

MyGUITAR LESSONS

Guitar Accessories with My Guitar Lessons.

Guitar Straps



Guitar straps are pretty straight-forward and hassle-free, really...but there are a few different types and styles so I'll talk you through em here...

Basically, if you're going to want to play guitar standing up, you're going to need a guitar strap. They can range in price from a couple of pounds/dollars for a bog-standard, basic strap right up to a surprising amount of cash if you want to get some super custom thing, handmade in finest premium leather from the world's most endangered breed of cow with solid million-carat diamond studs or whatever unnecessary nonsense you might want in it. Basically though, there are only two types - your basic guitar strap, where you fit the strap buttons on your guitar through the (leather) holes at the end of the strap, thus holding it in place where you stand up...or a 'locking' guitar strap, where there's a little gadget on either of the strap in place of the leather holes that clamps around the strap buttons on your guitar and makes sure it's not going to fall off in mid-solo (it's quite surprising how likely that can be to happen if you have a cheap strap).

NOTE: Usually, guitar straps tend to be made from either a budget material (polypropylene, perhaps) or leather. Leather might look cooler, if you're into that, and be more durable, but it's more expensive, will also weigh a bit more and not flex/move like a cheap one - it'll feel chunkier and more rigid when you're playing.

You can, if you so desire, buy a guitar strap made from just about anything (snakeskin tickle your fancy? I saw one with the snake's head still on it once. Seen them handmade from exotic woods too, like some extravagant belt!) in a million different styles/patterns, and customised to your heart's content. Personally, I only ever use a cheap strap. But it might be worth investing in a locking one so you don't run the risk of the guitar slipping through the holes when you're not holding it and plummeting to the floor. If you're feeling the weight of a roll of bills burning a hole in your pocket, you can find some really cool custom ones that'll look awesome.

Drop-D Tuner



At 'My Guitar Lessons' we have got a Peavey Wolfgang, which is an Eddie Van Halen signature guitar and therefore comes with one of these fitted to it as standard. It's patented by the man himself, and basically is a switch attached to the (Floyd Rose) bridge of your guitar, where the low E-string goes. Once the guitar is in standard tuning (E,B,G,D,A,E top to bottom), you can pull the switch out and it'll drop the pitch of the bottom string to a D, allowing for some drop-D riff mayhem. Push the switch back in, and you're back in standard tuning again. This can save headaches at gigs if you have songs written in different tunings, but if you start messing with the tuning on your guitar (sticking it into E flat, or any other tuning without having your guitar specifically set up for it), I find the tuner becomes less accurate. I would tend to use the fine-tuner to make sure it's in before I played anything anyway. On the plus side, it means you don't have to go raking around your gig bag for allen keys to unlock your strings and retune it before the next song starts! I always thought it would be cool to have some gadget that has one of these on every string, so you could play a tune, then drop the whole guitar down a tone, or into open G...or whatever. Maybe I might have to invent it!

Guitar Slides



Sometimes referred to as a 'bottleneck', a guitar slide is an accessory that you place over your (usually third or fourth) finger on your fretting hand, which you can 'slide' up and down the strings to get a sound very popular in old-style blues and a few other styles. Hit a note/chord that you've fretted with the bottleneck, and slide up to your next note or chord, and it produces a very distinctive sound. They're believed to originate from an old African instrument called a "diddley bow", which is actually a form of one-stringed zither. It would be played lying-down in your lap, with the string plucked with one hand, and a slide pulled up and down the string with the other to create the tune. Legendary guitarist Bo Diddley almost certainly took his name from it.

FACT: It's sometimes referred to as a 'bottleneck' because that's the material they were usually made from, back in the day. You could just cut off the top of an old beer bottle, stick it over your finger and you were good to go! Guys like Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters made these very popular, as did guys like Led Zeppelin later on and you'll even hear a slide cropping up on Guns 'n Roses records from time to time.

