

BILL SWICK
**TEACHING
BEGINNING
GUITAR CLASS**
A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Teaching Beginning Guitar Class

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A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Bill Swick

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Teaching Beginning Guitar Class

Teaching Beginning Guitar Class: A Practical Guide was written to assist secondary music teachers with the task of teaching beginning guitar in the classroom. This book provides the first practical approach to teaching guitar in a public school, with step-by-step instructions for the quickest and easiest steps for achieving success not only for the teacher, but for students as well.

This book is formatted to follow the school year, from preplanning, the opening days of school, the first weeks of school, to a week-to-week timeline for the full school year. Lesson plans are provided, along with many ideas and suggestions that have been tried and proven in the guitar classroom.

Teaching Beginning Guitar Class: A Practical Guide is designed to be a “go to” resource for anyone who is new to teaching guitar in the classroom. The content of this book represents more than thirty years of experience of training new guitar teachers. The first seven chapters of this text are focused on preparation prior to the school year beginning. Following suggestions in these chapters will give any new guitar teacher the tools necessary to start the school year successfully.

Once the school year gets off to a good start, chapters 8 through 11 provide a week-to-week guide for all four quarters of the school year to make sure the school year runs smoothly. The final chapter is a wrap-up for the year and provides ideas for the years to follow. Any music educator who has been given the task of teaching guitar in the classroom is going to want to read *Teaching Beginning Guitar Class: A Practical Guide*.

There is no shortage of guitar method books which assist in teaching one how to play the guitar. There are very few texts that assist non-guitar-playing music educators to be effective guitar teachers in the secondary classroom.

Teaching Beginning Guitar Class: A Practical Guide is designed to assist classroom guitar teachers with classroom content, classroom management, timing, structure, curriculum, and myriad subjects related to teaching guitar in the classroom. Many questions asked by struggling first-year classroom guitar teachers have been answered in this guide.

This guide will assist in decision making in terms of what equipment is needed, what type of method book to use, what preparation is needed before school starts, what kind of students to expect, how to time content, and what content to include, along with a week-to-week guide for the entire school year.

The intent of this publication is to assist classroom guitar teachers and provide the tools for experiencing success not only for the teachers, but for all of the students who will benefit from taking a beginning guitar class. The goal is to create lifelong learners, and the journey begins with year 1.

Teaching Beginning Guitar Class: A Practical Guide may be used as a college text for preparing music education majors to teach guitar in the classroom.

Getting Started

I Do Not Play Guitar, Why Do I Have to Teach Guitar?

While this idea is not new, the leaders in music education have been aware of the growing need for alternative music classes; that is, a need for music classes other than band, choir, and orchestra. While there are parts of the country where these three types of music classes are quite healthy and do wonderfully well, there are many parts of the country where the standard music classes such as band, choir, and orchestra are falling out of favor for alternative music classes like guitar, Mariachi, hand bells, steel drums, music technology, music theory, etc.

Schools which have offered guitar as an alternative music class have discovered that the classes fill up fast and attract students who would not otherwise participate in band, choir, or orchestra. The number one challenge with offering a guitar class in a public school is finding a state-licensed guitar teacher who holds a music education degree and is prepared to teach guitar in a classroom environment.

While there are many colleges and universities offering performance degrees in guitar, few of these institutions offer music education degrees for guitarists. At the time of this writing, there are only a handful of universities where it is possible to receive a music education degree as a guitar major. While this may slowly be changing, the changes are not coming nearly quickly enough to meet the growing demand for licensed guitar teachers with degrees in music education.

In the 1990s, there were only a few states offering guitar classes in public schools. Today, most states in the United States have guitar in one or more school districts.

With the rising interest in guitar education in secondary schools, and the nation's lack of state-licensed guitarists with degrees in music education, many band, choir, and orchestra teachers are being asked to teach guitar. The logic is simple. Often, band, orchestra, and choir teachers do not have full teaching schedules and must add classes to be considered full-time. Frequently, music educators are asked to teach music appreciation, music theory, jazz band, percussion ensemble, etc., to complete their schedules.

Schools offering guitar as an alternative music class have found that guitar classes attract students. If enrollment numbers are what are needed to keep music educators employed, frequently schools will offer guitar classes as a way to save jobs and keep music educators working. Guitar classes have saved a tremendous amount of music teacher positions in Clark County, Nevada. One may assume this is true for other parts of the country as well.

