

# Getting Beyond Guitar Shapes

*by Curt Sheller*

Over the years people have come up with various fingering systems, patterns and even gadgets to make learning the guitar easier. Most systems are geared to the beginning student and don't require any knowledge of the guitar fingerboard beyond what a fret is and that string six is your thickest string and string one, your thinnest.

## Common Guitar Fingering Systems

One thing most fingering systems have in common is that they are shape and pattern based. This is basically a connect the dots approach and does not require any knowledge of the actual names of the notes you are playing. These approaches don't provide any method or way to connect the various shapes. They are set fingerings, starting on the same finger each time. And most importantly by being set fingerings, they produce one sound.

The initial set of basic chords are typically dictated to the beginning guitarist or learned from a book as chord shapes using chord grids. They show the fingerboard shape, the fingers that are used to finger the chord and what strings to play. This approach is also carried over to learning scales. But what are the notes? The notes could have come from Mars as far as most are concerned. This shape based, put finger x here approach also carries over to TAB where you are told what string and fret to play.

Beyond a basic set of scales and chords, there are too many shapes to memorize. A knowledge of the fingerboard is needed to progress beyond guitar shapes. The sooner the shapes are linked to their actual notes and the sound they produce, the better. The shape should come after the notes and sound. It is the notes that produce the shape, not the other way around.

The guitar has a unique capability to play the exact same note on different strings using anyone of your fingers. This gives guitarists tremendous flexibility and headaches at the same time. The duplicate note ability of the guitar at the extreme gives you six choices for string one, open E. This note can be played on any string if your neck has 24 frets...lots of fingering choices and tonal choices. Piano has one choice for a note and set fingerings are an advantage.

This article will focus on several common fingering systems available to guitarists.

## Basic Requirements for a Fingering System

There are four sources of material used for improvisation: scales, intervals, arpeggios and sequences. A fingering system needs to support the efficient playing of each, allow for playing any note with any finger, support multiple ways of playing any musical passage taking advantage of the guitar's ability to play the same note on different strings. As guitarists, we might as well use this feature.

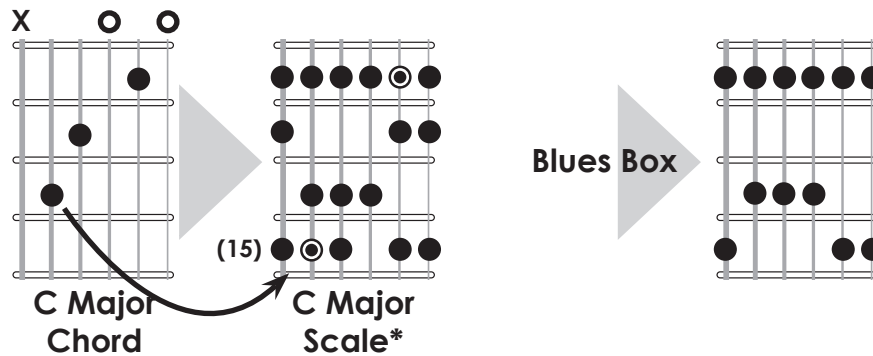
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## The “CAGED” system

The “CAGED” system is based on the first open position chords one typically learns on the guitar. These chords are commonly called “Cowboy” or “Folk” chords. These are just your basic open position chords E A D G C with their minor and seventh versions. They can be arranged to spell the word “CAGED”. These are almost always learned by memorizing their fingerboard shape.

This shape based learning is carried over to the “CAGED” scale system of fingering. Typically the first scale a rock or blues guitarist learns is the Blues scale using one of its “CAGED” scale positions. This produces the famous “Blues box”.



(\*The C note is up one octave)

Knowing the names of the notes are not one of the requirements to learn this system. They are pattern based fingerings. Major fingering limitations arise for playing scales, arpeggios, intervals and sequences. The “CAGED” fingerings produce a set scale sound from their set fingering. They span an octave or more and don’t necessarily start on the root or letter name of the scale. They allow you to play a scale in five regions of the guitar. There is no provision for connecting the regions.

After learning the basic blues box fingering, and being stuck in that proverbial “blues box” fingering for a while, I learned my scales using the “CAGED” system from a series of Guitar Player magazine articles by Howard Robert’s in the late 70 and early 80s. There are several books available and online resources that deal with this system.

