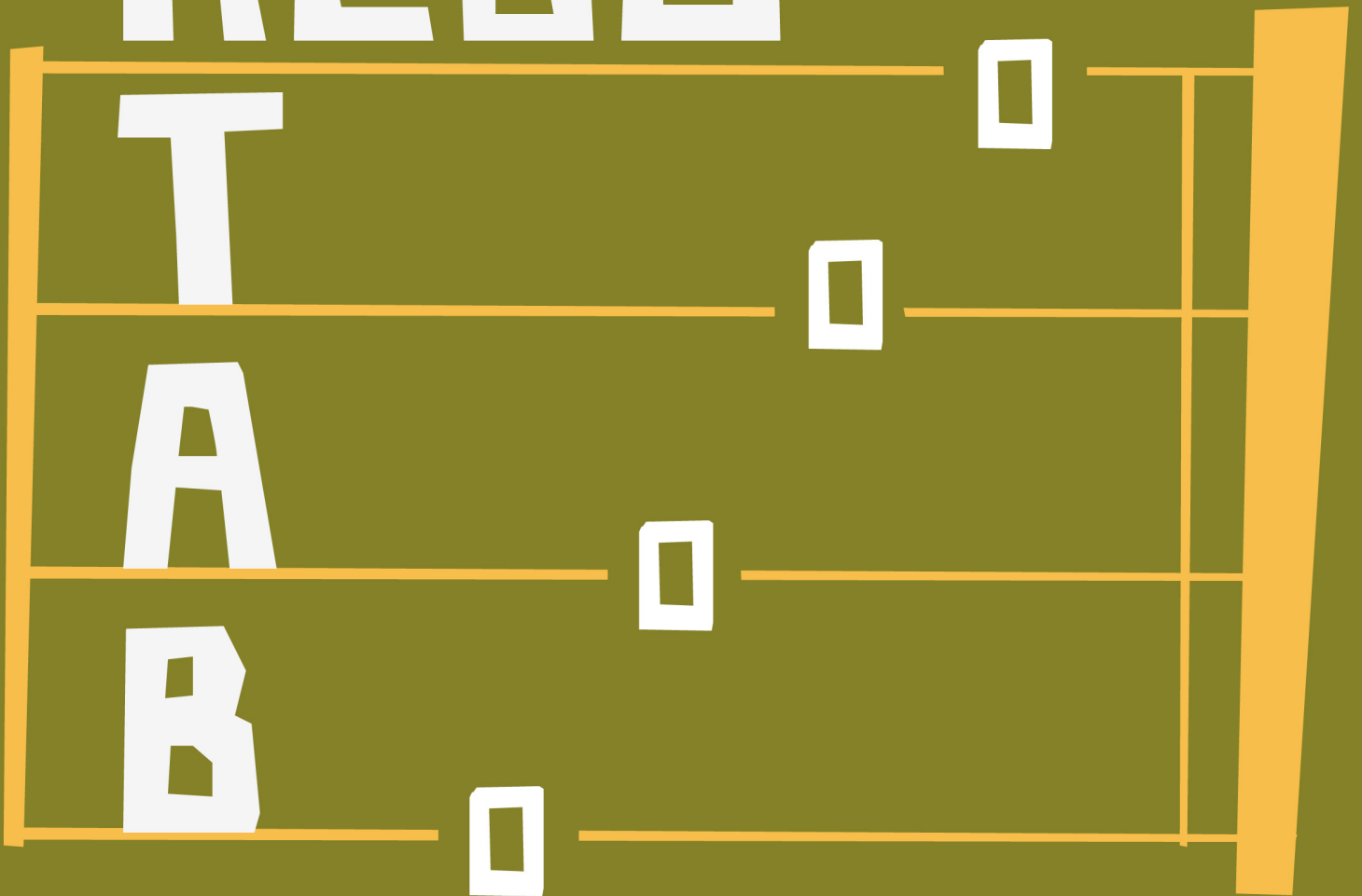


How to Read



Part 1: Tab Basics

Old fashioned music snobs will have you believe that tabs are a new fangled system for people who are too lazy to read standard notation. Whereas modern music snobs (like me) say that video tutorials are for people too lazy to learn to read tab.

But tabs have actually been around since the 14th Century. They are massively helpful when you're playing a fretted instrument as they tell you exactly what you need to play (which string and which fret). Something standard notation doesn't do.

