GUITARSHELF · FREE PDF GUIDE

FINGERPICKING FOR BEGINNERS: FROM THE THUMB TO ALTERNATING BASS

From arpeggios to Travis picking, in 10 sheets

A 10-sheet path from arpeggios to fingerstyle: first spelling out the chord, then giving the thumb its bass role, all the way to alternating bass.

10 sheets · level 2 to 4 · at your own pace

Layout optimised for 7-inch e-readers (Kobo, Kindle, Boox…), also easy to read on phones and tablets.

Created by Guitarshelf, a guitar exercise sheet generator and catalogue — https://guitarshelf.com

WHY THIS PACK

Fingerpicking starts with a simple idea: play the notes of a chord one by one instead of strumming them. Then comes the idea that changes everything: give the thumb a role of its own, the bass, while the other fingers handle the treble strings. This guide follows those two stages. First the arpeggio, where you learn to spell out a chord without worrying about which finger goes where (sheets 1 to 4). Then fingerstyle proper, where the thumb and each finger have their role (5 to 9). Finally alternating bass, which gives a single instrument a foundation close to that of a bass guitar (10). The same progressions come back (C-G-Am-Em, G-D-Em-C, Em-C-G-D) so that all the attention goes to the picking hand. The classic trap is starting with the fingers when everything rests on the thumb.

THE 10-SHEET PATH

01 **Arpeggios in C — getting started**
LEVEL 2 · POP
Spell out the chord with the pick: one string at a time, from bass to treble.

02 **Pop in G (4 chords) — arpeggios**
LEVEL 2 · POP
Another progression, G-D-Em-C, and an arpeggio where the finger order stays free.

03 **Pop in E (suspended) — arpeggios**
LEVEL 2 · POP
Listen to every note: the colour of the suspended chords Esus4 and Asus2.

04 Rock in E minor (basic version) — arpeggios

LEVEL 3 · ROCK

An arpeggio in minor: Em, C, G, D, with a more even picking hand.

05 Independent thumb in fingerstyle

LEVEL 2 · POP

The core move of fingerstyle: the thumb plays its pulse while the other fingers play freely.

06 Fingerstyle in C

LEVEL 2 · POP

The thumb-index-middle-ring pattern over C-G-Am-Em.

07 Pop in G (4 chords) — fingerstyle

LEVEL 2 · POP

The split of roles: thumb on the bass, three fingers on the treble, over G-D-Em-C.

08 Rock in E minor (basic version) — fingerstyle

LEVEL 3 · ROCK

The same split of roles in minor, with a thumb that stays on a single bass string per chord.

09 Blues in A (12 bars) — fingerstyle

LEVEL 3 · BLUES

The thumb as the bass of a blues: A7, D7, E7, without a pick.

10 Pop in C — alternating bass fingerstyle

LEVEL 4 · POP

Alternating bass: the thumb swings between the root and the fifth, Travis picking.

SUGGESTED PRACTICE PLAN

Week 1 — Spelling out the chord (sheets 1 to 4)
Four arpeggios over different progressions, including one with suspended chords and one in minor. The finger order stays free: all that matters is that one string sounds at a time.

Week 2 — The thumb takes its role (sheets 5 to 7)
Thumb independence, then the thumb-index-middle-ring pattern over C-G-Am-Em and G-D-Em-C.

Week 3 — The same move, other worlds (sheets 8 and 9)
A fingerstyle in minor, where the thumb stays on a single bass string, then a blues in A, where it keeps the tempo of the progression.

Week 4 — Alternating bass (sheet 10)
The thumb swings between two low strings: Travis picking. Finish by comparing it with the fixed-bass version.

01 · ARPEGGIOS IN C — GETTING STARTED

Level 2 Pop

Online sheet: https://guitarshelf.com/en/fiche/arpeggios-c-beginner

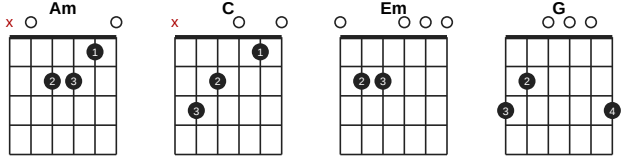
ITS PLACE IN THE PATH

Spell out the chord with the pick: one string at a time, from bass to treble.

GUIDE TIP

Before playing, say out loud the starting string of each chord (A, low E, A, low E): the picking hand stops searching.