Slides can be used either on a guitar held in normal position (which is referred to as 'playing slide guitar') or with the guitar lying down on your lap (almost like a keyboard, and usually on a resonator/dobro guitar), which is referred to as 'lap steel guitar' playing. They can be a bit awkward to get used to at first, and (like any sort of guitar playing, really) it can take plenty of practice to become a bit of a slide maestro!

Guitar Tuners



This is an electric guitar tuner...and if you're playing electric guitar, you ALWAYS need one of these. You can plug the guitar lead straight into the side of it, which means you don't get any interference, regardless of any noise around you, and your guitar will be perfectly in tune. Usually it's just a case of hitting a note, and tuning it in until the line on the screen/display of the guitar tuner lands in the middle. Any half decent electric tuner will have a microphone built into it to pick up notes from acoustic/classical guitars too. There are, however, other types of tuner if you must insist

Clip-on Tuner



This nifty little gadget clips onto the headstock of your guitar, and works on vibrations travelling through the wood. It's used for classical (and sometimes acoustic) guitars that have no way to plug a lead into them. The advantage of these is that you can still use them if there is other noise in the room (if you're playing a gig for example). Clip it on the headstock, hit a note, the vibrations through the guitar are picked up by the tuner, which tells you if that note is in tune or not. You can pick them up pretty cheaply and they're always a better bet than attempting to tune by ear! For practising in the house though, I'd probably just stick with an electronic one and use the microphone on it.

Floor Tuner

'My Guitar Lessons' have explained these in the effects pedal section. These are your best bet if you're playing a gig, as it's under your feet the whole time. Of course, it's only going to work if your guitar is plugged in and is not an entirely acoustic guitar.

Tuning Forks

Avoid! These are mega old-skool but still used by, say, classical music purists and people who, for some reason, insist they're the best. Basically it's a Y-shaped piece of metal, that you strike on a surface and as a result it produces a sound at a certain pitch (E, for example). You tune your E string till it matches the pitch perfectly, and then tune the rest of the strings from that string. Really, it's like tuning your guitar from a piano. Or sitting in the rehearsal room, having the guy on bass hit a note for you then just tuning from that. Unless you have PERFECT pitch (which you almost certainly don't, regardless of what you think!) the strings are going to end up at least slightly out of tune, and it'll sound rancid as soon as you hit a chord. Buy an electric tuner - it's the 21st century! Plus you'd look like a new level of idiot at a gig, in-between songs, striking tuning pegs on the bass amp!

Capos



A capo is a device that you fix over the neck of the guitar, across a certain fret that clamps-down across the strings and in doing so, raises the pitch of the guitar. For example, if you clamp the capo over 2nd fret, then hit the open top string, it'll be an F# you're playing instead of an E. As a result, if you consider the capo as the 'nut' of

the guitar, and play a chord (or anything, for that matter) in the position you normally would, everything you're playing will be a tone higher than it was before.

These were actually invented way back in the 1600s, and are seen as an essential piece of kit for any guitar player who might be messing around with different tunings - does your song sound cool but kinda similar to the last song? Changing the pitch with a capo could be a solution! Does the song sound cool but it's too high/low for the singer to sing comfortably? Get that capo out again!

Different sorts of capos are available for every type of guitar - from electric guitars, to classical guitars, to banjos and everything in between - you can even get ones for super-high action resonators, for lap-steel playing, that come in two parts and actually clamp across the actual strings, not touching the neck.

If you're learning a song from a songbook, it's fairly common to see a note saying, for example, 'capo 2nd fret' or whatever. This will be less common in, say heavy metal guitar playing (different tunings may still be common but it tends to be that the entire guitar is tuned DOWN, manually, rather than UP on a capo), but more common in acoustic playing, and Beatles/Rolling Stones-style rock n roll.

