

Spider Exercise

By Douglas Niedt

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The spider exercise is a valuable exercise for every guitarist in the late-beginner to early-intermediate stage of playing. It is one of the best exercises for developing both the independence and synchronization of movements of the left-hand fingers. For the late-intermediate to advanced guitarist, it is an excellent stretching and warm-up exercise.

The goal is to play the spider exercise so the chord changes are absolutely legato (connected). In other words, the changes should be seamless, with no dead space between.

In his excellent book, *Pumping Nylon*, Scott Tennant shows the exercise on the 2nd and 5th strings, beginning at the first fret and working up the neck.

Spider exercise on 2nd and 5th strings beginning at the first fret

Continue up the neck

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

However, I think it is a little better for the newbie to first learn the spider exercise on the 2nd and 4th strings. The reaches/stretchers are a little easier. Once the exercise is learned on the 2nd and 4th strings, the student can graduate to the 2nd and 5th strings.

Plus, I like to begin the exercise at the 7th fret instead of the 1st fret. The frets are closer together at the 7th position than 1st position. Again, that makes the stretches a little easier for the newbie. Plus, if you begin at the 7th fret and work your way down to the 1st fret, the frets gradually become more widely spaced which gradually stretches the fingers and hand. This adds to its value as a stretching exercise.

For the newbie, the spider exercise would be played like this:

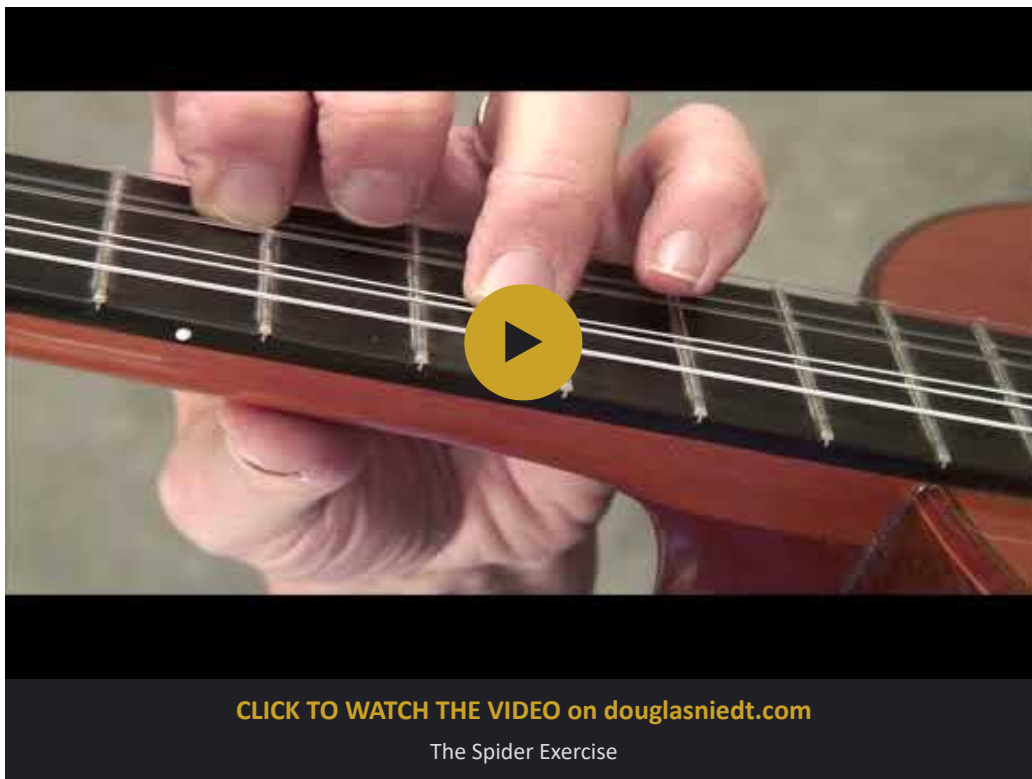
Spider exercise on 2nd and 4th strings beginning at the seventh fret

Continue down the neck to 1st fret

T	7	8	9	10	9	8	7	6	7	8	9	8	7	6	5	6	7	8	7	6	5
A	9	10	7	8	7	10	9	8	9	6	7	6	9	8	7	8	5	6	5	8	7
B																					

However, before attempting to play the spider exercise in its entirety, several preliminary steps should be practiced first. Watch this comprehensive video which will guide you through all the steps to master this very important exercise:

The Spider Exercise



Video Summary: Spider Exercise

Scott Tennant, in his excellent book *Pumping Nylon*, shows the spider exercise beginning at the first fret and moving up the neck, all the way to the end. I prefer to start at the seventh fret and work down, because the frets are closer together up here and gradually widen as you descend to the first fret. If you use this exercise as a warm-up, it's helpful to start where the frets are close together (the 7th fret), and then gradually stretch the hand out as you work down to the first fret, where the frets are much farther apart.

