

# Teaching Guide

## College Classes for Beginners on Guitar

### Syllabus Supplement for Teachers

by Mary Jo Disler, M. Mus., The University of Michigan

Adjunct Faculty, Retired, Oakland Community College  
Farmington Hills, Michigan

---

## Introduction

The comments in this Supplement augment the Class Guitar I: Course Syllabus, which represents a highly successful course developed and taught over 25 years at several southeastern Michigan colleges: The University of Michigan–Dearborn, Mercy College of Detroit, and currently Oakland Community College. This experience resulted in the text *Guitar QuickStart*™ by Mary Jo Disler, ISBN: 978-0-9642229-0-6, Lyra House Music Publications. Class Guitar I: Course Syllabus is a sample document, but has been prepared so that it can be photocopied and used as an “instant” syllabus. This Syllabus and Supplement present this writer/teacher’s experience and style of teaching a beginning course offered to the general public.

The course includes introductions both to music reading and chord / chart playing on guitar. This format is the practical outcome of teaching at schools with no specified guitar curriculum, and no assurance that the second semester followup course would always be available.

Fourteen class sessions are outlined in the Syllabus, though some schools have fifteen-week semesters. It may be stretched easily to a fifteenth week by doing “catch-up” or additional harmonizing/transposing work at the end of the semester. The thirteenth session may be devoted entirely to class work, with the fourteenth and fifteenth scheduled as the written and performed final exams respectively.

## Class Profile

Class Guitar I is a two-credit-hour course, taught once weekly. Each class number in the syllabus represents one two-hour class meeting. Registration is limited to 15 students per class section, with three sections of Guitar I maintained at Oakland Community College. One section of Guitar II is offered as a followup. It is intended for the “general public,” and is not associated with a specific guitar curriculum. Therefore it is designed for beginners in music, as well as in guitar, and incorporates all fundamentals necessary to this goal. In reality, each class has a mix of students with more or less guitar and musical background.

- Some students have learned odds and ends on guitar by themselves or from friends: They benefit from gaining a foundation for understanding what they already know, and usually learn additional material that is new to them.
- Some students have training on a different instrument: They learn the skills and concepts that are unique to the guitar.
- Some students have no background whatsoever: They benefit especially from the mental / theoretical concepts, as they begin to build the physical skills.

Learning a strong basis for understanding the fretboard, and introductory theoretical aspects of both reading and chord playing, provide a common ground for this diversity of experience. The mix of both written and performance tests provides all students an equal opportunity to do “A” work. The class format is tightly structured in order to present material efficiently and clearly for all, and to avoid drifting into “jamming” or specialized interests. The latter are better served by private lessons or classes devoted to special guitar topics. Since the course goal is learning to play the guitar, only as much theory as needed to provide practical shortcuts to performance is included. Students conclude the semester with a nice collection of music that they have learned to play.

## Course Profile and Structure

The first page of the Syllabus presents the course specifics: texts, objectives and grading.

- **Texts:** The principal text is *Guitar QuickStart™* by Mary Jo Disler, ISBN 0-9642229-0-6, Lyra House Music Publications. Additional music reading material may be selected by the instructor. Basic reading for either classic or plectrum techniques can be used in a beginning class.
- **Tests:** Tests are important. This teacher's experience over many years indicates that students respond best and make the most progress through material that sets testing goals. Without testing, classes tend to become "sloppy" and unfocused, despite a carefully formulated syllabus. This course includes both written tests and performance of specified material. Indeed, the final performance test is one of the highlights of the class. In preparing for it, students capsulize their accomplishments for the entire semester. Those who prepare conscientiously are delighted by their own self-discovery of their progress. The performance tests are described in detail in the Syllabus. Sample written tests are being considered for publication by Lyra House.
- **Transparencies:** Overhead transparencies play a major role in the style of classroom presentation. After a number of years of chalkboard and lecture oriented teaching, the adoption of overheads dramatically enhanced the ability to cover more material and concepts with improved clarity. Instructors may also be able to use modern instructional technologies, based on availability at their school.
- **Structure:** The first half of the course presents basic fretboard theory and music reading, and the second half presents chords and chart-reading. The rationale for this order is that students who are new to music reading will have the benefit of the full term to start internalizing the concepts. Experimentation with both formats (chords first as compared with reading notation first) has proven the benefits of the "reading first" approach: Students with no prior music training may struggle with the reading process, but learn chords more quickly and easily later in the semester when they are oriented to the guitar. Reading also provides theoretical background that can be applied to understanding chords. –And the full sound of the chords comes as a welcome relief to the single-note reading of the first few weeks. It injects a breath of fresh air and inspiration at precisely the midsemester time when the course needs a new slant.