Over time, I realized their limited technical and musical potential. I felt trapped, caged in by the “CAGED” fingering system. I could not easily connect the different positions. The set fingerings didn’t allow me to connect them other than with a few slides I had figured out on my own. For me it was a good system for scale runs and not much more. I didn’t even know the names of the notes.

Joe Pass, Herb Ellis and Barney Kessell are a few guitarists who have used this system. Countless players use this very common system.

## Segovia Fingerings

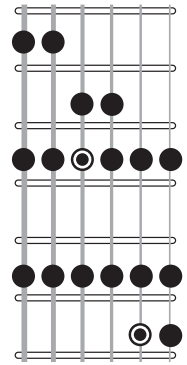
These are a set of major and minor scale fingerings developed by the great classical guitarist

Andres Segovia. They can be found in his booklet *Diatonic Major and Minor Scales*. They are commonly used by guitarists pursuing the classical guitar repertoire. This booklet provides a set of left hand fingerings and right hand fingerings. The left hand fingerings are set and the right hand fingerings have you play the scales starting with each right hand finger.

### 3 Notes Per String

This is a scale based fingering system that, as the name implies, features three notes per string. An example is shown to the right. This system is commonly used to facilitate quick scale runs as it allows consecutive down or up pick strokes across adjacent strings. Johnny Smith and Frank Gambale are good examples of guitarists who have incorporated this style into their playing. Like the CAGED system this system is shape based, region based and features set fingerings.

This system typically expands the basic four fret span of a finger per fret, from four frets to five frets using a stretch of the pinky or index finger to get five frets. Tough on smaller hands, great for a player like the late jazz great, Tal Farlow who could stretch almost an octave on his short scale guitar.



### 7 Regions

This system is based on set fingerings that start on the lowest note of a scale available on string six giving you seven positions or regions for each scale. One position for each of the seven diatonic intervals of the basic diatonic scales is available. Like the “CAGED” and “3 Notes per String” systems, this is shape based. Again no knowledge of what notes you are playing are required.

### Summary of Systems

All the above fingering systems provide a set number of scale fingerings and shapes. It's sort of like painting by numbers. They are limited in scope and do not address any fingering problems inherent with the guitar's tuning such as playing single notes on the same fret either on adjacent or non adjacent strings, starting on different fingers... connecting positions..., etc.

There are a few other fingering systems out there and I'm sure guitarists are cooking up others as well. They are usually shape based, limited in scope and do not address all the fingering problems that produce inefficient fingerings on the guitar. Being locked in to one of these systems is the most common reason for one having a feeling that their improvisations are limited and always sound the same. They do!!! Set fingerings produce set sounds.

### The Solution to Limited Fingering Systems

One major problem with the previous fingering systems is that they are confined to starting on a particular interval, finger and string. They are shape based with no knowledge of notes required.

It is difficult to develop a fingering system that works starting on any scale degree and any string, works equally well for scales, intervals, arpeggios and sequences and addresses inherent fingerings problems that guitarists encounter.

For scale fingerings, we will use one octave scales. To create longer two and three octave fingerings, all we will need to do is connect various one octave fingers and it won't matter what finger we start or end on. Our goal is to not painting ourselves into a proverbial guitar fingering

corner.

One thing that this system supports is knowing the notes of the neck. This is not the same as reading. It is as simple as putting your finger on any string, at any fret and name the note. It does not require you to memorize a bunch of new fingerings.

I will demonstrate this system with a C major scale, a C seventh arpeggio, the C major scale in intervals of fourths and finally, a simple sequence from the C major scale.

## **So, What is this System?**

Its not really a system but a series of principles used to play the notes on the guitar and explore multiple possibilities. If you think about it, there are never more than two notes to worry about. The note that you are on and the next note. It's that next note that give guitarists problems. This systems gives you up to six ways of playing that next note.

Using the six motion principles from the book "The Six Secrets of Guitar Fingering" by Chuck Anderson and knowing the notes of the neck, a guitarist CAN play ANY scale, ANY intervallic sequence, ANY arpeggio or sequence starting on ANY finger, and you don't have to memorize countless shapes or patterns. There is not a musical situation that can't be solved using one or a combination of these principles. It's great for reading as well as improvising.