It's not bad to start at the first fret and move up the neck, but I think it's better to begin at the 7th fret.

Getting Started

When I work on this with a student who's never done it before—again, we're talking about late beginners or early intermediate players—I recommend starting on the second and fourth strings, rather than the second and fifth strings. The stretches are a little easier this way. If the student has large hands and no trouble with reaching, they can start on the second and fifth strings, but for most, the second and fourth strings are more comfortable and put less stress on the hand.

You won't be practicing the entire spider exercise all at once. Instead, you'll learn it step by step. It may take several days, or even weeks, before you can play the entire exercise from the 7th to the 1st fret, so be patient. Don't force things or risk injury. As long as you don't overdo it, this exercise is not high-stress, but it does require stretching.

If you do it slowly and carefully, it's good for your hand. That's one of the purposes of the spider exercise: stretching the hand. Once you've mastered the exercise, you'll probably start on the second and fifth strings, going from the 7th to the 1st fret as a daily warm-up.

Starting at the seventh fret and working down is a great way to warm up the hand gradually, going from small frets to large frets. But for beginners and intermediate players, we're using it more for finger independence and synchronization, rather than just stretching.

Let's look at the exercise step by step. Our strategy is to work on each change individually.

Chord 1 to Chord 2

The first change is from the 1st and 3rd fingers to the 2nd and 4th fingers on the 2nd and 4th strings. Again, start in the upper regions of the neck, where the frets are close together:

- Chord 1 is the 1st finger on the 2nd string at the 7th fret and the 3rd finger on the 4th string at the 9th fret.
- Chord 2 is the 2nd finger on the 2nd string at the 8th fret and the 4th finger on the 4th string at the 10th fret.

That's the change to focus on, but you won't do it all at once. The first thing to do is hold "chord one" (first and third fingers) and simply place and lift "chord two" (second and fourth fingers) while keeping chord one down. Don't lift chord one as you place and lift the second and fourth fingers.

From your perspective, you'll hold chord one on the second and fourth strings, then place and lift the second and fourth fingers, keeping chord one down.

At this stage, your goal is to get the second and fourth fingers to land together on their strings. What often happens is that the second finger lands first, and then the little finger follows, and they may not lift together either. So you want to carefully place them together and lift them together.

Another common issue is lifting up chord one when you lift the other fingers. This is all about finger independence and synchronization.

For both fingers to land together, preparation is important. Don't let your little finger be way over the first string if it needs to land on the fourth string, and don't let your second finger be out of position either. Make sure both fingers are precisely above their string and at the same height—ideally, no more than a quarter inch above the string. If the little finger is higher than the second finger, it will tend to be late. So, make sure both are at the same height before placing them down.

Repeat "place and lift" until you can easily do it, keeping chord one down and getting both fingers to fall together onto their strings.

Next, reverse it: place chord two and, while leaving it down, place and lift chord one. Most people find this a bit easier, but everyone's different. Again, the goal is for both fingers to land and lift together.

If you have trouble getting your little finger to land at the same time as your second finger, intentionally put the little finger down first for a day or two, then you'll gain the control to place them together. The same principle applies if your third finger is consistently late; put it down first intentionally for a short period to train the hand.

Once again, preparation is key. Each finger should be above the proper string, no more than a quarter inch above. The thumb should be positioned behind the neck, opposite and between the first and second fingers—not off to the side. Don't come around the neck or you'll create problems. Keep the thumb behind the neck.

Once you can do the touch, you can add playing if you like. Hold chord one and place chord two, keeping chord one down, and play the notes. This step isn't absolutely necessary, but it can't hurt.

Reverse it: hold chord two, placing and lifting chord one. The pitches don't change because you're holding chord two while placing chord one, but it's still a good exercise.

So, to recap:

- Hold chord one, place and lift chord two (we call them chords, but they're intervals).

- Hold chord two, place and lift chord one.

You may be able to do these right away, or it may take a day or two. Everyone is different.

The next step—still not playing, just left hand—is to hold chord one and change back and forth between chord one and chord two: lift chord one as you place chord two, lift chord two as you place chord one. Again, preparation is important; keep the fingers close to the strings, not flying away.

Finally, you can play the second and fourth strings with the thumb and index finger (P and I) on the right hand. The challenge here is left hand—right hand coordination: pluck and change the left-hand fingers at the same time. Don't place the fingers and then pluck—everything should be simultaneous.

For some people, it helps to think “ready, set, go” for each change to sync everything up. Others may use a metronome at a very slow tempo, practicing the changes right on the metronome tick. Whatever works for you.

You'll use this same process for every chord change in the spider exercise. Once you've worked on chord one to chord two, you may want to spend a week or more on just one change. Repetition is important.

Then, move on to chord two to chord three.