Leads

NOTE: Depending on where you're from, guitar leads tend to be either referred to as 'guitar leads' or as 'guitar cables'. Here in jolly old England, they tend to be known as 'guitar leads', so that's what I'm sticking with here. You get the idea - just don't confuse 'guitar lead' with 'lead guitar'!



Guitar leads/cables (often referred to as "jack-to-jack" leads, or occasionally as 'quarter-inch' leads) are always an essential piece of kit for anyone playing any other style than classical guitar. What they do is carry the signal from the guitar to the amplifier, where the amplifier can convert it into sound. A quick stroll into the guitar shop will show that there are plenty of different types of leads available...so what's the difference? Let's investigate -

There are plenty of things to look out for, and there's often a good reason why some leads are more expensive than others. As with anything else in life, you get what you pay for - and cheap guitar leads may be fine for just jamming in the bedroom, but if you're recording or whatever may lead to problems as you strive to get that killer guitar tone! Cheap leads might produce a load of 'hiss', for example...or if the rubber 'jacket' on the lead is thin it can mean the inside of the lead takes more of a beating if it gets stepped on/bashed around/stuffed inside the end of a guitar case etc. This can lead to signal loss, a lamer guitar sound or just total breakage of the lead - and that's not even pointing out that the components of the guitar lead were cheaper in the first place. It doesn't really make a great deal of sense, if you think about it, to plug an expensive guitar into an expensive amp with a cheap cable. Here's a few things to watch out for -

Shielding

A good-quality guitar lead will be 'well-shielded'. What this basically means is that the wires inside are covered/coated/wrapped by a copper or foil layer to stop them picking up interference from outside sources - as your signal travels down the lead, you DO NOT want it to be also picking up horrible buzzing sounds from fluorescent lights, speakers,

microphones or whatever else happens to be nearby. As a rule, the better-quality (that usually should be read as 'expensive') the cable is, the thicker the shielding is going to be, and as a result the better the sound quality will be when you're playing with it.

Connectors

This is the bit at the end of the lead, that you're going to plug into the guitar/amp/effects pedal. It might seem like a straight-forward part, but you'd be surprised at how many different varieties you can find. You can even find leads with gold or silver-plated connectors, which should give you a better sound due to the gold being very highly conductive, meaning that less of your signal is lost, and is passed straight through the gold into your amp in all its riff-tastic glory. Some people seem to disagree with this, or might be put off by the price (which is inevitably higher due to the materials used). Personally, I think Planet Waves (by D'Addario) cables are the best. And they're gold-plated. (*PLEASE NOTE* - we are not endorsed by anybody. You can take my word for it.) They are kind of pricey, but for what our opinion's worth, you can hear a difference.

Watch out not just for the plug but for the casing around it. Some leads have the end of the lead/the connector on the lead in a metal casing, some have it in moulded plastic - you'll see exactly what I mean when you go check out some guitar leads. The plastic ones will probably mean the lead will be a little cheaper, but have a look at the design - some of them tend to break eventually and can't be repaired, which is very unlikely to happen with metal-casing connectors...and even if it did, you can replace the casing.

Different-length Leads

Guitar leads are not all the same length. Some people seem to insist on buying super-length leads, but there's no need to buy a 30ft lead if you don't need it! It'll just trail across the stage like spaghetti, get in the way, and the longer the lead, the further the signal has to travel and higher the likelihood that you'll get signal loss, and end up with your guitar sounding weaker/not as good as it should do. Look at it like this - how far is it going to be from your guitar input to whatever the lead is plugging into? Take that distance in mind, add a bit extra to allow you to move around, and that's about the length you're going to want. It's a good idea not to buy a lead longer than you actually need, and if you really do need a super-length one to play on some giant stage or whatever, you may be better off with a wireless pack anyway (see below).

