

## 1. Classical Guitar, Concepts and Questions

General ideas and concepts to help you be a better teacher, or a quick overview of everything I learned during 25 years of teaching, but wished I knew when I started. Also, everything you ever wanted to know about guitar but were afraid to ask - the FAQ's of guitar teaching.

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### Three Simple Rules for Teaching

**1. You have to believe in/love what you are doing/teaching.** No one will buy a product when they know the salesperson does not believe in it. Students will not buy into what you are teaching, unless they believe that you have bought into it. If you have no desire to learn, then why should your students want to learn. As teachers, we must “be the example”.

**Do you believe that what you are doing is important?**

“A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.” - Henry Brooks Adams

“Your role as a leader is even more important than you might imagine. You have the power to help people become winners.” --*Ken Blanchard*

Why did you become a teacher? Was there an “influential teacher” in your life? Why were they influential?

**2. Know as much as you can about what you are teaching.**

If you don't know something, don't fake it. Admit you don't know and be willing to learn, even from your students. Your knowledge and understanding of the subject should inspire them. If your students think that you do not care about what you are teaching, then they will not care about learning.

**3. Make sure the bigger things are “in balance” so you can deal with the crap at school.**

Keep your priorities straight. You should be working hard, but you need to “keep the home fires burning”. You can not be an effective teacher if your life is falling apart.

There is more to life than money.

If you are too busy to enjoy life, maybe you should work less and live more simply.

What is important to you? What are your priorities?

### Simple Classroom Rules

**1. Teach in small bites.**

Chew thoroughly, swallow, digest. This is very important. Don't let a student choke on too much information at once. Teach your students to learn in small bites.

**2. Go from the concrete to the abstract.** (mechanical to reading)

They must be able to do the mechanics (moving the fingers, playing the notes on the guitar) before they try to read. Let them concentrate on one thing at a time.

Some of your students can't read English, let alone music, so be patient.

Start learning by rote and then get them to read the notes they have already played.

It is how we learned our “mother tongue”. Especially in the beginning, this is very important.

**Teach them to read.**

If you think that learning to read and write English is helpful, useful and a good thing, then do the same with music.

If you think that learning to read and write English is a waste of time, then only teach them tab.

**3. Let them use their ears.**

Have recorded examples of the pieces they are learning, for them to listen to and play along with. Ears are a tremendous asset for a musician. Teach your students to use and develop their ears.

**4. Be as positive as you can.**

Many of your students live in very negative circumstances. They need lots of kindness and encouragement in their lives (and so do you).

For example: If they are playing some rock lick, tell them “that's a great lick, but I need you to practise for the next test right now. When you can play the test and get 100%, then you can practise your own stuff.” *Always fan the flames of enthusiasm!*

**5. Make sure you know “where you are going” and let your students know where you expect them to go.** *Have a clear outline for the year. If you shoot at nothing, you will hit it every time.*

**6. It is your classroom, not theirs.**

Make sure you are comfortable there and enjoy it. You are in it for “the long haul” while they will be gone in 4 (5 or 6) years.

**1. These books have been written by a classroom guitar teacher and are suited to the 4 years of a high school music program.**

Book 1 is first year (grade 9),

Book 2 is second year (grade 10)

Book 3 is second year (grade 11)

Book 4 is second year (grade 12)

(though many music teachers have used book 1 for grades 7 and 8.)

**2. All music examples can be downloaded from the web for free.**

Book 1 is in a more “accompaniment” style with bass, guitar, drums and keyboard. (melody and accompaniment). Books 2-4 have each piece played on guitar.

These tracs may be downloaded by the teacher for private or classroom use, or by individual students who want to practice along at home. I always encourage all students to download the songs for the year and listen to them before we play them in class. Students can expect a 10-20% increase in their mark if they know the song, in their head, before they try to play it on guitar.

In the classroom, the tracs are helpful to keep the students “on task” while the teacher helps individual students. When playing scales and exercises that have no prerecorded trac, use drum tracs or a metronome.

### **3. A complete semester layout of tests and assignments is provided.**

You can see how the book has been used and just change the dates for assignments. (free on the web)

#### **Book 1 includes:**

- a thorough approach to beginning classical guitar
- introduction to “The Blues” and the pentatonic scale
- 27 theory lessons
- 7 lessons on counting
- chord diagrams
- blank staff paper, tab paper, and tab/staff paper
- 52 musical accompaniments, downloadable free
- 5 duets
- 3 trios
- teacher support

Always start by rote. Get them comfortable on the guitar before they learn to read. Use guitar diagrams on the board. They should be able to play a chromatic scale in 1<sup>st</sup> position, the “D” chord, and the C major notes on the top 3 strings (in 1<sup>st</sup> position) before they start reading. A number of rote examples are provided. I usually draw a guitar diagram on the board and use a pointer stick. Whenever possible, play along with the recorded tracs or use a drum machine or metronome. It will keep the students together as you go around the class helping individuals

With original compositions I like to give a mark specifically for a creative title.