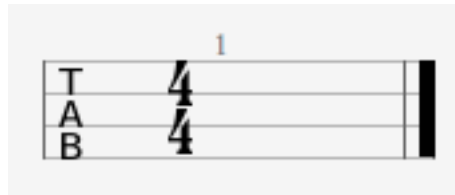
First thing to clear up is the difference between tabs and chord charts since some sites mix them up. Chord sheets will show the chord shapes at the top and have the chord changes mapped against the lyrics.

Tabs are much more detailed than this. They show you exactly what to play, when and for how long. If you're looking to move beyond strumming chords it's a big help to be able to read tab.

This ebook is laid out the way I get asked questions about tab: "What does this thing mean?" It is for explaining tab so the descriptions of techniques are very brief. If you're looking for proper descriptions of the techniques pick up a copy of *Ukulele for Dummies*.

1.1 What are the horizontal lines?

What they look like



What they are

The strings of the ukulele.

Each line represents one of the strings. They are arranged as they'd be if you tilted the ukulele so the strings faced you. From bottom to top they're G, C, E, A.

You'll have noticed a few other things around the lines.

Sometimes you'll see "TAB" written at the start. This is to distinguish it from standard notation.

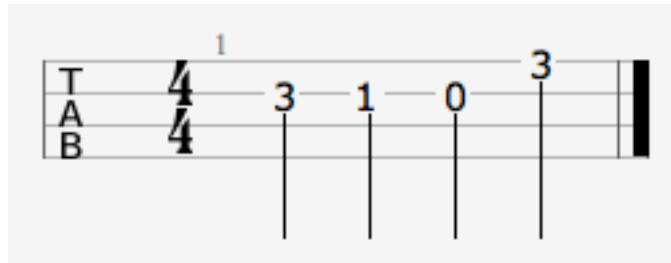
The two fours are the time signature. You can ignore that for now.

The number 1 above the tab is the bar number. More about bars in part 2.

And the thick vertical lines just indicate the end of the tab.

1.2 What are the numbers on the lines?

What they look like



What they are:

Fret numbers.

The numbers that appear on the lines indicate which string to play and what fret to play it at. So when you see a number on the string you play that fret on that string only.

Play the Example



The first three notes are on the second line down representing the E string. You should play this string and only this string. The number 3 indicates that the string should be played at the third fret (giving you a G note). Then you play the first fret on the same string.

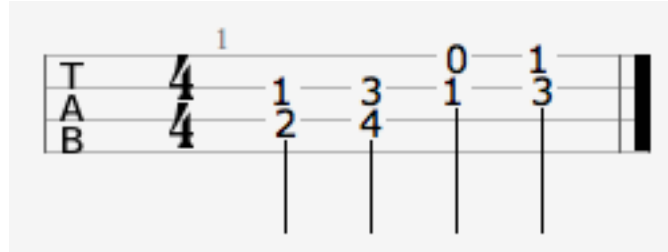
When you fret the note make sure your finger is just behind the fret bar itself. If you hear a buzzing when you fret try moving your finger back from towards the head slightly.

The 0 means you play the string open i.e. you don't fret it at all just play the string as it is.

The last note is on the top line. So you play the A-string at the third fret.

1.3 What does it mean when one number is above another?

What they look like



What they are

Simultaneous notes. Anytime you see two or more numbers above each other you play them at the same time.

Play the Example



The concept of the numbers is exactly the same. All you do is play them simultaneously.

First, the C string is played at the 2nd fret while the E string is played at the 1st fret.

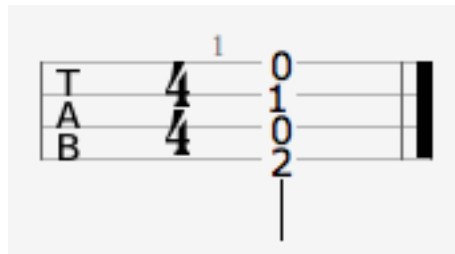
After that note, you play the C string at the 4th fret at the same time as playing the E string at the 3rd fret.

It then shifts to a new pair of strings: E and A.

You can play these picking the lower string with your thumb and the higher with your index finger. Or you can play both using a mini-strum with your thumb.

1.4 What do you do when all the strings have numbers at the same time?

What they look like



What they are

Chords.

All notes written above each other are played at the same time. So when you see a vertical line of four numbers – with numbers on all the strings – you play a chord.