CHORDS



CHORD PROGRESSION

I	V	VI	III
C	**G**	**Am**	**Em**

The C-G-Am-Em progression — probably the most-played in all of pop — picked note by note instead of strummed: it's the catalog's very first arpeggio sheet, built for a picking hand that has never held a chord this long without strumming it as a block. All four chords are open, no barre, which leaves full attention for the real novelty: picking one string at a time, bass to treble, while the fretting hand keeps the whole chord shape held down through the whole arpeggio.

TIPS

Set the full chord shape before playing the first note, and don't lift a finger before the next change.
Start very slowly: the goal isn't speed, it's one string ringing at a time, never two by accident.
Find the first string to pick on each chord: the A string for C (3rd fret) and Am (open), the low E string for G (3rd fret) and Em (open).

02 · POP IN G (4 CHORDS) — ARPEGGIOS

Level 2 Pop

Online sheet: https://guitarshelf.com/en/fiche/g-pop-arpeggios

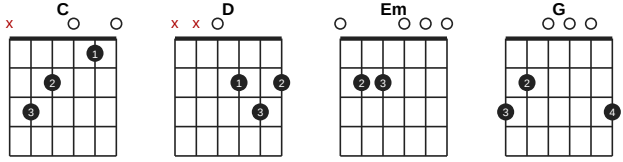
ITS PLACE IN THE PATH

Another progression, G-D-Em-C, and an arpeggio where the finger order stays free.

GUIDE TIP

Check the starting string of each chord before playing: it changes from one chord to the next, and it gives the bass of the arpeggio.

CHORDS



CHORD PROGRESSION

I	V	VI	IV
G	D	Em	C

Unlike this same grid's fingerstyle version (also level 2), where the thumb stays dedicated to the bass while the fingers pick the treble strings, this simple arpeggio doesn't split roles between the fingers: each chord note is picked in order, with no fixed assignment. It's a different technical entry point, not an easier version of the same thing.

TIPS

Don't try to assign a fixed finger to a specific string: unlike fingerstyle, the finger order can stay free here.
Play each chord slowly, one note at a time, before looking for fluency.
If you've already worked this grid's fingerstyle version, consciously compare the two right-hand feels: they're less alike than they might seem.

03 · POP IN E (SUSPENDED) — ARPEGGIOS

Level 2 Pop

Online sheet: https://guitarshelf.com/en/fiche/e-suspended-pop-arpeggios

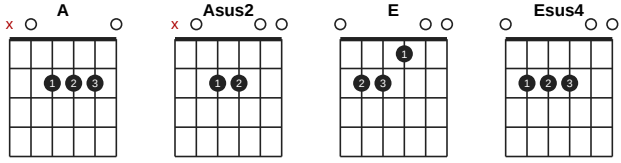
ITS PLACE IN THE PATH

Listen to every note: the colour of the suspended chords Esus4 and Asus2.

GUIDE TIP

Play each suspended chord, then its plain version, note by note: the arpeggio lets you hear exactly which note changes.

CHORDS



CHORD PROGRESSION

Esus4	E	Asus2	A

Unlike this grid's alternating-bass fingerstyle version, where only the thumb (and so the bass note) is examined and the suspension stays inaudible in that role, this arpeggio here picks absolutely every note of the chord, including the one carrying the suspension. It's therefore the only version of this grid where Esus4's and Asus2's colour is genuinely heard, note by note.

> **TIPS**
>
> Listen specifically for the suspended note as you pick it: it's what tells Esus4 apart from E and Asus2 apart from A.
> Play each chord slowly, one note at a time, before looking for fluency.
> Compare by ear with the catalogue's alternating-bass fingerstyle version: there, that same suspended note goes almost unnoticed.

04 · ROCK IN E MINOR (BASIC VERSION) — ARPEGGIOS

Level 3 Rock

Online sheet: https://guitarshelf.com/en/fiche/e-minor-rock-arpeggios

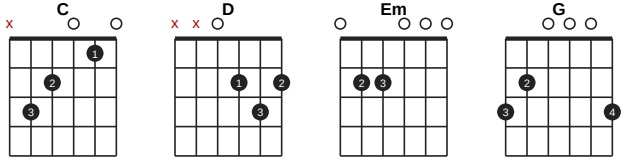
ITS PLACE IN THE PATH

An arpeggio in minor: Em, C, G, D, with a more even picking hand.

GUIDE TIP

Record yourself: on playback, a note that stands out from the others gives away a finger that hits harder. Aim for even intensity.

CHORDS



CHORD PROGRESSION

I	VI	III	VII
Em	**C**	**G**	**D**

The Em, C, G, D progression played as arpeggios: each chord is picked note by note instead of strummed, to build picking-hand precision.