Patch Leads



Basically, a patch lead is just like any other guitar lead, but smaller (usually just a few inches long) and are mainly used for linking effects pedals together. If you have a bit of an effects rig going on - i.e. you've got your guitar plugged into the amp via a wah-wah pedal, a distortion boost and a floor tuner (check out the 'effects pedals' section on this website for a full explanation of those) you're going to need a lead not just to go to the amp, but to go between the guitar and the wah, the wah and the tuner, and so on. Using full-length guitar leads for this is just going to end up in a tangled mess of leads all of the floor that looks awful and will get in the way, so patch leads are the way to go. They tend to be fairly cheap, but like any other leads, an unbranded one might be fine, cheap and cheerful, but you'll have the same issues as with a cheap guitar

lead. Crappy ones might give you some signal buzz, be prone to breakage and might not transmit the signal very well. When you're in the studio in particular, your guitar signal, and as a result your tone, are everything ... so you might want to invest in a decent one!

Right-angled Connectors / Plugs



Basically, this refers to the connector that you plug into your guitar or amp. But rather than being straight (as they usually are) it's in a right-angle on the end of the lead, which has its own advantages - if you step on the lead it won't wrench it out of your guitar...or if your lead is too short you're less likely to yank it out of the amp if you step forward on the stage. To be honest, I don't see why these aren't the norm...they do exactly the same thing that any other lead does but with a little bonus at either end! I would definitely recommend them. Unless of course, you're going to go the whole hog and use a -

Wireless Pack

A wireless pack/system is a cool piece of equipment. Have you ever been watching your favourite band and realised they don't have leads coming out of their guitars (or indeed seen a TV presenter with a microphone on his shirt but no leads trailing out everywhere)...and wonder how they do it? They're using a wireless pack - which can be expensive (certainly a lot more expensive than a lead) but have the enormous advantage of, well, not having leads lying all over the stage! A mini-lead plugs into your guitar (with a regular jack plug, just like a normal guitar lead), and is connected to a pack that you can either clip onto your trousers, clip onto the strap if you want to or just put into your back pocket. The signal from the guitar is sent down the mini-lead and into the pack, which sends your riff across to the part number two of the system - a receiver box sitting on top of your amp - as radio signals. The box on top of the amp is plugged into the amp, which then turns the signal into sound, and out comes your riff!

While these can be surprisingly expensive, it's usually not a good idea to scrimp and go for a budget one. Parts will be cheaper, and the ultimate sound quality might end up being lamer than if you'd just used a lead, yet at numerous times the expense! Quality wireless packs might use ultra-high frequencies and/or have more than one receiving circuits/antennas (antennas!? antennae?!) for better sound quality.

NOTE: If you're going to invest in a wireless pack don't forget that the pack in your back pocket is running on batteries. If you don't change them regularly, you'll inevitably find problems with it when they start to run down and/or look like an idiot onstage when your batteries run out!

ANOTHER NOTE: If you have more than one guitarist/bassist in the band using wireless packs, make sure that they're on different frequencies. Some wireless packs will have a coloured dot on the receiver (which sits on top of the amp) to indicate what 'type' it is. If they're both on the same frequency they're going to interfere with each other...and you DO NOT want that! If you're both getting the same brand, make sure they're not the same one. If you have different brands, make sure they're compatible with each other.

Guitar Cases

Basically, there are two types of guitar cases. I'm deliberately ignoring dreadful super-

flimsy guitar cases you can pick up for next to no money and will rip immediately, and so should you. You can spot them in fairly lousy guitar shops - they're basically just a thin case of imitation-leather with a zip down the side. They're dreadful, and you may as well just carry your guitar around in a bin bag. Ignore them completely! Moving on...

Gig Bags



A gig bag is a 'soft bag' (as opposed to a hard case) and is designed to take your guitar and accessories (via pockets on the side) and carried around on your back. These are a very common choice among guitarists, will be made of a highly durable material, have plenty of padding should you walk into a door or something and tend to be relatively convenient. The downside, of course, is that if the guitar gets dropped it may well still be damaged and walking around with in on your back, the guitar neck (the most fragile bit of your guitar!) will stick up above and behind your head as you're walking, and you'd be amazed at how many people I've seen walk that guitar neck right into the top of a door! Gig bags can be convenient, but if you're serious about your instrument you probably want to go with a...