This system gives a guitarist multiple fingering pathways through any musical passage. This opens up tremendous musical choices and possibilities. It is more work than the set fingerings of other systems. However, it offers a broader palette of musical choices than any set fingering system.

From this system, all the previously mentioned fingering systems can be explained using one or more of the six motion principles. This system is not shape based and thus needs a knowledge of the names of the notes of the guitar neck. It applies equally well to scales as it does to intervals, arpeggios and sequences.

To learn the notes of the neck I recommended Chuck Anderson's book "Unlocking the Guitar: Notes of the Neck". This book provides 10 steps to finally learning the guitar neck.

Venturing beyond basic pentatonic scales and chords, a guitarist should quickly realize that there are far too many shapes on the guitar to memorize. Just take a look at any chord dictionary to see that. Throw in scales, arpeggios, intervals and it can be pretty overwhelming. It all comes down to the notes.

Bottom line is that this "non" system can explain any other system.

## **Using the Six Motion Principles**

In his book "The Six Secrets of Guitar Fingering" Chuck Anderson has developed a system based on six motion principles for navigating the guitar's fingerboard. The Six Secrets of Guitar Fingering are Basic, Slide, Pass, Leap, Stretch and Contraction. Here is an excerpt from the book.

**Basic** is used when the passage falls within a 4 fret span and you need the maximum motion efficiency. This fingering solution minimizes the number of notes per string. Consequently, it maximizes the number of string changes resulting in the greatest possible mixture of tone colors. The Basic 4 fret span can be set and reset anywhere on the neck.

**Slide** is used when the passage can not be played within a single 4 fret span or when more notes per string are needed to produce a particular effect. It's also used in situations where a gradually ascending or descending diagonal motion best solves the physical and musical demands of the passage.

**Pass** maximizes the number of notes per string, making the timbre consistent. It's used to move up or down the neck to cope with a passage in which the range is unusually large. The pass provides an effective way to move straight up the first string. It's particularly useful in developing 3 octave fingerings and in playing melodies with an adjacent drone string.

**Contraction** is used to subtly shift the position up or down as you move from string to string. Though contraction is a much neglected principle, it often eliminates the need to stretch.

**Stretch** is used when the majority of notes in a passage fall within a 4 fret span with the exception of a note or two. Generally, stretch is avoided. However, if the avoidance of stretch causes excessive position shifting and this shifting can't be justified for any musical reason, use the stretch principle. Stretch can also be used to prepare for a new position.

**Leap** is used to solve a passage whose range is unusually wide or when you need to drastically alter the timbre of the notes.

## Using the Fingering Principles

The dominant principle of fingering is Basic and not marked in the examples. The other principles are used when notes can't be played in a 4 fret span or when a particular musical effect is needed. Each of the examples illustrate a fingering principle or combination of principles.

### Example C Major Scale



Example **A** shows a few of the possibilities starting on string six. All produce a particular sound. Do not memorize these examples but simply explore the possibilities. To improvise, vary the rhythm, add embellishments, staccato, legato, hammer ons, pull off, etc.

There are countless other ways to play this scale. Using the one octave C major scale above and starting on string 6 six alone, there are minimum of twenty different pathways through a one octave major scale using each of the fingering principles once or twice only. If you combine principles or apply the principles on different note combinations, the possibilities are almost endless. Compared to the one finger, one pattern approach of the current systems, the musical possibilities are staggering.

### C7 Arpeggio

Example **B** shows several examples for playing the notes of a C7 chord. Again, Do Not memorize these examples but simply explore them. To improvise, vary the rhythm, add embellishments, staccato, legato, hammer ons, pull offs, etc.

### C Major Scale in Fourths

Because the standard tuning of the guitar is mainly in perfect fourths, this is one of the harder intervals to play on the guitar. Example **C** shows a few examples for playing a C major scale in



fourths. To improvise, vary the rhythm, add embellishments, staccato, legato, hammer ons, pull offs, etc.

For the longest time, I had avoided fourths on the guitar with out even knowing it.

