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Guitar From Scratch: Your First Songs in 30 Days

In one month of 20-minute sessions, go from never having held a guitar to playing real songs with clean chord changes.

30-day guide · 6 chapters · Self-Directed Learning Framework

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide was built with the Self-Directed Learning Framework (SDLF): every chapter gives you a short starting action, the one idea you actually need, a fully worked example, a checklist, and exercises with a number attached — no filler, no re-reading required.

Work through the chapters in order over about a month; each covers several days of short practice rather than a single sitting. Any acoustic or electric guitar works. Tune before every single session — more beginners quit over an out-of-tune guitar than over difficulty, because correct playing sounds wrong and they conclude the problem is them.

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CHAPTER 1 OF 6 · DAY 1–3 · 20 MIN

Holding, Tuning and Making One Clean Note

> **Outcome:** "I can tune the guitar and play a single fretted note that rings clearly."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Sit on a chair without arms, guitar on your thigh, neck angled slightly upward, and just hold it for two minutes. If your fretting wrist already aches, the neck is too low — raise it and the wrist straightens itself.

The minimum you need to know

The strings are E-A-D-G-B-E from thickest to thinnest. Tune with a clip-on tuner or a phone app before every session, without exception. To make a note ring, press just *behind* the metal fret wire — not on top of it and not in the middle of the fret — using the very tip of your finger, with nails short. Buzzing almost always means your finger is too far from the fret or not upright enough; a dull thud means a finger pad is resting against the string.

Worked example: your first clean note, six times

Fret the third fret of the thickest string with your ring finger, fingertip just behind the fret wire, thumb resting on the back of the neck roughly opposite. Pick the string once. If it buzzes, slide a millimetre closer to the fret and press slightly harder. If it thuds, your finger is lying flat — curl it until only the tip contacts the string. Then repeat on the third fret of each of the other five strings, ten clean notes each. That is the entire first session: no chords, no songs, just the physical skill that every chord is made of.

Checklist

- ☐ Guitar tuned with a tuner or app at the start of the session
- ☐ Seated with the neck angled slightly up, wrist not bent sharply
- ☐ Fingernails on the fretting hand cut short
- ☐ Pressing just behind the fret wire, not on it or mid-fret
- ☐ Fingertip, not finger pad, contacting the string
- ☐ Ten clean notes played on each of the six strings
- ☐ Thumb on the back of the neck, not wrapped over the top

Exercises

1. Tune the guitar three days running until it takes under a minute.
2. Play ten clean notes on each string at the third fret, repeating any that buzz.
3. Move to the fifth fret and repeat — the same technique at a different position.

CHAPTER 2 OF 6 · DAY 4–8 · 25 MIN

Your First Three Chords

> **Outcome:** "I can play Em, C and G so that every string in each chord rings clearly."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Play Em: two fingers, second fret of the A and D strings, and strum all six strings once, slowly. It's the easiest complete chord on the instrument, and it already sounds like music.

The minimum you need to know

A chord is a shape you can verify note by note. After forming any chord, pick each string individually and listen: every string should ring except the ones the chord asks you to leave out. A dead string is almost always a finger lying flat against a neighbour, and the fix is to curl the fingers more and push the wrist slightly forward. Em, C and G between them cover an enormous number of songs, and they're sequenced deliberately — Em needs two fingers, C needs three, G needs three across a wider stretch.

Worked example: diagnosing a buzzing C chord

C is ring finger on the third fret of the A string, middle finger on the second fret of the D string, index on the first fret of the B string, strummed from the A string down. Picked string by string, the G string sounds dead. The cause is almost always the index finger lying flat and touching it. Curl the index so only its tip presses the B string, and move the wrist a centimetre forward, away from the neck. Pick each string again: all five ring. Do this check before every strum for the first fortnight — strumming a broken chord simply practises the broken version until it's automatic.