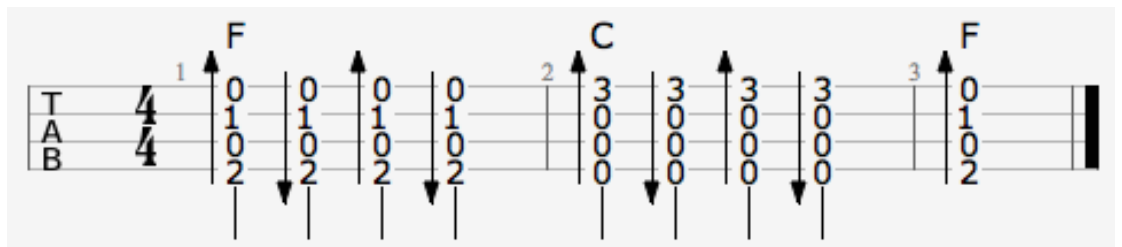
You fret these just the same as individual notes.

So in this example you have the g-string being played at the second fret and the E string at the first fret with the other notes ringing open. This creates the F-chord shape that you are probably familiar with.

These can be either strummed or picked. You can find how those are tabbed later in the book.

1.5 What are the arrows?

What they look like



What they are

Strumming directions.

These arrows indicate which direction you should strum. An up arrow indicates a down strum, and a down arrow indicates an up strum. Don't look at me I didn't invent the system!

It does actually make sense in terms of the order you're hitting the strings. So in a down strum you hit the g-string first and the A-string last and the arrow points from the g-string to the A-string.

Play the example



The tab indicates the chords you play (F – C – F).

The arrows are a simple down-up-down-up for each chord, finishing with a down strum for the final F.

Part 2: Bars

2.1 What are the lines dividing up the tab?

What they look like



What they are

Bar lines. They separate the music up into little chunks known as “bars”.

The music will fit neatly into these bars. Each element will take up a certain number of them.

Your standard strumming pattern like d - d u - u d - is one bar long and you play it once in each bar. You’ll play a chord for one, two or however many bars. Then the whole chord pattern might last 8 or 16 bars. All these elements will usually neatly fit into bars like this.

Similarly tab is divided neatly into bars. You might have a riff that last two bars, a melody that lasts 12 bars or a solo that lasts 6 bars.

The end of the piece is indicated by the double line with one thick line.

2.2 What are the little numbers above the tab?

What they look like



What they are

Bar numbers. They make it easy to reference a certain part of the piece. They don't influence the music at all.

2.3 What are the big numbers at the beginning?

What they look like



What they are

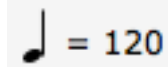
The time signature.

The top number tells you how many beats there are in a bar. By far the most common is four. When you hear a singer shouting “1, 2, 3, 4,” at the start of the song they’re counting out the beats in the bar. Other numbers you’ll sometimes see are two beats and sometimes three.

Don’t worry about the bottom number for now. It’ll almost always be 4.

2.4 What does the little equation at the top mean?

What they look like



A musical notation symbol consisting of a quarter note followed by an equals sign and the number 120, representing a tempo marking of 120 beats per minute.

What they are

The tempo marking.

They tell you speed of the tune (known as tempo in music jargon). The tempo is indicated in beats per minute. If you're using a metronome you'd set it to 120 bpm in this case.

Part 3: Rhythm

Tabs vary a fair amount in how they display rhythm. The most simple tabs will indicate rhythm by the relative size of the gaps between the notes. Others don't indicate rhythm at all and you're expected to pick up the rhythm by listening to the music.

This part focuses on the two most common and most useful ways: with standard notation and with rhythm marks on the tab.

3.1 What are all these lines and blobs above the tab?

What they look like



The image shows a musical staff in 4/4 time with a treble clef. The first measure contains a quarter note on G4 (labeled '1'), an eighth note on A4, a beamed eighth note on B4, a sixteenth note on C5, a beamed sixteenth note on B4, an eighth note on A4, and a quarter note on G4. The second measure contains a quarter note on G4 (labeled '2') and a quarter note on F4. Below the staff is a guitar tab with fret numbers: 0, 1, 3, 1, 3, 1, 0, 2, 0, 0.

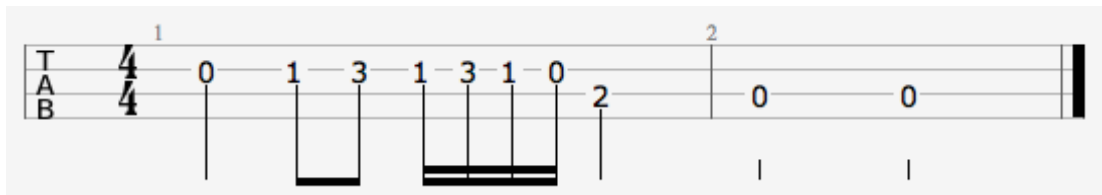
What they are

Standard notation. With some tabs you'll see the standard notation alongside the tabs. These indicate the notes to be played by their position. But since you have the tab you don't need to worry about that.