## **C Major Sequence.**

Example **D** shows several examples for playing a sequence based on the C major scale. To improvise, vary the rhythm, add embellishments, staccato, legato, hammer ons, pull offs, etc.

I can't say this enough. **DO NOT MEMORIZE** any of these as shapes that these fingerings happen to make, memorize the notes. The goal is to be able to play any note with any finger and ultimately make wise, efficient fingering decisions.

Some problems that a guitarist will encounter are the actual motor skills necessary for the six fingering principles. There are a whole series of fingering exercises to gain the motor skills. Just about any teacher will have exercises for the guitar. There are a few books available on this subject. The best that deals specifically with the these skills needed for each of the six principles is "High Tech Guitar" by Chuck Anderson, the author of "The Six Secrets of Guitar Fingering".

Now go back and explore these on every string using every possible starting finger. Apply it to all your scales, intervals, arpeggios and sequences. Lots of work but the reward is greater than the effort.

**NOTE:** All books noted in this article are available online at [www.JazzGuitarResources.com](http://www.JazzGuitarResources.com).

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An Author of several books including QuickStart - Scale Fingerings for Lead Guitar - Vol I, QuickStart - Chord Progressions for Lead Guitar - Vol I, The Advance Guide for Guitar Chords Vols Vol I, II & III, The Advanced Guide to Chord Progressions for Guitar Vol I & II. All are available through his publishing company Curt Sheller Publications at [www.JazzGuitarResources.com](http://www.JazzGuitarResources.com).

Curt also created and maintains the [www.JazzGuitarResources.com](http://www.JazzGuitarResources.com) web site. [JazzGuitarResources.com](http://JazzGuitarResources.com) is a site dedicated to the pursuit of music with a special interest in jazz guitar for jazz guitarists. The site Contains listings and links to over 170 jazz guitar luthiers worldwide and 300 plus jazz guitarists and most major jazz guitar manufactures that offer jazz guitars. The site also offers links to lots of amps, speaker cabinets, strings, publishers, online lessons and much more.

**A**

# One Octave C Major

*C Major Scale*

The image displays a musical score for the One Octave C Major scale on guitar. It begins with a standard musical staff in treble clef, showing the scale from C4 to C5. Below this, there are ten systems of guitar tablature (TAB), each consisting of six lines representing the strings. Each TAB system includes fingering numbers (1-4) and specific techniques such as 'Slide', 'Pass', 'Contraction', 'Stretch', 'Leap', and 'Pass'.

**System 1:** Fingering: 2, 4, 1, 2, 4, 1, 3, 4. TAB: 8, 10, 7, 8, 10, 7, 9, 10.

**System 2:** Fingering: 2, 4, 1, 2, 4, 1, Slide, 1, 2. TAB: 8, 10, 7, 8, 10, 7, 9, 10.

**System 3:** Fingering: 1, 3, Pass, 1, 2, 4, 1, 3, 4. TAB: 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 12, 14, 15.

**System 4:** Fingering: 1, Contraction, 4, 1, 2, 4, 1, 3, 4. TAB: 8, 10, 7, 8, 10, 7, 9, 10.

**System 5:** Fingering: 3, Stretch, 4, 1, 2, 4, 1, 3, 4. TAB: 8, 10, 7, 8, 10, 7, 9, 10.

**System 6:** Fingering: 4, 1, 3, 4, Leap, 0, 1, 3, 4. TAB: 8, 10, 7, 8, 10, 7, 9, 10.

**System 7:** Fingering: 4, 1, 3, 4, Leap, 0, 1, 3, 4. TAB: 8, 5, 7, 8, 10, 2, 4, 5.

**System 8:** Fingering: 4, 1, Slide, 1, 2, 4, Pass, 1, 3, 4. TAB: 8, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15.

**System 9:** Fingering: 3, Pass, 1, 3, 4, 1, Contraction, 4, 1, 2. TAB: 8, 10, 12, 13, 10, 12, 9, 10.

**B**

# C7 Arpeggio

*C7*

The image displays a musical score for a C7 arpeggio on guitar. It begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The notation shows a sequence of notes: C4 (fret 2), E4 (fret 1), G4 (fret 4), Bb4 (fret 2), A4 (fret 4), F4 (fret 1), and C4 (fret 2). Below the staff, there are seven systems of guitar tablature, each consisting of a treble (T), an arpeggio (A), and a bass (B) line. The tablature provides fret numbers for each note in the sequence, with some systems including additional techniques like 'Stretch', 'Slide', and 'Pass'.