Band directors are known for their abilities to teach a number of different instruments. From an administrator's point of view, asking a band director to teach one more instrument that s/he does not play should not be that big a stretch. Orchestra folks are known for teaching at least four string instruments. Because guitar is a string instrument, again, from an administrator's point of view, this may not be a big stretch.

Choir teachers are also asked from time to time to teach guitar. From some administrators' points of view, anyone who can sing should be able to strum and play the guitar. While this is perhaps a bigger stretch for choir teachers, the requests are made and choir teachers from time to time find themselves teaching guitar.

There are leaders in music education who believe that music education students attending college today have a strong chance of teaching guitar during their teaching careers, regardless of what their major instruments may be. Also in this projection are other alternative music classes like music theory and music technology. In Dr. Deborah Sheldon's article "7 Things Music Majors Can Do when Facing the Job Market," she stresses the need to "become as broad-based and well-trained as possible."¹

Music education is constantly changing and the concept of being only a band director, only a choir director, and/or only an orchestra director is morphing. The new term for all of these titles is likely to become "music educator." And music educators now, and even more so in the future, are expected to teach music to all students, including the many emerging "alternative" music classes.

With the emergence of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), more students are likely to be directed to attend music classes and the choices are likely to become even more diverse.

Reasons Why Music Educators May Like Teaching Guitar

At first, the idea of teaching guitar may not seem appealing to a music educator who does not play the guitar. Here are a few reasons why music educators may like teaching guitar.

- (1) Once tuned, the guitar plays in tune even in a beginner's hands.
- (2) There is only one clef, treble clef, and no transposition.
- (3) There is only one kind of instrument in the room.
- (4) The guitar is a melodic instrument as well as a chordal instrument.
- (5) The volume of the guitar is softer than most band and orchestra instruments.
- (6) Beginning guitar students are capable of creating a nice sound and tone immediately.
- (7) Beginning students play in tune and tend to move faster in the beginning stages due to the lack of a bow or the need to develop a good embouchure in order to make a sound.

Band Students Will Leave the Band to Join a Guitar Class, or Will They?

The number one argument from music educators against offering a guitar class is that many students currently enrolled in band, orchestra, or choir are going to leave these classes to join a guitar class. How likely is that to happen?

Students who are attracted to a guitar class tend not to be attracted to a band, choir, or orchestra classes. Therefore, the idea of a student leaving these classes to join a guitar class is possible, but not likely. There will always be exceptions but, for the most part, guitar classes service a different type of student who would otherwise not study music in school.

Of course, it is possible for a student to leave band, choir, and/or orchestra to join guitar class. Some of the reasons for students leaving these classes to join a guitar class may be:

- (1) they have always wanted to learn to play the guitar;
- (2) they have a personality conflict with the band, choir, or orchestra teacher;
- (3) the period in which guitar class is offered may work better for their schedule;
- (4) the band, choir, or orchestra teacher may have encouraged the student to leave his or her class;
- (5) the student does not closely identify with other students in the band, choir, or orchestra.

On the other hand, upper-classman music students may have multiple choices for elective classes and may choose to remain in band, choir, or orchestra and also take a guitar class.

As the population of schools continues to become more culturally diverse, the offerings of music education will continue to change to meet the needs of the students. For now, guitar is considered an “alternative ensemble” in many schools and is more likely to attract the “alternative student,” that is, the student who would not otherwise be attracted to band, choir, or orchestra.

On the other hand, here is something music educators may not realize: the growing number of music educators who were once forced to teach guitar and eventually left teaching other music classes to pursue a full-time position teaching guitar.

Music educators who are encouraged to teach classroom guitar quickly discover teaching a single instrument is far easier than teaching a dozen instruments. A guitar class moves along much faster because it is a single instrument. There is no marching. There are no percussion students to deal with. Classes are generally smaller. There are many pluses to teaching guitar class. While there are many band directors who have band in their blood and who would never quit teaching band, there are music educators who have found teaching guitar much more rewarding than teaching band and have made the move to teach guitar full-time.

Guitar Content for the First Quarter

The task of teaching beginning guitar may seem simple at first. The following is a list of concepts which may be taught to have a successful first quarter. In the very beginning, students should be exposed to the following:

- (1) note recognition (names of lines and spaces);
- (2) note placement (where notes are on the guitar);
- (3) rhythmic notation (recognize quarter, half, and whole notes);

- (4) how to count;
- (5) the parts of the guitar;
- (6) how to make a sound with the right hand;
- (7) how to place fingers on the fingerboard to change pitches.