## Class Session Notes

These notes are brief supplements to the Syllabus lists for each class day. They augment it with ideas for presentation, but do not discuss each and every item. The discussions in the text *Guitar QuickStart™* are clear and complete. It is wise to teach a technique or concept in class first through demonstration, then refer students to the text pages for study and reinforcement of class work. Demonstrate first, and verbalize afterwards is generally a successful teaching principle.

- **CLASS #1: What a day the first class is!** The teacher is new to the students. Students are new to the teacher. Some are there TO LEARN, and some are just curious. –And then there are the guitars – all kinds of guitars – good and bad – in tune and out of tune– steel-string and classic – full-size and child-size – straight necks (mostly) and warped necks. –And it is YOUR job to make sense of all this as you set the tone of the class for a whole semester yet to come! Rest assured that it can be done!
1. Start ON TIME with an "icebreaker," one you are comfortable with: Play something, introduce yourself, ask students to introduce themselves and their music/guitar background.

2. Ask students to fill out a questionnaire providing the teacher with information on musical and guitar background, if you like. (Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't.)
3. Tune all the guitars. Ask them to line up at your chair, and use an A-440 tuning fork or other accurate device to set the pitch for each one, even those that may seem to be in tune. This serves several purposes: You can assess the individual guitars and students' prior background in tuning. Make recommendations as necessary: Guitars may need repairs and/or new strings. You might recommend a different instrument if one is especially bad (perhaps one can be borrowed or rented for the semester), or otherwise warn students of instruments which pose a problem that might seriously hamper their success. I normally tune all guitars the first two classes, then ask students to work on learning the tuning process.
4. Begin to learn students' names. Ask first names as they present guitars for tuning. Go over your class list. Knowing names is one of your most important teaching tools.
5. Teach material of substance. Don't waste the first session as a "get-acquainted and go buy the texts" time. There is too much to learn, and with one meeting per week, the semester will go by very quickly. Remember that the first class sets the tone for the focused work to come. Present the concepts listed in the Syllabus, (even if some students do not have guitars the first day), and conclude with a brief discussion of the course specifications on page 1 of the Syllabus.
6. Use handouts to facilitate teaching. Since some students will attend without the text, two handouts are helpful the first day: 1) a diagram of a guitar for learning parts of the guitar, and 2) a 12-fret blank tablature (as on p.12 of *Guitar QuickStart™*) for diagramming the fretboard.
7. Have students play the guitar as soon as possible. This is why they are taking the course, and the sound and feel of the guitar begin immediately to generate a sense of purpose for the class. After guitars are tuned and the subject for the day is addressed, students can play the strings as they are labelled with numbers and letters. Establish the concepts of "high and low" as sound, not spatial location, from the very beginning, and associate them with what is being played. Students may also play the frets on single strings as the whole- half-step formula is being taught: Establish the second finger opposite the thumb as the basic position for the fretting hand, and ask students to slide the second finger up and down a given string at random while playing. Then apply this technique to learning the letters on each string according to the whole- half-step formula.

**CLASS #2: All students will bring guitars**, so a discussion of posture for holding the guitar, and of the basic finger and plectrum techniques are important.

1. Demonstrate basic playing techniques: classic and plectrum. I limit the classic technique to alternating "i" and "m" fingers at first, with occasional use of the thumb on lower strings. Encourage students to develop an efficient and correct technique. You may or may not be able to follow up with individuals throughout the semester. Many have the habit of using the thumb for everything. Help them to realize that this limits what they can do on guitar. The best players don't play that way, as they can observe for themselves at concerts or on TV. Respond to those who express concern for playing with correct technique. They will be some of your most conscientious and rewarding students.
2. Review and complete the construction of the music alphabet on the fretboard. Play the alphabet on all strings horizontally to fret 12. Playing each letter twice (E E - F F - G G - etc.) gives new players thinking time, and experienced players a little more activity. I show students the basic fretting hand position with thumb opposite the second finger, and ask them to slide the second finger from letter-to-letter along the string. This helps them to stabilize the fretting hand relative to the neck, and also encourages a sense of the active role of the arm.

