execute a passage of music.

The goal is to apply minimal effort for maximum efficiency.

Note: "Left hand" in this article comprises left hand, left-hand fingers, left forearm, and left shoulder.

You are Totally Relaxed Only When You Are Unconscious!

Playing the guitar while unconscious just will not work. And, sorry to break this news to you, but playing any instrument is NOT a relaxing activity. Playing the guitar requires constant muscular effort and tension, sometimes quite a bit of it.

Even in piano pedagogy, which is far more developed than that for the guitar, relaxation theories (now discredited) used to be very popular. The problem is that the teachers had it backwards. They thought relaxation led to efficient, effortless playing. In reality, it is the application of the correct types of movement and tension that leads to what appears to be relaxed, effortless ("He makes it look so easy") playing.

This may seem like I am splitting hairs, but the bottom line is that if you try to follow a teacher's instruction to relax or tell yourself, "Relax darn it", you will not get good results.

You must train your hand to make efficient movements with minimal effort which *results* in what feels to you (and looks to others) to be a relaxed hand. Only then, will you begin to "make it look easy".

Functional and Dysfunctional Tension

The trick is to use only *functional tension* (tension which is helpful to accomplishing a task) and *eliminate dysfunctional tension* (tension that does not help and sometimes hinders accomplishing the task). Broadly speaking, using functional tension is using good technique!

Common Examples

1. **Squeezing *lightly* between the thumb and fingertips can be functional tension.** It can help to play a fretted note. Excessive squeezing is dysfunctional tension.
2. **Leaving a finger down as a pivot finger or as preparation for a shift is functional tension.** Leaving a finger down as you place another finger on a higher fret on the same string is dysfunctional tension. Example #1.

Example #1. m11-12, *Leyenda (Asturias)* by Isaac Albéniz

11

⑥ ⑤ ④

Leave 1st and 2nd fingers down on 4th string. Bad. Dysfunctional tension.

Leave 1st finger on string for no reason. Bad. Dysfunctional tension.

Lift 1 as you place 2. Lift 2 as you place 4. Good. Releases tension.

Leave 1st finger on string for upcoming shift. Good. Functional tension.

T 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

A 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

B 7 9 7 9 10 12 9 10 7 9 10 9

Watch me demonstrate. Video 1. Be sure to watch full screen.

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #1: Lifting Fingers



Sometimes you may think it is easier to leave a left-hand finger down. But doing so usually leads to choppy playing or creates problems with shifts. Lift the finger. Then prepare the finger for what is coming next. Just because it is an easy C chord, D chord, G chord or whatever, does not mean you want to put all the fingers of the chord down. Only place the fingers you absolutely need. Example #2.

Example #2. m4-6, *Un Dia de Noviembre* (Leo Brouwer)

Leave 2nd finger down.
Hop from 4th to 5th string
produces choppy change to beat #3.
Bad. Dysfunctional tension.

Lift 2nd finger here.

Releases tension and allows
2nd finger to prepare above
the 5th string for a very
smooth change to beat #3.

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #2: Lifting Fingers on *Un Dia de Noviembre* (Brouwer)

No 4th-string E here

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #2: Lifting Fingers on *Un Dia de Noviembre* (Brouwer)

3. Placing an entire chord at the very beginning of a piece or section is functional tension. Placing an entire chord during the piece when it is not needed is dysfunctional tension. Example #3.

Example #3. *Prélude No. 1* (Heitor Villa-Lobos)

Più mosso

Place each finger sequentially as needed.
Tension and effort will be reduced.

Place 2 Place 3 Place 1

Plant the chord before beginning.

Placing the entire E-major chord here is dysfunctional tension.

Watch me demonstrate these techniques in Video 3. Be sure to watch full screen.

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #3: Planting on Prelude No. 1 (Villa-Lobos)

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Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #3: Planting on Prelude No. 1 (Villa-Lobos)

4. In arpeggio passages, placing the fingers one-at-a-time as they are needed is functional tension. Placing the fingers of an entire chord simultaneously is dysfunctional tension. Example #4.

Example #4. Prelude No. 1, from the Well-Tempered Clavier (J.S. Bach)

1

Place each finger sequentially as needed.
Tension and effort will be reduced.