#### **After the first few weeks, a typical class might look like this.**

*(70 minute period)*

1. Warm ups: 5-10 minutes -Scales, chords and exercises by rote -always with a drum beat -keep track of tempos
2. Review of learned pieces: 5-10 minutes As the year goes on, you will have a lot of material to choose from. Vary what you are doing so they keep all former pieces at their finger tips.
3. Theory: 5-10 minutes maximum -keep it short and keep reviewing
4. New pieces: 10-20 minutes I like to do a few bars at a time, and then give them a few minutes to work on it. When they get restless, it is time to move on. I might have 4-6 pieces on the go in this section.
5. Individual practise time: 5-15 minutes The time spent here, as in all sections, will depend on how you are feeling and how they are working. Tell them what they should be working on.
6. New pieces again: 5-10 minutes -or review what was done earlier in new pieces

7. Wrap up: 3-5 minutes Play something they know really well.

You also might want to add listening and history into that mix.

*In first year, keep time slots short, like Sesame Street.*

## Theory

Book 1 begins “in the beginning”, assuming the student has no previous musical experience. Of course, if they have other musical experiences, it will help them with guitar and theory.

Some students find theory tedious and boring. It is important to remind them that theory is a lot like performance, it must be practised to be mastered. That is why all 27 lessons should be completed. They are there to help the student, not to torture them. (though some students will not believe you)

## FAQ'S

1. **Why learn “classical” guitar?** The technique and practice habits learned while studying classical guitar, will help you no matter what style of music you may want to play in the future. Electric, folk and classical guitars are all tuned the same and while each one may use some exclusive techniques, I believe the classical guitar will give you the best start and the most flexibility.
2. **What are the best guitars for use in the classroom?** I will only use Yamaha classical guitars (with nylon strings). Currently, the model I am using is the CG110, a Yamaha guitar that is **not** solid top. Solid top guitars do not tend to fare as well in the classroom. I know there are many brands out there that might work out, however, Yamaha makes a good guitar for the money, and they stand up in the classroom.
3. **What electronic tuner would you recommend?** Right now, I prefer the clip on tuners that pick up the vibrations from the guitar. They are a little easier to use in the classroom as they are not sensitive to the classroom noise.

### **4. What do you do on the first day of class?**

1. **Make sure you take the time to get to know the students' names.** I like to sit everyone alphabetically. This can break up some dangerous cliques as well as help you learn the names faster. Don't let someone break order to “sit with a friend”. It is never a good idea.
2. **Assign a specific guitar number for each student. (if the guitars are not numbered yet, you may want to do this very soon).** I like to paint the number on the outside of the guitar case, along with the school name. Also, engrave the back of the headstock and write inside the sound hole with a Sharpie. Basically, you want to mark the guitar up, so that if it gets stolen, it is easy to identify. You should also keep track of the serial numbers with the guitar numbers.

**3. Decide how they are going to get their guitars.** Like any music class, you must establish a routine. I spend quite a bit of time on this at the beginning. You could say something like this: “When you come to class, first set your books down under your chair and then make sure you have a footstool set at the left leg of your chair. “ (We use 4x6 pieces of wood cut 11 3/4 inches long). “Then, *carefully* go and bring back your assigned guitar. Holding the case in your right hand, *gently* set the case on the floor at the right of your chair. Move the case so that it is lying flat. Open the clasps that are holding the case closed and carefully remove the guitar and lay it on top of the closed case. This is where I want you to keep the guitar when I tell you to put it down”.

**4. Then I would explain positioning and get them playing.** Have them put their left foot on the footstool. Get them to pick up the guitar with their right hand and set it on their left leg (which is now raised by the footstool). Have them place their left hand on the side of the guitar, (out of the way, not to be used at this time) and then start them playing the top three strings, open, with different rhythms, alternating with the “*i*” and “*m*” fingers of the right hand, using rest stroke. Also, I would teach the D chord, using Thumb – Brush. Do not do any reading for at least a week while they start their fingers moving. In general, try to keep them as active as you can. (You will have fewer problems). Also, keep it fun and interesting.