The more important info is the rhythm. The shape of the note tells you how long each note will last.

3.2 What are the lines coming off the tabs?

What they look like



What they are

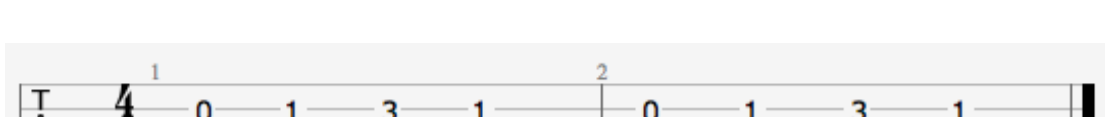
Rhythm notation. Some tabs do away with the standard notation and just show the rhythm markings on the tab itself. The symbols are very similar.

3.3 What do the rhythm markings mean?

Each marking indicates a different amount of time that a note lasts. These are all relative to the speed of a song. So they are all expressed relative to the length of a beat. In the videos you'll hear a metronome clicking out the beat.

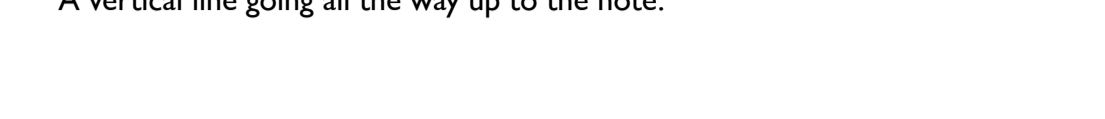
Quarter Note

What they look like in tab



A vertical line going all the way up to the note.

What they look like in standard notation



A vertical line with a filled-in oval.

How long they last

A single beat.

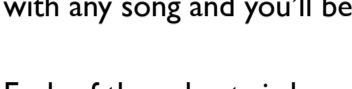
When you listen to a piece of music, you'll feel the pulse of the music. Clap along with any song and you'll be clapping out its beat.

Each of these beats is known as a *crochet* (in UK speak) or a *quarter note* (American speak). From now on I'm going to stick to using the US terminology because even though I'm English it makes a lot more sense to me.

So when you're strumming a d - d - d - d - pattern you're strumming out quarter notes.

The lines going up in this example can also go down. It makes no difference to how the note is played.

Play the example



In these rhythm examples you'll hear a metronome clicking for each beat (quarter note). In this case you play one note per click at the same time as the click.

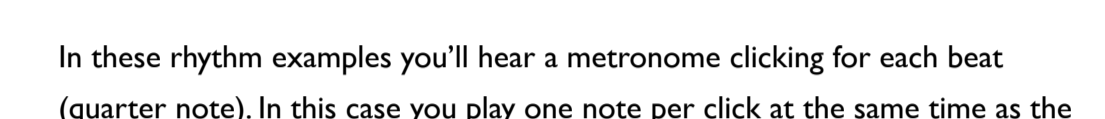
Half Note

What they look like in tab



A vertical line that only goes half way up to the note.

What they look like in standard notation



A vertical line with a hollow oval.

How long they last

Two beats

Play the example



Because they last two beats you play these once every two clicks of the metronome.

So when you're counting the beats you'd play on the 1 and the 3 (1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4).

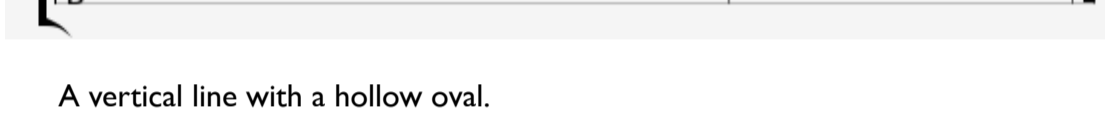
Whole Note

What they look like in tab



A note with no vertical line

What they look like in standard notation



A hollow oval without a vertical line.

How long they last

Four beats

Play the example



Whole notes take up the whole of the bar. So you just play them on the first beat: 1, 2, 3 4, 1, 2, 3, 4).

Eighth Note

What they look like in tab



Vertical lines connected by a horizontal line.

What they look like in standard notation

Like quarter notes connected by a horizontal line.



A hollow oval without a vertical line.