> **TIPS**
>
> Slow down until every note rings clearly before increasing the tempo.

05 · INDEPENDENT THUMB IN FINGERSTYLE

Level 2 | Pop

Online sheet: https://guitarshelf.com/en/fiche/independent-thumb-fingerstyle

ITS PLACE IN THE PATH

The core move of fingerstyle: the thumb plays its pulse while the other fingers play freely.

GUIDE TIP

Mark the thumb pulse by tapping your foot: if foot and thumb agree, the fingers can wander elsewhere without disturbing it.

A pure technical exercise, no chord or scale involved: the right-hand thumb plays a steady pulse on the bass strings while index/middle/ring fingers play freely on the treble strings, never syncing with the thumb.

TIPS

Isolate the thumb alone first until it becomes automatic, like an internal metronome, before adding the fingers: thumb independence is the real goal here, not the melody itself.

06 · FINGERSTYLE IN C

Level 2 Pop

Online sheet: https://guitarshelf.com/en/fiche/fingerstyle-c

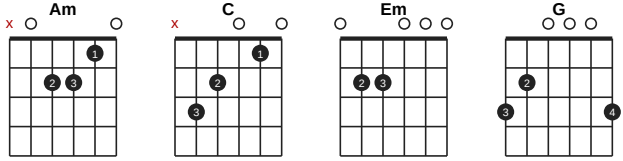
ITS PLACE IN THE PATH

The thumb-index-middle-ring pattern over C-G-Am-Em.

GUIDE TIP

Compare with the arpeggio of sheet 1: same chords, but each finger now has its own string. It is that assignment that changes everything.

CHORDS



CHORD PROGRESSION

I	V	VI	III
C	G	Am	Em

The C-G-Am-Em pop progression played fingerstyle instead of with a pick, using a repeated thumb-index-middle-ring pattern on each chord.

> **TIPS**
>
> Keep your nails or fingertips close to the strings: a wide motion tires faster and is less precise than a short, steady one.

07 · POP IN G (4 CHORDS) — FINGERSTYLE

Level 2 Pop

Online sheet: https://guitarshelf.com/en/fiche/g-pop-fingerstyle

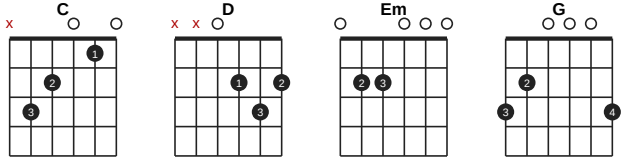
ITS PLACE IN THE PATH

The split of roles: thumb on the bass, three fingers on the treble, over G-D-Em-C.

GUIDE TIP

Then replay the arpeggio of sheet 2 over the same progression: the difference in the picking hand is felt at once, free order on one side, fixed roles on the other.

CHORDS



CHORD PROGRESSION

I	V	VI	IV
G	D	Em	C

Unlike this same grid's simple arpeggio, where each finger takes its turn with no fixed assignment, this fingerstyle version keeps the thumb permanently on the bass, while the index, middle and ring fingers handle the treble strings: a genuine division of roles between the hand's fingers, not just another way to play the same notes.

TIPS

Keep the thumb on the same bass string throughout a held chord, before worrying about the fingers.
If you've already worked this grid's simple arpeggio, notice the change: here the thumb no longer moves at random, it has a fixed role.
Once this division of roles is automatic, the catalogue's alternating-bass version of this same grid will only add one change: the thumb switches between two strings instead of staying on one.

08 · ROCK IN E MINOR (BASIC VERSION) — FINGERSTYLE

Level 3 Rock

Online sheet: https://guitarshelf.com/en/fiche/e-minor-rock-fingerstyle

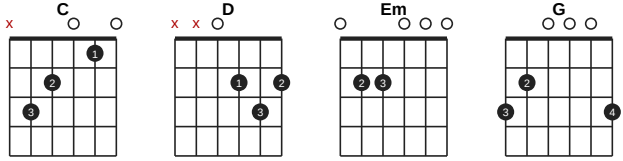
ITS PLACE IN THE PATH

The same split of roles in minor, with a thumb that stays on a single bass string per chord.

GUIDE TIP

Keep the thumb still on its bass string for the whole chord: it is the only movement to master before moving on to alternating bass.