Place 2 Place 4 Place 1

Placing the entire Dm/C chord here is dysfunctional tension.

2

Place each finger sequentially as needed.
Tension and effort will be reduced.

Place 3 Place 2 Place 1

Placing the entire C chord here is dysfunctional tension.

Watch me demonstrate the correct way for the left hand to play most arpeggios. Video 4.
Be sure to watch full screen.

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #4: Placing Fingers Sequentially Prelude in C Major (Bach)

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #4: Placing Fingers Sequentially Prelude in C Major (Bach)

5. Preparing fingers by extending them is functional tension. Keeping fingers relatively relaxed will often lead to dysfunctional tension when you must execute a chord change or move to a full bar. Example #5.

Example #5. Andantino (Matteo Carcassi)

Keeping the 2nd finger relaxed and hovering above the 2nd string will require the finger to leap across the fretboard at the last moment to reach the 6th-string low G. This is dysfunctional tension.

Extend 2nd finger across the fretboard and prepare above the 6th string for the shift to the 6th-string G at the 3rd fret. This is functional tension.

Watch me demonstrate the use of functional tension for left-hand finger preparation. Video 5.
Be sure to watch full screen.

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #5: Extending Fingers for Preparation Andantino (Carcassi)

[CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com](https://douglassniedt.com)

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #5: Extending Fingers for Preparation Andantino (Carcassi)

Example #6. m25-26, *Leyenda (Asturias)* by Isaac Albéniz

After lifting the 1st finger, keeping the 1st finger relaxed and hovering above the 4th string will require the finger to leap across the fretboard at the last moment to bar the 7th fret. This is dysfunctional tension.

After lifting the 1st finger, extend the 1st finger across the fretboard to prepare for the bar at the 7th fret. This is functional tension.

Watch me demonstrate these left-hand techniques in *Leyenda*. Video 6. Be sure to watch full screen.

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #6: Extending Fingers *Leyenda* (Albeniz)

[CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com](https://douglassniedt.com)

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #6: Extending Fingers *Leyenda* (Albeniz)

Dysfunctional Tension in Other Body Parts

An important goal is to get rid of tension from body parts not directly associated with the operation of the left hand. For instance:

1. Clenching the teeth together

2. Making faces
3. Doing weird things with your tongue
4. Clenching your toes
5. Tensing leg muscles
6. Tensing foot muscles
7. Tensing throat muscles
8. Tensing eye muscles

These actions have nothing to do with the left hand. They have nothing to do with improving the efficiency of the fingers or hand. Therefore, they are all examples of dysfunctional tension.

Tensing other body parts will often transfer to or increase tension in the left hand.

Tensing other body parts can also mask your sensation of tension in the hand. Because another body part or parts is under tension, excessive left-hand tension may go unnoticed.

An Efficient Left Hand is the Sum of Many Parts.

The goal is to use no more effort than is needed to do a required job. Dysfunctional tension generates extra effort and sabotages efficient movement.

In the left hand, dysfunctional tension and lack of efficiency may be caused by one or several of the following factors. Reducing or eliminating dysfunctional tension is an extremely complex topic because there are so many interacting physical body parts and so many variations in body characteristics from player to player. Regardless, I will try to give you some broad principles, so you can self-diagnose your problems and focus on the things that might improve your left-hand efficiency the most.

USE THE CORRECT BALANCE BETWEEN USING THE THUMB, PULLING WITH THE ARMS, AND ARM WEIGHT

The Three Power Sources

The left hand has three sources of power from which to draw so it can play efficiently with minimal effort. **An efficient left hand uses all three in constantly varying proportions** depending on the demands of any given musical passage.

Power Source No. 1: ARM WEIGHT

Arm weight is the power source most teachers and players like to tout. It is absolutely a great power source but unfortunately is limited. The weight of the arm pretty much stays the same. It is sufficient for some demands required of the left hand, but is insufficient for many more. However, it is definitely the most efficient source of power. No effort is required for the weight of the arm to pull on the hand as it hangs on the guitar.