This list is in no particular order. Many teachers attempt to teach all seven of these skills in the first few weeks of the first quarter. Moving too quickly through these skills frequently discourages beginning students.

Building a successful guitar program is similar to building a high-rise structure. The bulk of time needs to be spent on the foundation. If the foundation is not solid, little can be added without leading to frustration.

Make quarter one of the beginning guitar class the solid structure necessary for building a successful guitar program. Everyone including the teacher is anxious to get started and to see results. However, taking time to make certain each student understands and can perform the seven tasks mentioned above is absolutely essential to building a solid guitar program.

The most common mistake made by new classroom guitar teachers is moving through materials too quickly. Many music teachers attend a popular five-day summer workshop which trains music educators how to teach guitar. In these five days of training, coaches cover typically what will be covered in the first half of the school year in just five days. As a general rule, we teach the way we learn. Students of these workshops and others like it are sometimes challenged about how to disperse this rich resource of information presented in only five days and make it last over a period of several months. There have been teachers new to guitar class who have introduced a string a day, covering five strings in five days. This of course is entirely too fast to be effective and leads to frustration for all involved. Even one string a week is considered too fast.

One of the reasons guitar teachers tend to move so quickly is the lack of supplementary materials, which drill the seven skills mentioned above. It is not possible to effectively teach each of these seven skills by simply mentioning it one time and modeling the skill once or twice. These skills and techniques need ample materials for students to practice. Students are not all the same. As a teacher, it is necessary to have many ways to say the same thing and many approaches to the same subject to appeal to the diversity of learning. The more application one has to each of these techniques, the more likely one will experience success.

What Kind of Equipment Is Needed for a Guitar Class?

The following is the standards list for a new guitar class in the Clark County School District. Each new school comes equipped with the following materials for the guitar room:

- 30 nylon-string guitars (Fender FC-100 or CN-90V2 or Yamaha CG102 or C40) in cases
- 1 electric guitar (Yamaha)
- 1 electric guitar amplifier (Yamaha)
- 1 electric bass guitar (Squier by Fender)

- 1 electric bass amplifier (Crate)
- (Alesis SR-16) drum machine
- (Sony) five-disc CD player
- Choice of a stereo amplifier with speakers or a six-channel PA with speakers
- 2 (Wenger) violin/viola instrument stands for storage
- 30 chairs
- 30 (Wenger) music stands or Manhasset stands (preferably the 48c lower stands).

Every school district seems to do things differently. This list of standards applies only to Clark County School District. However, it is a good list and worthy of consideration to copy.

The schools in Clark County purchase nylon-string guitars. When writing the Nevada State Curriculum for guitar, it was decided the nylon-string guitar would be the standard. There are several reasons. The nylon-string guitar has a slightly smaller body, which is good for smaller students. The nylon strings are softer on the fingers of the left hand. More importantly, the nylon strings are spaced so that the right-hand has room for finger picking. This is possibly the greatest argument. There is left-hand technique and right-hand technique. It is difficult to teach right-hand technique on a steel-string guitar in which the strings are not spaced properly for the traditional, classical right-hand pedagogy. The nylon-string guitar is designed with the correct spacing, approximately 9–10 mm apart. It is easier to play a steel-string or electric guitar after learning on a nylon-string due to the thinner neck. It is not as easy switching from a steel-string guitar to a nylon-string guitar due to its added width of the neck and the added distance between strings.

Nylon-string guitars are generally less expensive than steel-string or electric guitars. Nylon-string guitars blend together better in a large ensemble than steel-string guitars. Most colleges offering guitar as a major expect students to perform on a nylon-string guitar.

The suggested range for a school to spend on new nylon-string guitars is \$200–\$300, with the average being \$250, including the case. Purchasing all of the guitars at the same time can be an advantage as far as negotiating a better price per unit.

Trimming the List

If the school district has no standard equipment for a guitar classroom, the list provided above may be helpful. It may also be edited. The list may be trimmed to the bare necessities. In some cases, a music educator will teach band, orchestra, or choir in the same room as the guitar class. In that case, there may already be chairs and music stands. There may already be a sound system and a metronome in place.

