



How to Read Guitar Tab/Tablature

Guitar tablature is a system of notation that graphically represents music by showing you the strings and frets that are to be played. It also can show some degree of “feel” or technique with slides, hammer-ons, pull-offs, slurs, vibrato, etc. Since tablature is somewhat of a shortcut system there are not a lot of official rules to this notation. In fact, transcriptions vary from tab to tab as one transcriber may illustrate something differently than another. That being said, I’m going to try to be as thorough as possible regarding the subject so that you have a good grasp of how to interpret it. A note is represented by placing a number (which indicates the fret to play), on the appropriate string. One thing that tablature does not illustrate is the duration of notes. It does not tell you how long a note should be held out. Sometimes tab transcribers will specifically put longer spaces between notes on the line to denote duration, but it’s not quantifiable; it is simply a basic idea. That being said, most people don’t use tablature unless it’s a song that they already know and can hum, so that part becomes less of an issue, except with more intricate parts. Also, even though tablature has been around for centuries, some of the techniques used by rock/pop guitar players are fairly new.

In tablature, each line represents a string on the guitar. The thickest string is the bottom line and the thinnest string is the top line. So basically, it’s the opposite of the way that you think it might be. One way to remember this is to think of the **higher lines as the higher pitched strings and the lower lines as the lower pitched strings.**

| | | |
|----------------------------|-------|--------------|
| 1 st string / e | _____ | thin string |
| 2 nd string / B | _____ | |
| 3 rd string / G | _____ | |
| 4 th string / D | _____ | |
| 5 th string / A | _____ | |
| 6 th string / E | _____ | thick string |

The numbers placed on those lines represent the frets. Tablature does NOT tell you what fingers to use. That is where a good guitar instructor or proper technique comes in handy!

When numbers are placed vertically like below, you will play them like a chord, as in a strum.

Below is a G major chord. (By the way, tablature notation is typically plain black and white - I’ve merely added the red to help you zero in on what I’m referring to)

| | | |
|----------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1 st string / e | — 3 — | thin string |
| 2 nd string / B | — 3 — | |
| 3 rd string / G | — 0 — | |
| 4 th string / D | — 0 — | |
| 5 th string / A | — 2 — | |
| 6 th string / E | — 3 — | thick string |

Tablature Symbols

Remember how I said tablature provides a lot of detail? The following are tablature symbols that represent various techniques. Since new techniques are being discovered all the time, this is not an exhaustive list.

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| h - hammer on | T - tap |
| p - pull-off | TP or 3 diagonal lines under the note - tremelo picking |
| b - bend string | PM - palm muting |
| / - slide up | \n/ - tremelo bar dip; n=amount to dip |
| \ - slide down | \n - tremelo bar down |
| v - vibrato (sometimes written as ~) | n/ - tremelo bar up |
| t - pick hand tap | /n\ - tremelo bar inverted dip |
| Harm - natural harmonic | < > - volume swell (louder/softer) |
| A.H. - artificial harmonic | x - on rhythm slash represents muted slash |
| A.T. - tapped harmonic | |
| tr - trill | |

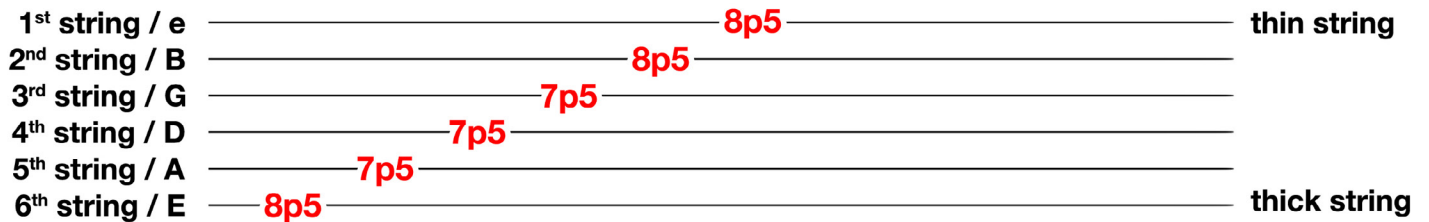
Hammer On

A “hammer-on” is a technique performed by sharply bringing a fretting-hand finger down on the fingerboard behind a fret causing a note to sound. For our example here, you would pick the fifth fret and hammer the seventh or eighth fret as indicated. Hammer-ons might feel awkward at first, but they are easily mastered with practice. As the name indicates, hammer your finger in a quick snapping motion so that the string does not have time to fade out. A snappy hammer-on will vibrate the string almost as much as a strong picking. By the way, this is the A minor pentatonic or C major pentatonic scale that you are about to play.