Let me explain arm weight. Video 7. Be sure to watch in full screen.

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #7: Using Your Arm Weight



Power Source No. 2: ARM PULL

Arm pull is the most important power source. Arm pull is the act of pulling the guitar against the chest equally with both arms. The arms and shoulders are very strong and can handle substantial power demands with little effort. It is also probably the least understood source of power. Most players, even advanced players, are often unaware they are using arm pull most of the time they are playing. I often hear people scoff at this idea, but once explained and self-awareness turned on, it is very obvious that everyone uses arm pull.

Power Source No. 3: THUMB SQUEEZE

Most of the time, the thumb should not be a power source at all. It is weak and becomes fatigued quickly. Instead, the left-hand thumb is a PASSIVE PARTICIPANT in efficient left-hand technique. Its purpose is to channel or direct the power from arm weight and arm pull into the hand and provide balance and stability. If you use correct technique, RARELY should you feel tension or pain in the thumb.

Watch this riveting video on how an efficient left-hand technique uses its three power forces. Video 8. Get out the popcorn and watch on full screen.

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #8: Balance of Forces



How to Use the Three Power Sources

To hold notes, intervals, chords, or bar chords, the left hand should use a COMBINATION of the following three power sources. In general, we might use these percentages:

1. 45% pull with both arms.
2. 45% arm weight.
3. 0-10% squeeze between the thumb and fingers.

The percentages will change substantially depending on what you are playing. To play single notes, pulling with the arms may drop to 10% with 85% arm weight and 0-5% thumb.

On the other hand, playing a Db full bar chord in first position will use 80% arm pull, 10% arm weight, and 0-10% thumb squeeze. Example #7.

Example #7. Db major full bar chord

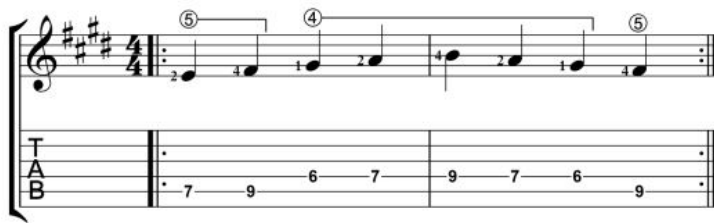


A great way to get a feel of how to use these elements is to practice WITHOUT THE THUMB ON THE NECK.

Start with Single Notes

1. Begin playing this E major scale fragment with the thumb on the neck. Be sure you have the guitar leaned back against your chest, so you can easily see all 6th strings on the fretboard (this makes it easier to take full advantage of arm weight—see video #7). Example #8.

Example #8. E major scale fragment.



2. As you repeat the fragment, take the thumb off the neck. You are now experiencing the use of 100% arm weight to hold down the notes. Wiggle the thumb around a bit to be sure it is loose.

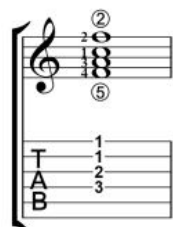
3. Then, add the thumb but do not apply pressure with it. Play the fragment several times. The hand learns it can have the thumb on the neck (exerting zero pressure) and continue to use 100% arm weight.

4. As you repeat the fragment over and over, alternate between placing the thumb on the neck and taking it off as you play. Notice how putting the thumb back on the neck helps stabilize the position but that it does not need to exert any force of its own for you to be able to hold the notes.

This will teach the hand that the thumb is a passive participant (it only stabilizes and balances the hand) as you continue to use 100% arm weight. In real-life playing situations, the thumb will usually exert a bit of pressure, but it should be minimal.

Chords

1. Play this F major chord in 5th position with the thumb on the neck. Be sure you have the guitar leaned back against your chest, so you can easily see all 6th strings on the fretboard (this makes it easier to take full advantage of arm weight—see video #7). Example #9.