Flight Case / Hard Case



Basically, it's like a big suitcase to fit your guitar, and I'm going to take a wild guess that they're referred to as 'flight cases' because you'd use one to take your guitar on a plane, where it's inevitably going to get tossed around in the cargo area as soon as you hit turbulence. If you have a flight case, your guitar is much safer from damage than if it's in a gig bag. If you manage to drop the flight case, you'll probably be fine. It'll have plenty of extra space inside to stick your leads, straps etc too ... the only disadvantage (especially if you have a heavy guitar like a Les Paul) is that it'll be heavier, and it can be hard work lugging this around all day. A gig bag, across both shoulders, is much easier to carry ...but to be honest I'd probably go with a flight case every time anyway - especially if your guitar was expensive!

Plectrums / Picks

Last but not least, yet another absolutely essential piece of equipment for your guitar - and you might want to take a moment to decide which one is right for you! Picks come in different 'gauges', among different shapes and sizes, so let's have a look at the different types -

Lightweight Picks / Light-Gauge

You'd probably want to use these for rhythm/acoustic playing (or definitely for 12-string playing!). The pick itself is going to be pretty bendy, and will have a nice sound if you're (only) strumming chords. If you're going to attempt a guitar solo, it might be a bit awkward as the pick will just flop through the strings rather than dig into them when you hit them, and you won't get much of an 'attack' to your soloing. You're certainly not going to be shredding with one.

Medium-Gauge Picks

There won't be a section in the shop saying 'medium-gauge picks - you're just going to have to try a few out and you'll see what I mean. Some are bendy, some are super-stiff, and some sit in the middle. Just to please everyone I've got them all covered here - and a medium-gauge pick will probably be fine for a bit of strumming, a few licks and a bit of a solo, but I wouldn't bother with any of them. I would skip right over the pair of them and exclusively check out -

Heavy-Gauge Picks

There's not going to be any 'give' in these picks, and you want to make sure you get one with a sharp point if you're going to be wailing out some solos. You'll notice when you're looking at different types that most of them will have a fairly rounded point - I'd avoid them. Check out something like Dunlop Jazz 3s (again, I'm not endorsed by them, so you can trust me on this), which are smaller than regular picks (so you have less plastic getting in the way) are totally firm and have a sharp point on them - so you barely even need to touch the string to get the note to sound cool...which is a definite advantage if you're tremolo-picking/alternative picking at speed or going for a bit of an Yngwie Malmsteen impression! If the pick is hard, you don't have to wait for the plastic to 'bounce back' after every stroke, and only needing the very tip means as soon as the tip touches the string, you've played the note and don't have to waste time pushing more of the plastic across the string. This might sound like a ludicrous point to make, as the 'times' involved are stupidly minuscule - but if you're wailing out ten notes a second in some guitar run or other you really will see what I mean.

Thumb Pick / Fingerpicks

Thumb picks and finger picks are exactly the same thing, but if you wear one on your thumb it's a thumb pick...or a 'finger pick' if you have them on your fingers. These are only really used for banjo-playing or fingerpicking acoustic guitar (Tommy Emmanuel style), and allow for a style of guitar playing that is similar to the "fingerstyle" technique of classical playing, but with a less subtle sound, as you're picking every note. They look unnoticeably different from any other pick in the display, as they have a bit that wraps across your finger/thumb allowing the pick part to stick out downwards.

Alternatively, some guitar players (mainly classical players) will grow the fingernails on their picking hand to get a brighter sound out of the notes when they're playing them. Essentially, finger/thumb picks are for if you can't be bothered doing this...but personally I wouldn't want to walk round with bizarre long nails on one hand anyway!