

An Introduction to Fret Hand Awareness

The Language of Fret Hand Awareness

When learning to play a chord, first focus your attention on the location - the string and fret - of each note on the fretboard and with which finger to play each note. This information is given in the form of Fretboard Diagrams. (See Appendix A - How to Read Fretboard Diagrams)

To be able to play, you will need to change your fingers from one chord shape to another efficiently, without hesitation, and without fumbling. To do this you must send clear and concise signals from your brain to your fingers. The guiding principles for doing this - the 'language' you use to 'speak' to your fingers - is referred to here as "Fret Hand Technique Awareness for Playing Chords". If you internalize the underlying logic of this language you will intuitively use it to instantly change your fingers from one chord shape to another in any given situation.

There are four categories of Fret Hand Technique Awareness for Playing Chords: Hand Position Awareness, Finger Movement Awareness, Finger Weight Awareness, and Anchoring Awareness

Hand Position Awareness

Relax / Be Flexible

The curvature of your fingers, the angle of your palm, and the precise position of your thumb will all be subtly or not so subtly different for each chord. Be aware of how much tension you feel in your hand, and adjust it until you feel as little tension as possible. Allow your fret hand to be relaxed and and flexible.

Cut Your Nails

Each finger needs to have the option to be touching only the string it is playing and not the adjacent strings. To achieve this, cut your fret hand finger nails as short as possible and play with the tips of your fingers, not the pads.

Curl Your Fingers More / Bend Your Wrist Less

Bending your wrist to get your hand out in front of the fretboard will reduce dexterity and cause fatigue. Keep your palm underneath the fretboard and curl your fingers.

Palm Angle Awareness / No Reaching With Fingers 2, 3 or 4

Keeping your palm parallel to and below the fretboard will also prevent you from reaching for notes with fingers 2, 3 or 4. Fingers 2, 3 & 4 function best when they are perpendicular to the fretboard. Any reaching or stretching that is needed is best done by finger 1. However, keeping your palm angled will relieve the tension created when playing multiple fingers in the same fret so allow the angle of your palm to be flexible.

Thumb Up

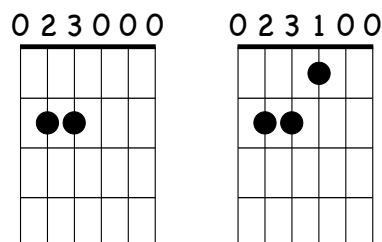
Your thumb generally points up and is in the middle of your hand on the back of the fretboard. It will rarely need to lay flat and point toward the tuning pegs. Its vertical position on the neck will change often when playing chords, from lower on the neck through to actually hanging over the top and touching string 6 in order to either play or mute it.

Finger Movement Awareness

Finger Movement Awareness means to be aware of whether or not each finger needs to be "Added", "Removed", "Move Vertically", "Move Horizontally" or "Relocated" in order to transform the shape of the starting chord to the shape of the target chord.

Adding

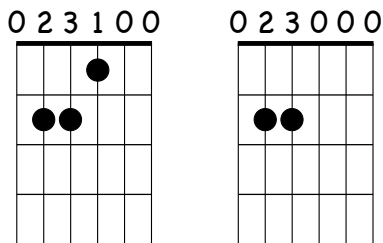
Adding refers to a finger that is not in the current chord but is needed for the target chord.



In this example, fingers 2 & 3 do not need to move and finger 1 is added to create the target chord.

Removing

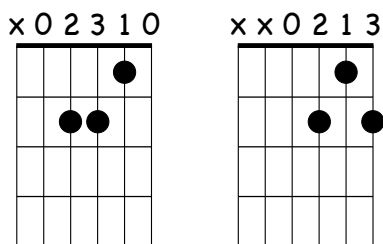
Removing refers to a finger that is in the current chord but is not needed for the target chord.



In this example, fingers 2 & 3 do not need to move and finger 1 is removed to create the target chord.

Moving Vertically

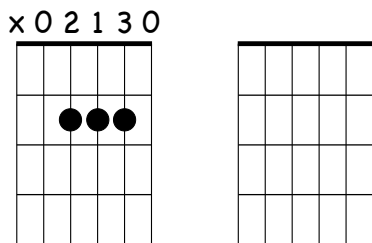
Moving vertically refers to a finger that is changing string but is not changing fret.



In this example, finger 1 doesn't need to move and fingers 2 & 3 move vertically to create the target chord.

Moving Horizontally

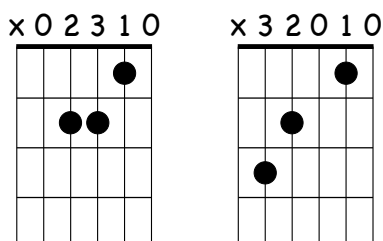
Moving horizontally refers to a finger that is changing fret but is not changing string.



In this example, finger 1 moves horizontally and fingers 2 & 3 do not move to create the target chord.

Relocating

Relocating refers to a finger that is changing both string and fret when moving to the target.



In this example, fingers 1 & 2 do not need to move and finger 3 is relocated to create the target chord.

Finger Weight Awareness

Learning to control and distribute finger weight - how hard you pushing on each note - significantly contributes to your ability to execute finger movements smoothly and efficiently. There are four aspects of Finger Weight Awareness: "Full Weight"; "Guide Weight"; "Release Weight"; "Add Weight"; and "Transfer Weight".