2. As you repeat the chord, take the thumb off the neck and *keep the right arm resting lightly as normal on the guitar*. The chord will buzz. You are experiencing the use of 100% arm weight to hold down the notes. Wiggle the thumb around a bit to be sure it is loose. But the chord is buzzing. *The use of arm weight alone is not sufficient to hold this and many other chords and formations.*

You could put the thumb back on the neck and squeeze and get the chord to come out clearly. But, it will take a strong dose of pressure. Not very efficient. Instead, proceed to step #3:

3. As you play the buzzing chord with the thumb off the neck, begin to pull the guitar against your chest with both arms. You will feel the guitar dig into the right arm as you pull with the left arm. This keeps the position of the guitar stable.

Pull just enough to stop the buzzes. Wiggle the thumb around to be sure it is loose. You are now using maybe 70% arm weight and 30% arm pull.

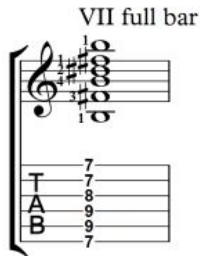
4. Continue to play the chord and add/take off the thumb from the neck. You can use zero thumb pressure, or add a little thumb pressure to reduce the amount of arm pull.

The arm weight will always be present. You will adjust the amount of arm pull and thumb pressure as needed for different situations. In general, use a minimum amount of thumb pressure. The arms are far more powerful than the thumb. Using functional tension in the arms is far more efficient than squeezing hard with the weak thumb.

Bar Chords

1. Play this B major chord in 7th position with the thumb on the neck. Be sure you have the guitar leaned back against your chest, so you can easily see all 6th strings on the fretboard (this makes it easier to take full advantage of arm weight—see video). Be sure the right arm is resting lightly on the guitar. Example #10.

Example #10. B major chord in 7th position.



2. As you repeat the chord, take the thumb off the neck and *keep the right arm resting lightly as normal on the guitar*. The chord will buzz badly. Wiggle the thumb around a bit to be sure it is loose. You are experiencing the use of 100% arm weight to hold down the bar chord. The chord will sound terrible. *The use of arm weight alone is no where close to being sufficient to play most bar chords.*

You could put the thumb back on the neck and squeeze and get the chord to come out clearly. But, it will take a huge amount of pressure. Not efficient at all. Instead, proceed to step #3:

3. As you play the buzzing chord with the thumb off the neck, begin to pull the guitar against your chest with both arms. You will feel the guitar dig into the right arm as you pull with the left arm. This keeps the position of the guitar stable.

Pull just enough to stop the buzzes. Wiggle the thumb around to be sure it is loose. You are now using maybe 10% arm weight and 90% arm pull.

4. Continue to play the chord and add/take off the thumb from the neck. You can use zero thumb pressure, or add a little thumb pressure to reduce the amount of arm pull.

Once again, the arm weight will always be present. For bar chords, you will mostly adjust the amount of arm pull as needed for different situations. Use a minimum of thumb pressure. The arms are far more powerful than the thumb. Using functional tension in the arms is far more efficient than squeezing hard with the weak thumb.

Read my technique tips on bars for specific information on the "secrets" to playing bar chords: [The Secret \(Little Jennifer's Secret\) of How to Play Clear Bar Chords](#) and [How to Learn to Play a Bar Chord in Under 2 Minutes](#).

End of Part 1. More to come next month in Part 2!

SECRETS TO AN EFFORTLESS, RELAXED LEFT-HAND CLASSICAL GUITAR TECHNIQUE

Part 2 of 2

By Douglas Niedt

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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.**

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.

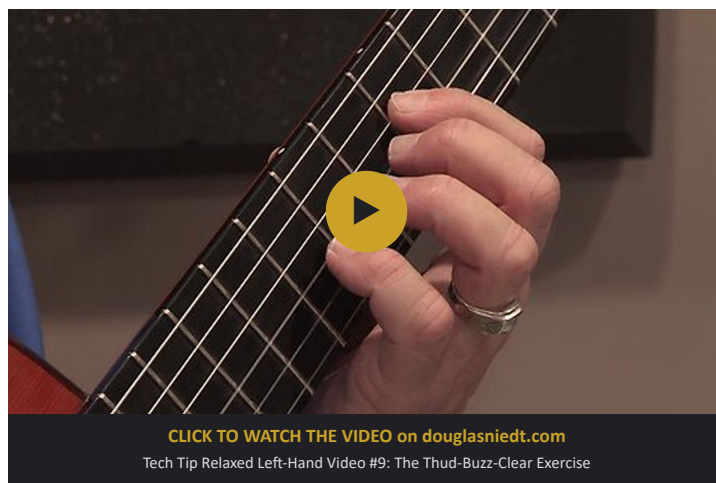
10. **Minimize finger pressure.** The "Thud to Buzz to Clear Exercise" is often recommended to develop a player's sensitivity to the amount of finger pressure needed to press down the strings.