School administrators may push to start a guitar program, but will want to do so for the least amount of financial expenditure. Here is a list of items which are essential for the classroom:

- (1) a classroom set of nylon-string guitars with cases (30–35 instruments at the approximate cost of \$300 each = \$10,000);

- (2) Alesis SR-16 drum machine or something similar (approximate cost \$150);
- (3) If music stands must be purchased, consider selecting the Manhasset 48c, which are shorter (approximately \$50 each = \$1,500);
- (4) four dozen replacements for each guitar string (approximately \$40 per dozen for a set of six strings = \$160, available from <http://www.juststrings.com/classicalnylonguitarbulkstrings.html>);
- (5) one Ernie Ball 4117 Power Peg Pro cordless electronic string winder (approximately \$30, available from Amazon.com);
- (6) two Snark SN-8 electronic instrument tuners (approximately \$12 each = \$24, available from Amazon.com);
- (7) optional classroom set of method books (approximately \$500); these will be covered in detail below.

The bottom line for the above cost is approximately \$12,500, the cost of one high-quality tuba, or a lesser tuba and an oboe. Basically, for the cost of a couple of band instruments, a guitar class may be fully funded.

No Left-Handed Guitars

Early in the inclusion of guitar in the schools, Clark County School District took the stance that there would be no left-handed guitars purchased and all beginning guitar students would learn to play as if they were all right-handed. If a student insists on playing guitar left-handed, the student must provide his or her own instrument.

The logic of making this decision stems from there not being any left-handed band instruments or orchestra instruments. If a left-handed student insists on playing a guitar left-handed, the student would provide the instrument to do so.

In the past two decades, there seems to have been an increase in the number of left-handed students. Studies have shown that left-handed students who play guitar right-handed tend to be better players. There are currently a number of internationally recognized concert guitarists who are left-handed, but who play the guitar right-handed. Knowing that left-handed students excel at playing the guitar right-handed is a good reason to insist on playing right-handed. These observations lead us to another question which is, "Should all of the right-handed students be learning to play on a left-handed guitar?" This of course is a hypothetical question and for now, the answer is "no."

A Closer Look at Quarter 1 Class Content

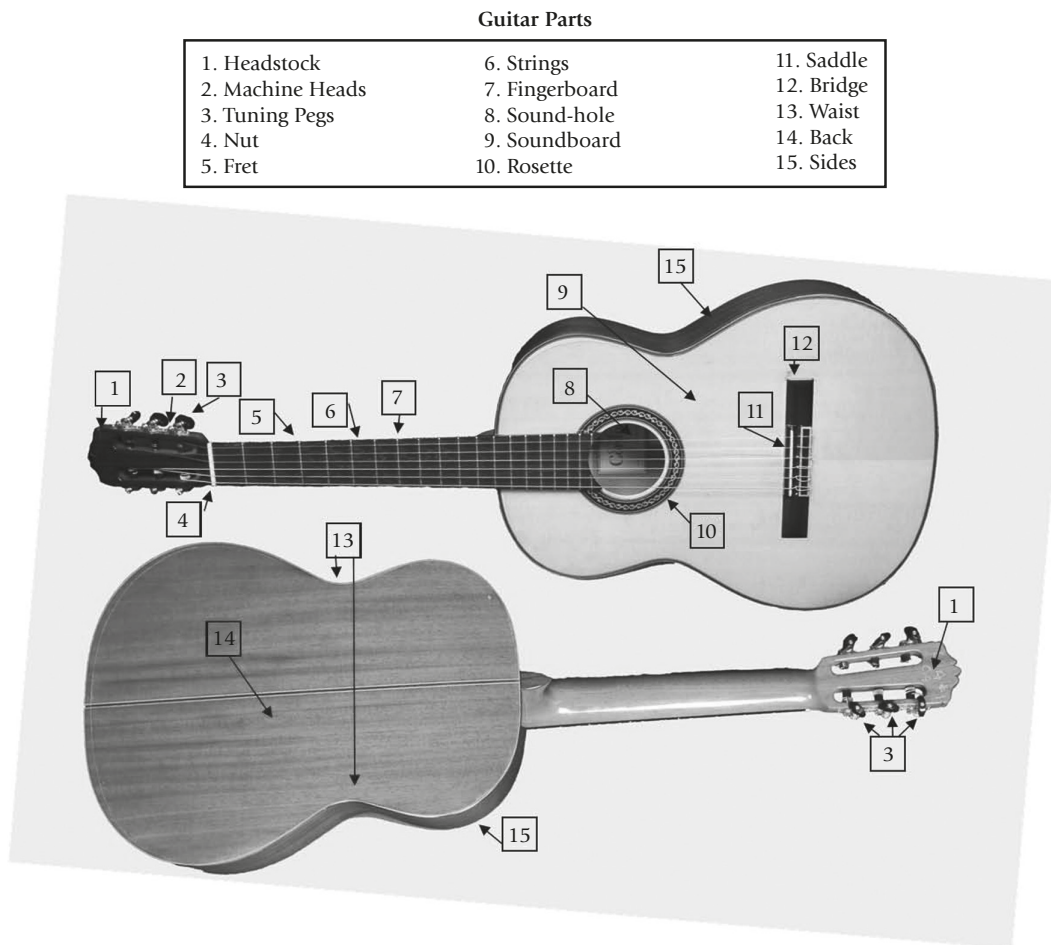
Above, there is a list of seven concepts which may be included in the first quarter of teaching guitar. The following is a closer look at each one.