3. Discuss the fifth-fret tuning process. Ask students to locate the fret matching the open string “by ear.” After completely constructing the alphabet on the fretboard, the relationship between the open-string letters and fifth-fret letters can be pointed out. Some students may have electronic tuners, which I encourage them to use. However it is important for the development of the ear for them to learn to tune the guitar to itself as well.
4. First position mapping of the natural letters opens the door to position-oriented fingering. Use an exercise to practice finger alignment on frets 1-4.

**CLASS #3: *Begin each class consistently with a warmup exercise.*** During the first half of the course, which deals with note-reading, the various scales serve this purpose well:

1. Letters on each string to fret 12 and back
2. First position scale of natural letters
3. The major scales of C, G and F (introduced in Class #4)

Be sure to explain measures and time signatures when introducing the “First Position Reading Charts and Exercises,” pp.18-24 of QuickStart. Frequently some students are already quite adept at tablature and are taking the course to learn reading. Other students are more comfortable reading directly from the music staff. Help them understand that tablature is used as a temporary teaching device to aid visual association between music staff and fretboard, and is incorporated into written tests.

**CLASS #4: *In reinforcing music staff reading,*** call on individuals to recite letter names and fret numbers for the reading exercises. This teacher is a strong believer in the value of verbalizing to the learning process. Provide a few minutes of “trying it out” time before playing each exercise together as a class.

***The Major Scale on the Guitar:*** The major scale is taught from a simple one-page handout. It has been added to the course as the result of many requests, but only the scales of C, G, and F major are included because of time limitations. (Guitar II teaches all fifteen major scales, one per week, throughout the semester.) C major is easy because students are simply asked to “play the alphabet from C to C” in first position, for one octave. It serves as a model for the whole- half-step formula, which is then applied to G and F major. The adjustment for the correct formula requires the F# of the G major scale, and Bb of the F major scale. All three scales are diagrammed on a tablature showing the spellings in first position only. The G and F major scales are played two octaves in first position.

***Test preparation:*** The first written midterm is scheduled for the next class session. Some review of concepts covered is helpful to students.

**CLASS #5:** At this point in the course, students have learned the fretboard by letter names, and are ready to understand that the same letter may occur in different pitch registers. Working tablature in class provides an opportunity to discuss this important feature.

***Pitch Levels of Letters and the Music Staff:*** The perception of pitch levels and their relationship to staff notation relates to the concepts of “high and low” as associated with sound, not spatial location on the guitar. Pitch level is a very important concept to beginning readers, and is described on page 26 of *Guitar QuickStart™*.

Help students see that if the note is higher on the staff, it will be on a higher fret [on the same string] or higher string on the guitar. Conversely, notes that are lower on the staff are on lower frets [on the same string] or lower strings on the guitar. This principle is true within a given position, and applies to all reading in this course, which is limited to first position. Point out that three letters occur three times in first position (E, F, and G) and therefore have “high, middle, and low” notes. The rest of the letters occur twice (A, B, C, and D), and therefore have “high and low” notes.

**CLASS #6: *Discuss the Midterm Performance Test*** and look over the pieces with the class. Present any loose ends of information, such as ties and pickup notes.

**CLASS #7: *This is the last full class devoted to music staff reading***, so tie up any loose ends regarding information: interpreting sharps and flats, key signatures, etc. Scan all tablature and notation work in students’ texts. It is mainly a way to check their understanding of the concepts, as well as preparation for material they will encounter in written tests.

**Chord diagram introduction.** Discuss the difference between letter names for single notes as compared with letter names for chords. As a demonstration of the fact that chords have 3 or more letters, each string of the Em chord may be analyzed for letter names. The letter that names a chord (the root) is like an “initial,” with the other letters “understood” when one has studied music theory. The relevance to guitar is that the root will determine the lowest string to be included in a given chord. This is an important, easy, and useful concept to beginners.

