

~ Picking Hand Discipline ~

I have often been asked how I, and other players, are able to play really fast without playing sloppy. Playing sweep picked arpeggios or scale sequences cleanly while using a lot of gain (distortion) can be a big challenge. Many players have a hard time keeping all of the lower strings from ringing out while soloing on the higher strings, causing a sloppy noise. In this lesson I will show you a highly effective technique for solving this problem.

Before I go any further, I want to make a very important distinction about the different string muting techniques that exist for guitar players. First is the palm muting that is used when playing rhythm guitar. This technique is achieved by resting your picking hand on the bridge touching the very strings that you are playing to achieve a special percussive kind of articulation. This technique is highly effective for playing **rhythm guitar** and it affects the very strings you are playing.

However, what I want to talk to you about is something **totally different** from rhythm guitar palm muting described above and it concerns how you should mute the strings that you are NOT playing while playing **lead guitar**. This kind of muting is important to achieve in order to make your lead guitar playing sound very clean. Most guitar players greatly struggle with this area of their playing because they do not have an effective technique for muting this extra unwanted string noise.

At best, guitar players try to use their palm in the same way as they do for rhythm guitar playing to mute strings that aren't supposed to be making any sound. However, since this way of muting is designed for a totally different reason (in order to play better rhythm guitar as explained above), it doesn't really work well for many players when they try to use it to block excess noise from strings when playing lead guitar.

Now that I have made this distinction between string muting for rhythm and lead guitar clear, I want to introduce a very important string muting technique to you that will help you clean up your lead guitar playing.

Unlike most players who try to mute the lower strings with the palm of their picking hand, I use my right hand (picking hand) thumb. The thumb rests on all of the lower strings lower than wherever the pick is. Here is an example: If the pick is currently playing a note on the G string, then the thumb would be muting (touching) the D, A and low E strings. The high E string would be muted by one of the fingers on the fretting hand (usually the first finger).

It looks like this:



Here it is from another angle:



Important Disclaimer: As I explained above, the thumb muting technique is designed to mute the strings that you are NOT playing when playing LEAD guitar. For rhythm playing, you should change from using thumb muting to palm muting in order to lightly mute the strings that you ARE playing. So do not confuse the two techniques and understand that thumb muting is meant for muting unwanted string noise in **lead guitar playing** and palm muting is something totally different and should be used in **rhythm guitar playing** to give the strings you are playing a more percussive/articulate sound.

Practicing this thumb muting technique can be frustrating at times and may feel unnatural at first. The most common problem that players / students have is the new positioning of the picking hand. If you are used to muting with the palm, then it may feel awkward to reposition your hand so that the thumb is now muting the strings. The solution is to stop trying to rest the palm on or near the bridge of the guitar. It may feel awkward at first because you are not used to holding your hand this way, but keep practicing and it will begin to feel natural soon.

Another common problem is inadvertently muting the very string you are attempting to pick. This is caused by the thumb getting in the way of the picked string and unintentionally muting it. This usually happens when the thumb is not centered on the pick and the tip of the thumb is hanging over the pick near the string you are attempting to play. If this happens when you are practicing this technique, reposition your thumb so it is holding the pick more in the center and is not hanging over the edge of the pick. Watch the position of my thumb in the pictures above. My thumb is positioned mostly near the center of the pick.

Playing some fast virtuosic lines can really add fire and passion to the music, but if those lines are not executed cleanly, you won't get the desired effect. Getting my own picking hand disciplined to keep my playing clean took a lot of work initially, but it has paid off greatly for me and it can do the same for you too if you keep working on it and don't give up. My original goal was mainly to clean up my arpeggio playing, but I later discovered the benefits of expanding the thumb muting technique to all types of lead playing. Now I pick this way all the time and I highly recommend for you to adapt this technique as well.

Obviously, you will not be able to completely master this technique before the next lesson. Therefore, my advice to you is to simply focus on applying thumb muting only during your practice time. When you play for fun, or do improvising, you can do so without worrying so much about the position of the hand. The time to focus intensely on it is when you practice! The more frequently you work on it, the easier it will be for you to completely integrate it into your playing (through muscle memory).

FAQs About The Thumb Muting Technique:

Question: I cannot seem to effectively mute the strings with my thumb and pick at the same time, why?

Answer: When your pick is playing a note on the B string (as an example), your thumb should actually be resting (touching) the G string, D string A string and the low E string and muting them. Make sure that your thumb does not press too hard on the strings that it mutes. This is a common problem among those who are unfamiliar with this technique. By pressing too hard, you are making it difficult for the hand to move easily and pick the strings that you need to play. So, make sure that you are only touching the strings enough to mute them and are not “anchoring” or digging in with your thumb as you play.

Question: The string I am trying to pick gets muted. Why does this happen?

Answer: Make sure that the tip of your thumb is positioned in the center of the pick and is not hanging over the edge of the pick. If your thumb is over the pick, it will mute the very string you are attempting to pick. Remember that this technique is probably new for you and it may take some time and practice before it will start to feel natural.

Question: How can I use thumb muting when playing rhythm guitar if I want the chunkier/percussive sound for muted power chords? Is there a way to combine thumb muting and palm muting?

Answer: Thumb muting is a technique designed exclusively for lead guitar playing. For rhythm guitar playing you should mute with your palm to achieve the sound you are describing. This means you need to adjust your hand positions for playing lead vs. rhythm guitar. In other words, when playing lead guitar, mute with your thumb and when playing rhythm guitar, change your hand position to mute with your palm (and not your thumb).

This adjustment will take a little bit of practice, but after only a short amount of time you will get used to automatically switching between palm and thumb muting while playing and you won't even think about it anymore.

Remember also that the thumb muting is designed to mute the strings that you do NOT want to sound and the palm muting is a totally different technique used for achieving a different tone with the very strings you ARE playing.