Full Weight

Full Weight is the amount of pressure you need on a string to clearly hear the pitch. Any more than this is a waste of energy that will create unnecessary tension in your fret hand and any less than this will make the string sound "buzzy" or muted.

Guide Weight

Guide Weight means you are still touching the string, but not applying enough pressure to hear the pitch. Guide Weight is used when sliding your finger horizontally (new fret, same string).

Release Weight

Release Weight means to remove your finger from the string. Of course you have to take your finger off the current location you are playing before moving it vertically or relocating it however, there are instances where it is advantageous to think of the release as a separate part of the process.

Add Weight

Adding Weight means to apply Full Weight to a finger once it has arrived at the target string/fret location.

Transfer Weight

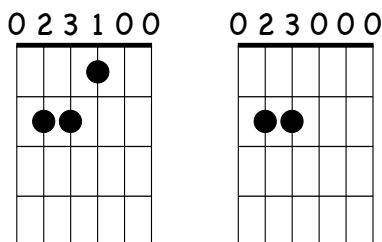
Transferring Weight means to transfer weight from one finger or group of fingers to another. In Anchoring Principles (see Reference Article 7), weight and guide weight can be used temporarily on one or more fingers to facilitate the movement of your other fingers. This weight is then released from the temporary anchor and transferred to the finger for which it needed.

Anchoring Awareness

Anchoring helps to facilitate the movement of your fingers by stabilizing your hand and keeping it connected to the fretboard. The Anchoring Principles are: "Stationary Anchoring"; "Horizontal Anchoring"; "Temporary Stationary Anchoring"; and "Temporary Horizontal Anchoring".

Stationary Anchoring

Stationary Anchoring means to stabilize your hand using a common string/finger/fret combination between the current chord and the target chord.

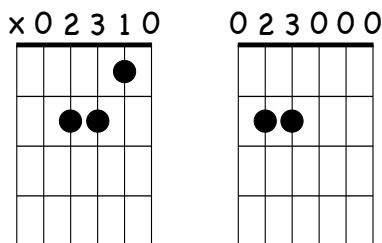


Stationary Anchor

Keep weight on fingers 2 & 3 while removing finger 1.

Temporary Stationary Anchoring

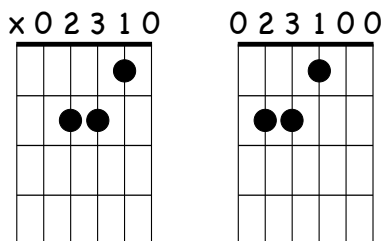
Temporary Stationary Anchoring means to stabilize your hand by temporarily holding the weight on a finger being used in the current chord while moving your other fingers toward the target chord. You then either remove, move vertically, or relocate this Temporary Stationary Anchor and complete the chord change.



Temporary Stationary Anchor & Remove

Hold weight on finger 1 while moving fingers 2 & 3 vertically.

While transferring weight to fingers 2 & 3, remove finger 1.



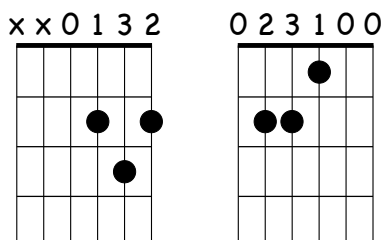
Temporary Stationary Anchor & Vertical Movement

Hold weight on finger 1 while moving fingers 2 & 3 vertically.

While transferring weight to fingers 2 & 3, move finger 1 vertically.

Horizontal Anchoring

Horizontal Anchoring means to stabilize your hand using a common finger/string combination between the current chord and the target chord. The difference between a stationary anchor and a horizontal anchor is that a horizontal anchor is moving along the string to a new fret and a stationary anchor is not moving.



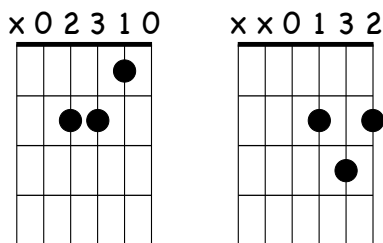
Horizontal Anchor

Keep guide weight on finger 1 and move it horizontally while moving finger 2 vertically and relocating finger 3.

Temporary Horizontal Anchoring

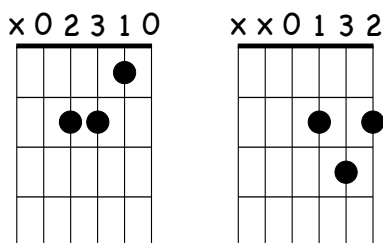
Temporary Horizontal Anchoring means to stabilize your hand by allowing a finger to act as a Horizontal Anchor while moving your other fingers toward the target chord before either removing it, moving it vertically, or relocating to complete the target chord.

Although temporary horizontal anchors can often be played as temporary stationary anchors that relocate, it is almost always better to choose the temporary horizontal anchor option. This is because it allows you to release more tension from your fret hand. In fact, it is best to think of a temporary horizontal anchor as something that we are "allowing" your finger to do, not something you are "forcing" it to do.



Temporary Horizontal Anchor & Vertical Movement

Hold guide weight on finger 1 and allow it to move horizontally while relocating finger 3 and moving finger 2 vertically. While transferring weight to fingers 2 & 3, move finger 1 vertically.



Temporary Stationary Anchor & Relocation

Hold weight on finger 1 while relocating finger 3 and moving finger 2 vertically. While transferring weight to fingers 2 & 3, relocate finger 1.