| | | | | |
|----------------------------|-------|-----|-------|--------------|
| 1 st string / e | _____ | 5h8 | _____ | thin string |
| 2 nd string / B | _____ | 5h8 | _____ | |
| 3 rd string / G | _____ | 5h7 | _____ | |
| 4 th string / D | _____ | 5h7 | _____ | |
| 5 th string / A | _____ | 5h7 | _____ | |
| 6 th string / E | _____ | 5h8 | _____ | thick string |

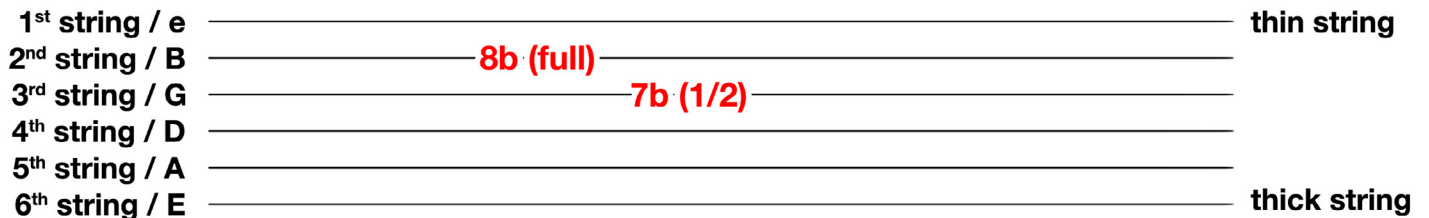
Pull-Off

A “pull-off” is the opposite of a hammer-on. A pull-off is a technique performed by plucking a string by “pulling” the string off the fingerboard with one of the fingers being used to fret the note. For our example here, you would pick the seventh or eighth fret as indicated and pull-off to the fifth fret. Pull-offs can also be a little awkward at first but with practice can be mastered. As its name indicates, pulling your finger off the fingerboard in a snapping motion causes the string to vibrate as if picked.



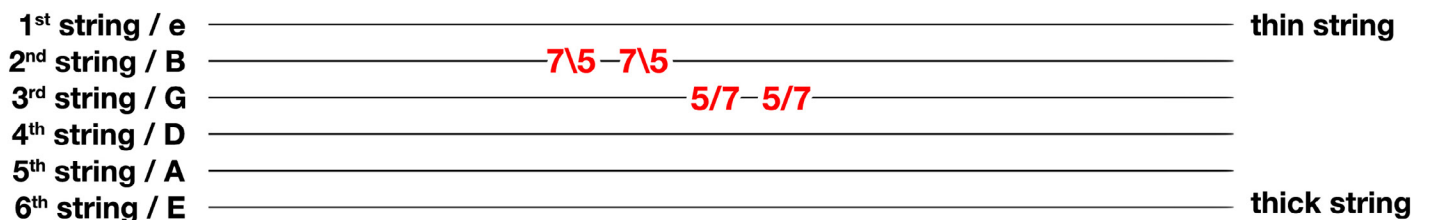
Bend

A bend is represented by the symbol ‘b’ or an arrow bending up or down. A bend occurs when the guitarist physically pushes the string across the fret board causing a change in pitch. Since bends vary in duration and style, often times each arrow is illustrated differently. Often times, the word “full”, or “1/2” will be written along with this, indicating that the note should be bent up either one whole-step or one half-step. Bends of larger intervals can occur. Typically the actual pitch change will be denoted.