How long they last

Half a beat

Play the example



You play these twice for each beat with the second note being played exactly half way between the beats. It's the same rhythm as a d u d u d u d u strum.

It's counted 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and.

Sixteenth Note

What they look like in tab



Vertical lines connected by two horizontal lines

What they look like in standard notation



Like eighth notes but with two horizontal lines.

How long they last:

Quarter of a beat

Play the example



Twice as fast again as the eighth notes. These come at you very fast. I'm playing this with a running-man motion. Alternating the picking between my index and middle fingers.

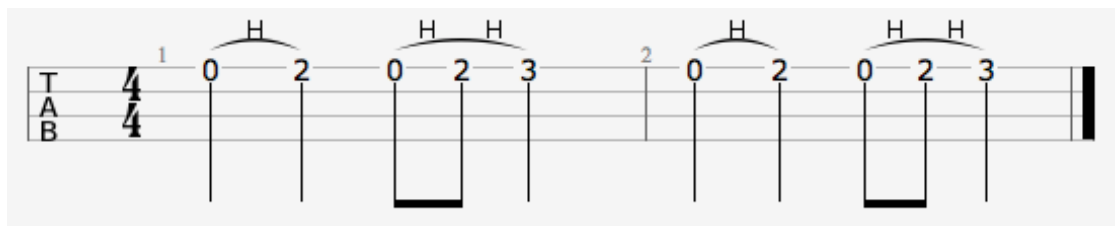
You can count them: 1 e and a 2 e and a 3 e and a 4 e and a

Part 4: Hammer-Ons and Pull Offs

Want to change the pitch of the note but are too lazy to repick it? Then hammer-ons and pull-offs are for you.

4.1 What's the arch with an "H" between two different notes?

What they look like



Tabs won't always have the "H" on the arch. You can tell it's a hammer-on because it goes from a lower note to a higher one. They can arch up or arch down. It doesn't make a difference to how it's played.

What they are: Hammer-ons. They are produced by plucking a note on the uke then bringing a finger down swiftly and firmly at a higher fret – making the sound of the higher note without picking it.

Play the example

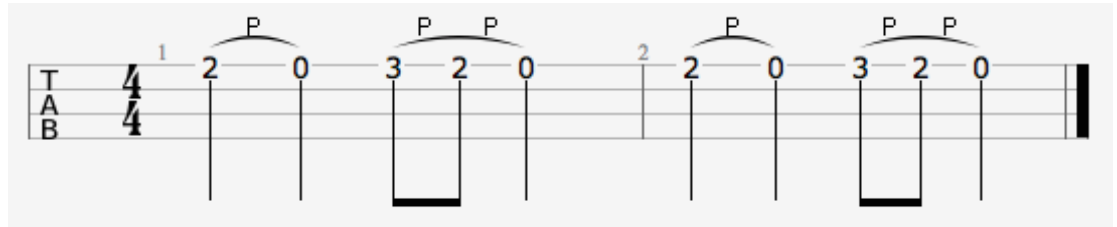


Here the string is being played open, then the middle finger hammers-on at the second fret (without the string being repicked). Make sure you bring your finger down firmly and quickly. You need to be able to hear the note ringing clearly.

The second part has two hammer-ons in a row. It starts just the same with a hammer-on at the second fret. You keep holding that note then hammer-on at the third fret with your ring finger. This is a bit more difficult. It's harder to get enough speed and force. So this one will take more practice.

4.2 What's the arch with a "P" between two different notes?

What they look like



They work in the same way as hammer-ons. Tabs won't always have the "P" on the arch and they can either arch above or below.

What they are: Pull-offs. They are produced by plucking a note on the uke then pulling your finger off the string so a lower note is ringing.

Play the example



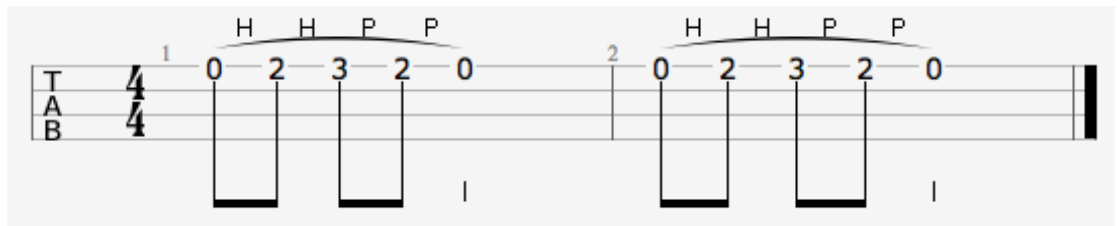
Start with your middle finger on the second fret. Pluck the note then pull your finger off the string to leave the open string ringing.