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.



Watch me demonstrate this concept in the Carcassi *Study No. 3* example above in Video 10. Be sure to watch on full screen.

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



A 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.

Example #13. m11-13, Recuerdos de la Alhambra (Francisco Tárrega)

A partial bar in these measures requires far less power than a conventional flat bar.

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

Partial Bar IX ②③④ only.

Continue Partial Bar IX ②③④ only.

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

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #11: Efficient Partial Bar Recuerdos (Tarrega)

Use a Partial Bar for maximum efficiency

Partial Bar ES 2-3-6 only

CLICK TO WATCH THE VIDEO on douglasniedt.com

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #11: Efficient Partial Bar Recuerdos (Tarrega)

2. **Hold down only what needs to be played in a bar.** Many bar chords can be played with far less effort by only pressing down only the very top and bottom notes of the chord, leaving the center of the bar barely holding the inner strings down.

Example #14. m1-3, *Study No. 5* (as numbered by Segovia) Op. 35, No. 22 (Fernando Sor)

Although we are barring 5 strings, it is only necessary for the bar finger to hold down the 1st and 5th strings. This is an example of using minimal effort to achieve a goal.

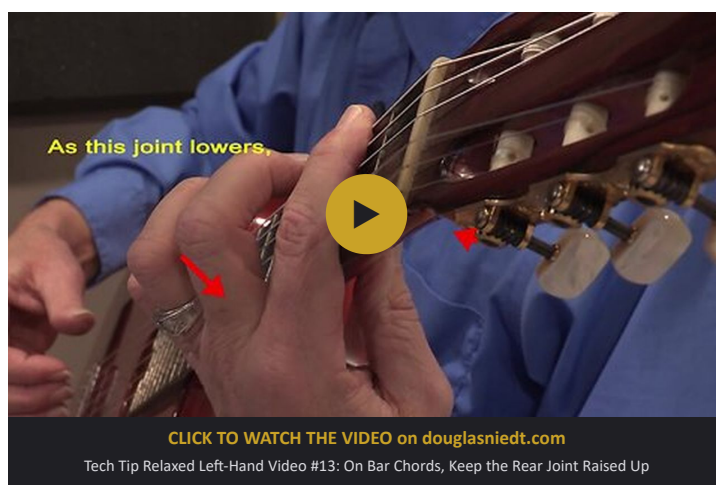
Watch me demonstrate this bar technique on Fernando Sor's *Study No. 5* in Video 12. Watch on full screen.

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #12: Efficient Bar Chord Study No. 5 (Sor)

3. **Experiment with how many strings to bar.** Do what is easiest for you. The music score may indicate that a chord is to be played using a half bar. But if you play the chord better and with less effort using a *full* bar, do it.
4. **Keep the rear joint of a full bar raised so the bar is flat across the fretboard.**
Many students and even professional teachers overlook this technique.

Watch me demonstrate this frequently overlooked technique of keeping the back joint of the bar raised up in Video 13. Watch on full screen.

Tech Tip Relaxed Left-Hand Video #13: On Bar Chords, Keep the Rear Joint Raised Up



5. **Bar chords especially, require adjustments to the balance between arm force, arm weight, and thumb pressure.** Most bar chords require a significantly greater amount of arm pull force than arm weight or thumb pressure.

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.](#)

IT MAY BE HOW YOU PRACTICE

How you practice and learn a piece is so important. Most people learn to play with tension as they learn a new piece. When they do that, it is extremely difficult to fix later because it was ingrained from the beginning.

Playing efficiently with minimal effort is a form of muscle memory. **Your hand must remember what it feels like to play efficiently without excess tension.** *It must be practiced,* just like you practice playing the chord changes, slurs, or dynamics in a piece.