- Chord two is 2nd finger on the 2nd string at the 8th fret, and 4th finger on the 4th string at the 10th fret.
- Chord three is 1st finger on the 4th string at the 7th fret and 3rd finger on the 2nd string at the 9th fret.

Hold chord two, place and lift chord three (left hand alone).

Make sure the two fingers land together.

Hold chord three, place and lift chord two (left hand alone), repeating until you master the motion.

If the little finger touches the third string a bit, that's all right. You want to be on the tips of your fingers, but don't worry about being on the absolute tips or if the first finger blocks other strings. Just make sure you're consistent.

Once you're comfortable, you can add playing:

- With chord two down, add chord three and play.
- With chord three down, place and lift chord two and play.

Practice with the left hand alone, putting the fingers down firmly. You may hear some extra sounds when you hammer on; that's fine.

Once you can do these changes, play them back and forth, making sure the hands are synchronized—the right hand should pluck at the exact moment the left hand makes its change, not before.

Continue this process through each change, always working step by step:

- Left hand alone, hold one chord, place the next.
- Reverse it.
- Left hand alone, actually do the change.
- Both hands together—plucking and changing at the same time.

List of chords or chord formations

- Chord 1 is the 1st finger on the 2nd string at the 7th fret and the 3rd finger on the 4th string at the 9th fret.
- Chord 2 is the 2nd finger on the 2nd string at the 8th fret and the 4th finger on the 4th string at the 10th fret.
- Chord 3 is 1st finger on the 4th string at the 7th fret and 3rd finger on the 2nd string at the 9th fret.
- Chord 4 is the 4nd finger on the 2nd string at the 10th fret and the 2th finger on the 4th string at the 8th fret.
- Chord 5 (same as chord 3) is 1st finger on the 4th string at the 7th fret and 3rd finger on the 2nd string at the 9th fret.
- Chord 6 (same as chord 2) is the 2nd finger on the 2nd string at the 8th fret and the 4th finger on the 4th string at the 10th fret.

You'll find that some changes are more difficult than others, such as chord five to chord six. Use the same principles: hold one chord, place and lift the other, work left hand alone, then add the right hand.

Once you've done all the changes individually, it's time to put them all together.

As you play chord one, have chord two prepared above the strings; as you play chord two, pull the fingers into position for chord three. As you play chord three, pull the fingers into position for chord four. Always prepare for the next chord as you play the current one. Your fingers should be ready above the correct strings, switching positions as needed.

Go slowly—at first, it may take a while to get the fingers into position for the next chord. That's fine. Don't worry about rhythm at this stage; focus on finger preparation.

Our goal is to play legato, connecting these changes smoothly with no dead space between chords.

Once you've done the whole cycle at the seventh fret, move down a fret and repeat. As you get closer to the first fret, the stretches become more challenging, so take your time.

Later stages

After mastering the second and fourth string version, you can graduate to second and fifth strings, going through the same steps. This is much harder due to the wider reaches. Eventually, you could try second and sixth strings, but that's extremely difficult, and not necessary for most people.

Remember: don't overdo it. The goal isn't to play fast, but to connect your changes and play them smoothly.

Once you're comfortable with each individual change, try the entire sequence in seventh position, connecting every change legato. When you can do this, begin working your way down the neck.

Use This Practice Procedure

Again, the newbie will practice first on the 2nd and 4th strings at the 7th fret. Everything is practiced slowly.

The steps are:

1. Left hand alone: hold chord #1. Place and lift chord #2.
2. Left hand alone: hold chord #2. Place and lift chord #1.
3. Optional: repeat step #1 but play the two chords with the right hand.
4. Optional: repeat step #2 but play the two chords with the right hand.
5. Left hand alone: change back and forth between chord #1 and chord #2.
6. Both hands: play chord change back and forth from chord #1 to chord #2. Alternate *pi* and *pm* with the right hand.

Next, work on the chord change from chord #2 to chord #3. Repeat all the steps. Then learn chord # 3 to chord #4 etc. It may take one to two weeks to learn just one chord change.

Assemble the pattern

After each individual chord change is learned (which can take many weeks), play the entire pattern in 7th position. Once it is secure in 7th position, begin at the 7th fret and work your way down to the 1st fret.

Things to remember

The goal is to connect the chord changes as smoothly as possible. *Prepare the fingers.* Prepare each finger precisely above the string it is to play. Keep the fingers close to the strings at all times--never lift more than 1/4 inch above the string.

1. The two left-hand fingers must land on the fretboard simultaneously. One finger should not land a fraction of a second before the other. Also, lift them precisely at the same moment.
2. When changing chords, one pair of fingers must lift *precisely at the same moment* the other pair lands on the fretboard.
3. Move the left-hand fingers precisely at the same moment the right hand plucks the strings. Do not place the left-hand fingers and then pluck the strings. The right hand must pluck, one pair of left hand fingers must land on the fretboard, and the other pair should lift off its strings all at the same instant.