Slide-Up/Slide-Down

A slide-down is represented by the symbol “/”. A slide-up occurs when a note is picked and slid up to another note. The second note is not picked, but instead is still vibrating from the previous pick and the agitation of the string during the slide. Opposite of a slide-up, a slide-down is represented by the symbol “\”. A slide-down occurs when a note is picked and slide down to another note. Typically, mastering the slide-down takes more time than mastering the slide-up.



Vibrato

Vibrato is a pulsating effect by bending the string in a rhythmic fashion. This technique is created by bending the string up and down rhythmically or shaking the string. This effect works best after a string is picked. A vibrato is usually represented by 'v' or '~'.

| | | |
|----------------------------|------------------|--------------|
| 1 st string / e | _____ | thin string |
| 2 nd string / B | _____ | |
| 3 rd string / G | _____ 7v _____ | |
| 4 th string / D | _____ 7~~~ _____ | |
| 5 th string / A | _____ | |
| 6 th string / E | _____ | thick string |

Tapping

The tapping technique is similar to a hammer-on, except it is done with the picking hand. It is almost always followed by a pull-off. The technique is performed when the picking hand taps the string hard enough to push the string against the fret creating a note to sound at that specific fret.

| | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| 1 st string / e | _____ | thin string |
| 2 nd string / B | _____ | |
| 3 rd string / G | _____ 7t—7t—7t _____ | |
| 4 th string / D | _____ | |
| 5 th string / A | _____ | |
| 6 th string / E | _____ | thick string |

Below is an example of numeric vihuela tablature from the book "Orphenica Lyra" by Miguel de Fuenllana (1554). Red numerals (original) mark the vocal part.

* Motetes a quatro Lupus. Orphenica Lyra. Libro Segundo.

The image displays six staves of music, each consisting of two lines of numeric tablature. Red numerals are used to indicate the vocal part. The lyrics are written below the staves, with some words appearing on multiple staves. The lyrics are: *fulum gedconis ve llus deitatis plu uia falue splendor ij. fumameti tu cali ginofe menti ij. de faper irradia placa mare maris stella, ij. ij.*

Harmonic (Natural)

A harmonic is a “chimed” string. This technique is produced by plucking the string while lightly touching the string over the indicated fret. The fret is not actually played in the traditional sense. When done correctly, a chime-like sound will be produced.

Harmonic (Artificial)

Artificial harmonics are also known as pseudo-harmonics, pinch-harmonics or “squealies.” This technique requires allowing the string to lightly graze the side of your thumb after picking it. Don’t try to over-think the process. When you pick a note, allow your thumb to keep traveling towards the string until it mutes it. Once you get the hang of that, try letting the thumb just barely touch the string. If done properly, you will hear a slight chime. Pseudo-harmonics are typically easier to produce on lower pitched strings and lower fretted notes; however, if the proper technique is used, an artificial harmonic can be produced on any picked note.

Trill

The term “trill” is typically used when referring to a continuous back-and-forth, hammer on and pull-off of two notes. Mastering the hammer-on and pull-off techniques will allow for quick and precise trills.

Tremolo Picking

Tremolo picking refers to fast, repetitive picking on one note. This technique is achieved by quickly picking a note up and down. Typically tremolo picking refers to single notes (not chords).

Palm Muting

Palm muting refers to the muting of strings with the picking hand in order to create a percussive or staccato (sharp attack) effect on notes or chords. This technique is achieved by placing the picking hand palm on the bridge of the guitar just where the strings meet the bridge. Backing the hand further towards the bridge creates a more standard, open sound. Moving the hand slightly closer to the strings will create a tighter, more closed-type sound. This technique can be used for all genres of music but is most prevalent in rock and heavy-metal rhythm guitar parts.

Tremolo Tricks

There could be a whole book written on this subject, but since most intricate tremolo work is done in hard rock/heavy metal music we won’t be delving into the matter fully. Slash marks used for this notation direct the player to move the note down or up, or both in some fashion. Often times the targeted note will be denoted by the fret number, meaning that the designated fret number should be the desired pitch.

Volume Swell

This notation is used in tablature, musical notation and charts. An increase in volume is denoted by a “V” on its side like “<”. A decrease in volume looks like the opposite “>”. Changing the volume can obviously be done in numerous ways.