1. **Take breaks.** Do you take breaks or just keep going non-stop? Over-practice *trains you to stay tense.* Take breaks so you prevent tension buildup.

2. **Practicing with speed bursts can work wonders.** Speed burst practice focuses on learning small, manageable bits correctly with minimal effort.

Even if it's a fast passage, speed bursts train you to play it with minimal effort.

In passages you play with excessive tension, speed burst practice is excellent for retraining your hand to play them with minimal effort.

See my technique tips [How to Use Reflex Bursts to Learn a Fast Scale](#) and [How to Use Reflex Practice to Master Fast, Difficult Passages Other Than Scales](#) for more information on speed bursts.

3. **Metronome practice** has its place, but if it is used incorrectly for increasing the tempo of a piece, it can lead to teaching the hands to play tense. Speed burst practice is often a much better way to learn to play fast pieces.

4. **Consciously practice efficient technique with minimal effort every day.**

5. **Within pieces, practice releasing tension at key points such as the ends of phrases or sections.** Don't carry over the increased functional tension that may be required for a difficult passage into the next passage. Practice releasing it.

6. **Practice a piece at a very slow, undemanding tempo.** Slow practice of a piece can be helpful to gain a sense of the minimal effort required to play it.

7. **Use the "Stop and Let Go" method of practicing.** In his excellent book, *The Natural Classical Guitar*, Lee F. Ryan describes this method of training your body to go on alert when it senses tension and immediately let go of it. When you notice unwanted or excessive tension in any body part, immediately stop playing. Focus on where the tension is and release it. Let go of it. Empty the tension. If you need to, massage the body part or shake it out. Stand up and walk around if necessary. Once the tightness is released or the tension dissolves, resume playing from that relaxed state. Every time you sense tightness, clenching, or excessive effort, stop right away and release the tension.

Ryan says you will probably need to stop every 30 seconds at first. But he says that is okay because you are developing your awareness of your body and playing mechanism. The goal is to make efficient playing a habit.

Of course, if you find the tension always seems to return, you will need to dig deeper into the specifics of what is causing the tension and apply the relevant solutions.

AWARENESS

Awareness is crucial. You must be able to tell if your hand is tense. If you can't feel the difference between tensed muscles and relaxed muscles in your bicep, shoulder, forearms, elbow, fingers, and hand, you won't be able to eliminate dysfunctional tension.

A practice method that can increase your awareness is to purposely play a passage or piece with extreme tension. Then play it again without the extreme tension and feel the difference. This should help to increase your awareness. It also helps to develop your ability to consciously turn off tension.

Here is another very basic exercise to help you feel the difference between tension and relaxation: stretch your fingers out as hard as you can. Then release. Stretch out hard, release.

CONFIDENCE

When you are practicing efficiently, and you are well-prepared, you will be confident. If you are confident, dysfunctional tension will be reduced, especially in performance. See my technique tip [The Keys to Consistent Classical Guitar Playing, Parts 1 and 2](#) for information about efficient practice. However, staying "relaxed" in performance is a separate topic. See [How to Control Stage Fright \(Performance Anxiety\)](#).

THE BASICS OF LIFE THAT IMPROVE MUSCULAR CONDITION AND EFFICIENCY

1. **Breathe.** Yes, this one is obvious but easily forgotten in the heat of battle. How many times have you caught yourself in a performance or guitar lesson holding your breath as you play difficult passages in your pieces?
2. **Drink water.** It is good for your body! Duh.
3. **Avoid non-guitar tasks that require excessive gripping.** This could include prolonged lifting of heavy objects, exercise on fitness machines, digging and other garden tasks, house painting, carpentry, prolonged scrubbing, etc. Once the hand becomes extremely

tense from such tasks, it can take days for it to recover for guitar playing.

Summary

An effortless and relaxed left-hand technique is not produced by a command to relax. Rather, *it is the sum of many parts*, all of which contribute to an EFFICIENT left-hand technique. An efficient left-hand technique is developed by making a habit of applying minimal effort for maximum efficiency in every movement made by the left-hand fingers, hand, and arm.