**5. Footstools! Why and What?** The use of a footstool allows you to sit in the “proper” position, so that the guitar is stable and not held up by the left hand. This allows the maximum ability to reach notes and access the fretboard. I use a 6 inch x 4 inch piece of lumber cut at approximately 11 ¾ length. I buy a couple of 8 foot lengths and then have my school shop cut them up for me. They should cost under \$3 each. You can purchase “real” classical guitar footstools, but they are usually at least \$15 each and tend to get “borrowed” quite easily.

**6. Left-Handed Students! What do you do with them?** If a student is new to the guitar, there is no reason to have them play any differently than other students. It does not matter if you are “left-handed” or “right-handed”. Both hands have to work equally hard. Unless a student comes into class and can demonstrate that they already play guitar, with some proficiency, with the neck of the guitar to their right (often referred to as “left-handed”) then I make them play in the traditional position with the guitar neck to their left. It is a big disadvantage to play “left-handed”: 1. guitars are more expensive, 2. it is harder to find a “left-handed” guitar, 3. if you go over to a friend's house who has a guitar, you cannot play their instrument, 4. Jimi Hendrix played left-handed and look how bad he was. (joke) Though, there are always exceptions to every rule - for example, Dizzy Gillespie.

7. What are some ways of inspiring students?

### **1. Give them a venue where they can perform.**

Some students love to perform. It is often a chance for them to polish up something they are working on, or to show off what they can do.

1. Class!

Always make time during class if someone has a piece ready to perform. As long as the piece is not offensive, encourage them to perform it for their peers.

2. Coffeehouse at lunch. (once a month?)

Have a coffeehouse in your class or in the lunch room or auditorium. If you can have a little PA, it seems to make it all a bit more important. I would have students sign up and do a maximum of two

songs each. I would usually preview the songs, and sometimes I would have to tell a student that they needed to put a little more work into it before it was ready.

3. Other ideas?

## **2. Let them see professional guitarists performing live.**

I have had many professional guitarists come and give concerts for the students over the years. Some will be glad to come and play for a class or two for free, and others will want a bigger venue and more money. At times, local music stores will sponsor a concert or workshop at your school. Be on the lookout for freebies.

### **My thoughts on organizing guitar concerts.**

I generally like to introduce students to different music than what they are already listening to, so I don't do pop/rock shows.

I have hosted many classical concerts:

Stepan Rak, Philip Candelaria (x2), the Canadian Guitar Quartet (x3), Kubica van Berkel Duo (x2), The Trio du Cologne (x2), The Amadeus Duo (x3), Sylvie Proux, Chuscales (flamenco) and a few others

I have also had many finger style guitarists for concerts:

Don Ross (x14), Antoine Dufour, Robert Taylor (x2) and Tony McManus

1. Decide on who you want to hear and contact them.
2. Unless you have a huge budget, tell them how much you love their music, that you are a classroom teacher of guitar, and that you would like to have them play at your school.
3. Inform them that you are on a limited budget and you know you can not pay them what they are worth. Ask if there is any time in the next year when they might be passing by your area. (If they are already in the area, you will not have to pay travel and you might just get them on a very inexpensive day. You might also be able to piggy back on a local arts group, if they are bringing anyone in. If so, work through them, not the artist.)
4. I do not like to make the concerts free as there are too many people attending who will distract others from the event. Everyone will come if it is free.
5. I would usually ask the artist to do two concerts, one in the afternoon for students, and one at night for the general public. They will usually do this for one fee.
6. Try to get other schools to come out to the concert.
7. I would always provide the sound system.
8. Make sure the whole experience is positive for the performer. Take good care of them. Before the concert, inform your students of concert etiquette and what you expect from them.

## 8. How do you mark playing tests?

### Marking Playing Tests

There are a number of ways you can break down the marking for a playing test. There are, of course, many variables.

1<sup>st</sup> year

For the first few tests I would have a marking scheme like this.

Position:	body and guitar	2
	LH	2
	RH	2
Notes:		<u>4</u>
<u>Total</u>		<u>10</u>

They are rewarded for just sitting properly.

After the first few tests I would expect their general position to be perfect, and therefore if they do not sit properly they will get an automatic zero.

Position:	LH	2
	RH	2
Notes:		<u>6</u>
<u>Total</u>		<u>10</u>

After a few more tests I would want to make sure they are playing rest stroke and alternating *i & m* (*RH*). This would be added to positioning as an “expected practice”, and they must do it to receive any mark on the test.

Notes:		10
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As long as they know how they are being marked, you can change your expectations and how you are marking them.

### Helpful Hint

Have strap pins installed on your guitar so you can use a guitar strap.

This makes it much easier to move around the class and help students.

If you have questions or comments, please contact  
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