Checklist

- ☐ Each chord checked string by string before strumming
- ☐ Fingers curled so only the tips touch the strings
- ☐ Wrist forward, thumb behind the neck
- ☐ Em, C and G each formed from memory without looking at a diagram
- ☐ Any dead string traced to the specific finger causing it
- ☐ Each chord held, released, and reformed five times in a row
- ☐ Guitar retuned partway through — new strings and fresh pressure knock it out

Exercises

1. Form each of the three chords and pick every string, fixing any that don't ring.
2. Hold, release and reform each chord ten times without looking at your hand.
3. Strum each chord four times slowly and listen for buzzing rather than for the song.

CHAPTER 3 OF 6 · DAY 9–14 · 25 MIN

Chord Changes: The Skill That Actually Matters

> **Outcome:** "I can change between Em, C and G in time, without stopping."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Set a timer for one minute and count how many times you can switch cleanly between Em and C. Write the number down. That single number is your real progress metric for the next two weeks.

The minimum you need to know

Beginners practise chords; what actually holds them back is changes. The fastest fix is to move all the fingers at once, as one shape, instead of placing them one at a time — if your index lands first and the others follow, that's three separate movements and it caps your speed permanently. Practise changes slowly and silently first: form, lift, reform, with no strumming at all. Speed comes from removing the hesitation, never from moving the fingers faster.

Worked example: the one-minute change drill, over two weeks

Em to C, sixty seconds, counting each complete clean change. Day one is typically around twelve. The rule for every repetition is that all fingers leave the fretboard together and land together — even if that means slowing down to one change every four seconds at first. Landing as a single snap is the thing being practised, not speed. By day five most people reach the low twenties; by day fourteen, forty or more. Then run the identical drill on C to G, and on G to Em, and write all three numbers down each day. The numbers, not the feeling, tell you whether you're improving.

Checklist

- ☐ One-minute count recorded for each chord pair, each day
- ☐ All fingers lifting and landing together, as one movement
- ☐ Silent form-lift-reform practice done before adding any strumming
- ☐ Speed reduced whenever the landing stops being simultaneous
- ☐ All three pairs drilled — Em↔C, C↔G, G↔Em
- ☐ Chords checked string by string at the start of each session
- ☐ Numbers written down rather than remembered

Exercises

1. Do the one-minute drill for Em↔C every day for a week and log the count.
2. Add C↔G in the second week, logging both.
3. Compare day one and day fourteen — the gap is the proof that this is the drill that works.

CHAPTER 4 OF 6 · DAY 15–19 · 25 MIN

Strumming and Keeping Time

> **Outcome:** "I can hold a steady strumming pattern through chord changes without speeding up."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Put a metronome on at 60 bpm and strum one downstroke on every click, on a single Em chord, for one minute. No pattern, no changes — just land exactly on the click.

The minimum you need to know

Strumming comes from the wrist, not the elbow, and the hand should keep moving down-up continuously even on beats where it doesn't touch the strings — that constant motion is what keeps time. The standard beginner pattern, down-down-up-up-down-up over four beats, fits an enormous number of songs. Rushing is the universal failure: nearly everyone speeds up through the easy bar and then stalls at the chord change.

Worked example: pattern plus changes, and finding the drift

Metronome at 70. Strum down-down-up-up-down-up on Em for four bars, then switch to C for four, then G. The rule: your strumming hand never stops moving, even during the switch — if the chord isn't ready, you miss the strings entirely and keep the motion rather than pausing the hand. Record thirty seconds on your phone and listen back. The tempo drift is almost always in the bar immediately before a change, where the brain starts preparing. Drop the metronome ten bpm until the drift disappears, then rebuild five bpm at a time.

Checklist

- ☐ Metronome used every session, not just occasionally
- ☐ Strumming motion from the wrist, not the elbow
- ☐ Hand kept moving continuously, including through changes
- ☐ Down-down-up-up-down-up pattern held for four bars per chord
- ☐ One session recorded and listened back to
- ☐ Tempo reduced whenever drift appears, rather than pushed through
- ☐ Changes made without pausing the strumming hand

Exercises

1. Strum on the click at 60 bpm for one minute without drifting.
2. Play the pattern through all three chords, four bars each, at 70 bpm.
3. Record it, listen back, and identify exactly where you sped up.