- (1) Note recognition (names of lines and spaces);
- (2) note placement (where notes are on the guitar)
- (3) rhythmic notation (recognize quarter, half, and whole notes);
- (4) how to count.

Most beginning method books will cover the information listed above. The order is of no particular importance. Sequencing will be covered in a later chapter.

Figure 1.1

Guitar parts handout



(5) The parts of the guitar are sometimes covered in beginning guitar method books, but not always. Here are two images which may be helpful (Figure 1.1).

(6) How to make a sound with the right hand.

Often, guitar teachers do not think about this before asking a classroom of students to play the first three notes on the first string. How are these students going to make a sound? The options are:

- (a) play with a pick;
- (b) play with the thumb;
- (c) play with the index and middle fingers.

Playing with a Pick

To use a pick, students will first each need a pick. The considerations for using picks are:

- (1) Will picks be supplied to each student?
- (2) Will picks be sold to students?
- (3) Will students supply their own picks?
- (4) What are the consequences for not having a pick?
- (5) Will students be taught the technique of using a pick?

Figure 1.2

Holding a pick

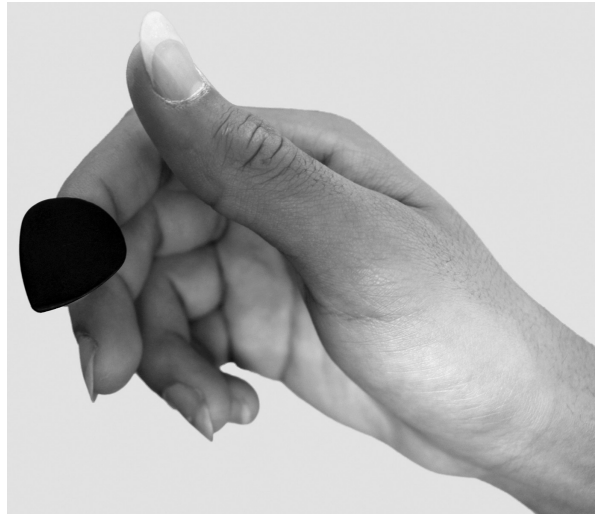


Figure 1.3

Holding a pick



Figure 1.4

Holding a pick



Here are some photos which will help with holding a pick (Figures 1.2–1.5). It is important to first learn the technique in order to demonstrate it to students. Also, here is a YouTube video on how to hold a pick: <https://youtu.be/mE2S3u-Wz1g>.

Playing with the Thumb

The most natural way to make a sound on the guitar is by plucking the string with the right thumb. This works well for only the first three strings. The thumb can naturally cover the range of three strings on the guitar. Once the class is ready to add notes on the fourth string, it will be time to either switch to playing with a pick or playing with alternating fingers.

Playing with Alternating Fingers

Playing with alternating fingers is most closely associated with playing classical style. Generally, the technique of classical-style playing requires holding the guitar in classical style, having a classical-style posture, and training the right hand to play with classical technique.

For those teachers who have had classical training, this may be the preferred way to teach. For teachers who have had no experience playing the guitar, this approach may prove to be more challenging.