CHORDS



CHORD PROGRESSION

I	VI	III	VII
Em	**C**	**G**	**D**

Unlike the catalogue's 'alternating bass' version already present on this same grid, where the thumb switches between two different bass strings, here the thumb stays on a single bass string per chord. It's this grid's simplest fingerstyle version: the same right hand (thumb + index/middle/ring), but only one thumb motion to master instead of two.

TIPS

If you've already worked on this grid's 'alternating bass' version, this one is simpler: keep the thumb still on a single string per chord.
Master this version first before tackling the catalogue's alternating bass: it's the same right hand, with one less complexity.
Compare both versions by ear: the alternating bass sounds richer, but this version remains the necessary technical foundation.

09 · BLUES IN A (12 BARS) — FINGERSTYLE

Level 3 Blues

Online sheet: https://guitarshelf.com/en/fiche/a-blues-fingerstyle

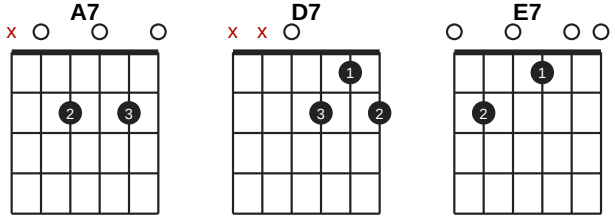
ITS PLACE IN THE PATH

The thumb as the bass of a blues: A7, D7, E7, without a pick.

GUIDE TIP

Count the 12 bars with the thumb: it is what keeps the tempo of the progression, the fingers just pass over it.

CHORDS



CHORD PROGRESSION

I	I	I	I	IV	IV	I	I	V	IV	I	V
A7	**A7**	**A7**	**A7**	**D7**	**D7**	**A7**	**A7**	**E7**	**D7**	**A7**	**E7**

The A7, D7, E7 progression played fingerstyle: the thumb covers the bass note of each chord while the index, middle and ring finger pick the treble strings in rhythm, no pick involved.

TIPS

Keep the thumb perfectly steady on the bass notes before worrying about the fingers: it's what holds the whole pattern's tempo together.

10 · POP IN C — ALTERNATING BASS FINGERSTYLE

Level 4 Pop

Online sheet: https://guitarshelf.com/en/fiche/c-pop-fingerstyle-alternating-bass

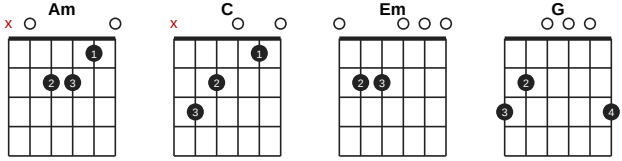
ITS PLACE IN THE PATH

Alternating bass: the thumb swings between the root and the fifth, Travis picking.

GUIDE TIP

Finish by playing sheet 6 (fixed bass) then this one (alternating bass) over the same C-G-Am-Em progression: the difference in groove is immediate.

CHORDS



CHORD PROGRESSION

I	V	VI	III
C	G	Am	Em

The same C-G-Am-Em grid as the catalogue's basic fingerstyle version, but with an alternating bass: instead of repeating the same bass string on every beat, the thumb switches between two different strings, usually the chord's root and its fifth. This alternation, known as 'Travis picking', underlies the fingerstyle of a huge number of folk and pop songs: it gives a three-finger accompaniment a rhythmic foundation close to that of a bass guitar, even though only one instrument is playing.

TIPS

Isolate the thumb's movement alone first, without the fingers, until switching between the two bass strings feels automatic and even.

Only add the index, middle and ring fingers on the treble strings once this foundation is solid: the thumb must stay steady even while the other fingers get active above it.

Slow down the moment the thumb hesitates between the two strings: that's a sign it's still consciously following the pattern rather than having absorbed it.

HOW TO USE IT

1. Print the sheets in order, or keep them as a PDF on a tablet near your guitar.
2. One sheet per session is enough: better to replay it for several days than run through all ten at once.
3. Note the date and the tempo reached on the back of each sheet: playing is refined by ear, but progress is measured with a metronome.
4. Once you've gone through all the sheets, the same path exists in other keys on the site to transpose what you've learned.

WHAT IS GUITARSHELF

Guitarshelf is a guitar exercise sheet site, free and with no account to create:

- A catalogue of sheets sorted by style, level (1 to 6) and exercise type (grid, riff, scale, technique...).
- A generator that creates a brand-new exercise sheet on demand, based on chosen criteria.
- A glossary and gear guides to understand the vocabulary and upkeep of the instrument.
- A personal songbook: build your own selection of sheets and export it as a PDF, like this one.

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