CHAPTER 5 OF 6 · DAY 20–25 · 30 MIN

Your First Full Song

> **Outcome:** "I can play one complete song from start to finish, at tempo, without stopping."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Choose a song that uses only chords you already have, find its chord chart, and write the sequence for one verse on paper. Choosing a song that needs a chord you can't play yet is the single most common way beginners stall at this stage.

The minimum you need to know

Learn a song in sections rather than from the top every time — otherwise you end up able to play the first eight bars of twenty songs and none of them all the way through. Take the hardest section first and loop it until it's the easiest, then join sections in pairs. Don't play along with the original recording too early: the band hides your timing errors from you. Metronome first, recording later.

Worked example: a three-chord song, learned backwards

The verse is Em–C–G–G and the chorus is C–G–Em–Em. The awkward moment is the chorus's C to G landing on beat one, so that's what gets looped first: those two bars, twenty times, at 60 bpm. Then the whole chorus. Then the verse alone. Then verse plus chorus once, slowly, with one absolute rule — mistakes are allowed, stopping is not. Stopping at every error means what you're practising is stopping. Add five bpm a day, and by day twenty-five you're at the recording's tempo and can play along with it.

Checklist

- ☐ Song chosen using only chords already learned
- ☐ Chord sequence written out on paper before playing
- ☐ Hardest section identified and looped first
- ☐ Sections joined in pairs rather than always starting from the top
- ☐ Practised with a metronome before playing along with the recording
- ☐ Played through without stopping, mistakes included
- ☐ Tempo increased in small steps, roughly 5 bpm per day

Exercises

1. Loop the hardest two bars twenty times at a slow tempo.
2. Play the full song once a day without stopping, whatever happens.
3. Raise the tempo by 5 bpm daily until you reach the original recording.

CHAPTER 6 OF 6 · DAY 26–30 · 30 MIN

Barre Chords and What to Learn Next

> **Outcome:** "I can play an F barre chord well enough to keep improving, and I know what to practise next."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Lay your index finger flat across all six strings at the first fret and strum. It will buzz. That buzz is normal and expected — this chapter is about closing the gap over the coming weeks, not about being perfect in five days.

The minimum you need to know

A barre chord uses one finger as a movable nut, which lets a single shape play twelve different chords by sliding it along the neck. F is the one everyone struggles with. Three adjustments do most of the work: roll the index finger slightly onto its bony outside edge instead of the soft pad, place it as close to the fret as possible, and pull the neck gently back toward your body with the fretting arm rather than squeezing harder with the thumb. If a full barre still won't ring after a week, play the four-string version instead — it sounds fine in a song and keeps you moving forward.

Worked example: building F across five days

Day one: barre only the top two strings with the index, add the rest of the shape, strum four strings. Day two: identical, but pick each string individually and fix whatever doesn't ring. Day three: extend the barre to cover a fifth string. Day four: ten attempts at the full six-string version, rolling the index onto its edge each time. Day five: switch from C to the four-string F ten times in a row. Nobody gets a clean six-string F in five days, and expecting to is why people quit here; everyone who keeps attempting it daily has it within a couple of months. After that the next three things are the A-shape barre, the minor pentatonic scale for lead playing, and one new song a week using no new chords.

Checklist

- ☐ Index finger rolled onto its outside edge, not flat on the pad
- ☐ Barre placed as close to the fret wire as possible
- ☐ Neck pulled gently back with the arm instead of squeezing with the thumb
- ☐ Four-string version used as a working fallback
- ☐ Each string picked individually to find which ones fail
- ☐ Daily attempts logged rather than judged
- ☐ Next three practice targets written down

Exercises

1. Work the five-day F progression above, one step per day.
2. Play ten C-to-F changes using whichever version rings.
3. Write down your next month's plan: one new song a week, plus the daily change drill.

You've completed this guide.

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