Staff	Notes	Frets	Techniques
1	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	2, 1, 4, 2, 4, 1, 2	
2	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	8, 7, 10, 8, 10, 7, 8	
3	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	4, 3, 1, 4, 1, 3, 4	
4	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	8, 7, 5, 8, 5, 7, 8	
5	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	1, 4, 3, 1, 3, 4, 1	Stretch
6	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	8, 12, 10, 8, 10, 12, 8	
7	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	1, 4, 2, 4, 1, 1	Slide
8	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	8, 12, 15, 13, 15, 12, 8	
9	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	3, 3, 1, 4, 1, 3, 3	Slide
10	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	8, 12, 10, 13, 10, 12, 8	
11	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	4, 3, 3, 1, 3, 3, 4	Slide
12	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	8, 7, 10, 8, 10, 7, 8	
13	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	2, 1, 3, 1, 3, 1, 2	Pass
14	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	8, 7, 5, 3, 5, 7, 8	
15	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	3, 2, 1, 4, 1, 2, 3	Pass
16	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, A4, F4, C4	8, 7, 10, 13, 10, 7, 8	



# C

## C Major Scale Intervals of Fourths

*C Major*

The diagram shows the C major scale in treble clef. Below it are six systems of tablature for guitar, each showing a sequence of intervals of fourths. Each system includes a diagram of the interval with fingerings (1, 2, 3, 4) and a list of fret numbers for the strings (T, A, B).

System 1:   
 Diagram: 1 (1) 3 4 1 (1) 1 2 3 4 1 (1) 3 4 3 4   
 T: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10   
 A: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10   
 B: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10

System 2:   
 Diagram: 2 1 3 4 1 (1) 1 2 3 4 1 (1) 3 4 3 4   
 T: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10   
 A: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10   
 B: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10

System 3:   
 Diagram: 3 4 3 4 1 (1) 1 2 3 4 1 (1) 3 4 3 4   
 T: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10   
 A: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10   
 B: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10

System 4:   
 Diagram: 4 1 3 4 1 (1) 1 2 3 4 1 (1) 3 4 3 4   
 T: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10   
 A: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10   
 B: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10

System 5:   
 Diagram: 1 (1) 3 4 1 (1) 1 2 3 4 1 (1) 3 4 3 4   
 T: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10   
 A: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10   
 B: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10

System 6:   
 Diagram: 2 1 3 4 1 (1) 1 2 3 4 1 (1) 3 4 3 4   
 T: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10   
 A: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10   
 B: 8 8 10 10 7 7 8 9 10 10 7 7 9 9 10 10

\* Indicates a barre of finger 1

**REMEMBER: DO NOT MEMORIZE ANY SHAPES  
THESE EXAMPLES HAPPEN TO MAKE.**

**D**

# C Major Scale - Sequence

*C Major*

2 1 2 4 1 4 1 2 4 3 4 1 3 1 3 4

T  
A  
B  
8 7 8 10 7 10 7 8 10 9 10 7 9 7 9 10

Slide

2 1 2 4 1 4 1 2 4 3 4 1 3 1 1 2

T  
A  
B  
8 7 8 10 7 10 7 8 10 9 10 7 9 7 9 10

Slide

4 3 4 1 3 1 3 4 4 3 4 1 3 1 3 4

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

Contraction

3 1 2 4 1 4 1 2 4 3 4 1 3 1 3 4

T  
A  
B  
8 7 8 10 7 10 7 8 10 9 10 7 9 7 9 10

Pass Slide

1 3 4 1 3 1 3 4 4 3 4 1 3 1 3 4

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

Stretch Contraction

1 4 1 4 1 4 1 2 4 3 4 1 3 1 3 4

T  
A  
B  
8 12 8 10 7 10 7 8 10 9 10 7 9 7 9 10

Slide Stretch Contraction

3 3 4 1 3 1 3 4 1 4 1 4 1 4 1 2

T  
A  
B  
8 12 13 10 12 10 12 13 10 14 10 12 9 12 9 10