**CLASS #8: *The Midterm Performance Test*** is conducted with each student individually, and is best done in a separate room - practice room, or whatever may be available. Beginners would rather not be “on display” in front of the class! I assure them that accuracy is important, but not speed. Some may not yet be capable of playing a piece up to tempo.

**CLASS #9: *Playing the chord assignments*** in the Syllabus is fairly straightforward from this point to the end of the semester. A highlight is memorization of the “Folia,” p. 45 of *Guitar QuickStart*™. It is a piece that was very popular in the Baroque era. In principle, it can be roughly compared to the blues in that it is a chord progression on which musicians improvised. In class it is used as a vehicle for teaching and playing rhythmic variety. The class works out 4 or 5 rhythmic variations written by students: Ask them to “write” several one-measure rhythm patterns in 3/4, the meter of the “Folia.” Draw them on a board or transparency so all can use the patterns to play the chart. (As models, see “Special Strum Rhythms” on p.47 of *Guitar QuickStart*™ ) Keep a copy of the rhythms written by each class section (if you teach more than one) and play them in future classes. “The Folia” is one of the pieces students can perform at the conclusion of the course.

**CLASS #10: *“Converting Songs to Charts”*** is a very important concept that forms the foundation for the relationship of chords to the meter and measure layout of specific songs. This is the principle that will enable students to figure out virtually any published score involving guitar chords. Go through the mechanics of the process with several songs, whether there is time to play them all or not.

**CLASS #11: Rhythm Exercises:** The class may be divided into two groups to play through the exercises in *Guitar QuickStart™*, pp.50-51. One group can play the even-numbered exercises, and the other the odd-numbered exercises.

**Introduce the freestroke** by playing “Homage to Pachelbel” ( *Guitar QuickStart™* , p.45 #5 ) with p i m a (eighth-notes) in each measure. Students will usually recognize the music. Practice the freestroke on open strings, then apply to chords in this chart.

If time permits, teach a simple bass run for “Down in the Valley” (low A-B-C#, second to last measure).

**CLASS #12: Alternating Bass for Chords.** It is best to demonstrate this technique before explaining it. As a followup to the Root-Chord technique introduced in Class #11, the sound is easily identified with country and bluegrass. The association with the perfect fifth interval sets the stage for future study of theory, since this interval plays such a prominent role in the circle of fifths and its applications. Students sometimes mistakenly add 5 letters to the root, so must be cautioned to label the chord root as number “1,” with the interval figured from that point to the letter at number “5.” Use the perfect fifth relationship to determine and diagram the alternating basses for all chords learned in this course.

**Harmonizing “Happy Birthday.”** To present the primary key chords, ask students to list the chords used in several songs from the text. (Omit those in minor keys.) Point out that the first and last chords of the songs are the same, and explain that this chord identifies the key of the song. Help them to see the patterns of reoccurrence of groups of chords. (For example, the songs “Skip to My Lou” and “Down in the Valley” are both in the key of D, and use the chords D and A7.) Make a chart showing the key chord first, followed by the others in alphabetical order by root. Analyze the root relationships within each key by interval, and the consistency of I – IV – V7 relationships will become obvious. Explain that these chord groups enable a start at “playing by ear,” as well as helping with songwriting.

Harmonizing “Happy Birthday” provides an immediate reinforcement of the concept. (The unfinished chart is on p.75 of *Guitar QuickStart™*.) Choose a key at random from those in the text. The key chord (I) will be the first and last chord. The chords in between may be any of the primary chords in any order, so one must “use the ear” and experiment while singing the song to complete the harmonization. I suggest “singing with the same chord until it doesn’t sound right. Then try either of the remaining two chords to see which fits best.” After the chords have been established, play and sing the song to prove that they “work.” Transposition can be demonstrated very simply: Ask students if the song is too high or low for them to sing. Select a higher or lower key and show the transposition by matching chord functions. Point out that some songs may have more than one solution, and that matching chords to tunes takes practice, just as playing does. If time permits, additional songs may be harmonized.

**Final Exams.** It is valuable to talk and play through the performance final as a review technique.

**CLASSES #13 & #14: Final exams: written and performed.** The final performance exam is listed in detail at the conclusion of the Syllabus. Fifteen minute time slots are ideal, but larger classes may require smaller segments of time to accommodate everyone.