When you bring your finger off the string don't just take it straight off perpendicular to the fretboard. Pull downwards a little while your finger is on the string so the string snaps off your finger. That gives it a sneaky little pluck so the note will still ring.

The second half of the bar is a double pull-off. You pluck the A-string, third fret then pull-off to the second fret (using the sneaky-pluck method) then pull-off again to the open string.

4.3 Combining hammer-ons and pull-offs

What they look like



What they are

A combination of hammer-ons and pull offs.

Play the example

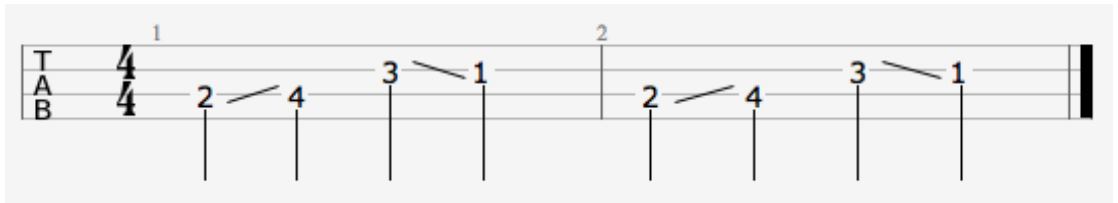


You can use hammer-ons and pull-offs together to make a nice flowing line. This phrase combines the hammer-on move from earlier with the pull-off move.

Part 5: Slides

5.1 What are the diagonal lines between notes?

What they look like



What they are

Shift slides.

You slide between the two notes and pluck both. An upward sloping line is a slide up the neck and a downwards line is a slide down.

Play the example

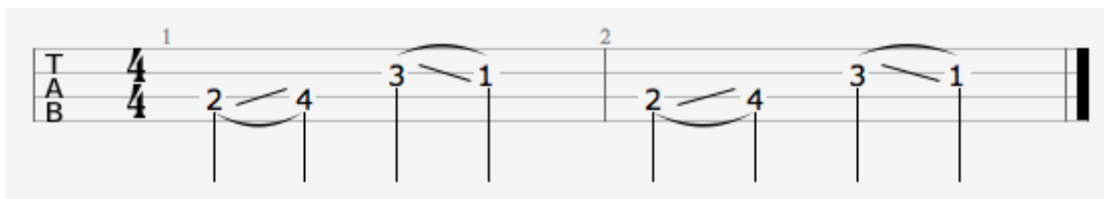


Start by playing the C-string, second fret with your middle finger. Then slide your finger up to the fourth fret. Make the slide quick and keep the pressure on the string. When you reach the fourth fret pluck it again.

Similarly, play the third fret with your index finger. Then slide it down to the first fret and pluck it again.

5.2 What are the diagonal lines with an arch?

What they look like



What they are

Slides.

Just like shift slides except this time you don't repluck the string.

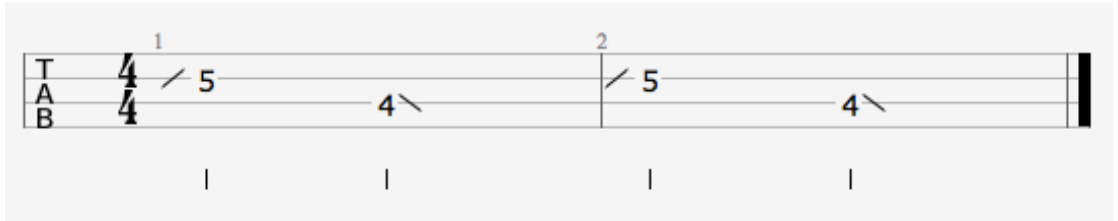
Play the example



Play this the same as the last example. The only difference is that you don't pluck the string after the slide. That makes it even more important that the string keeps ringing through the whole slide. If you find the note isn't still ringing try changing the amount of pressure you are applying to the string when you slide.

5.3 What are the diagonal lines that are only connected to one note?

What they look like



What they are: Slides into and out of a note. These don't have a definite beginning/end to the slide. They're slides to/from nowhere.

Play the example



For the slide in start with your finger two to four frets below the fret you're aiming for. Start the slide right before you pluck the note. You want to be sliding when you pick the note but leave as short a gap as you can.

For the slide out you want to gradually release the pressure on the string as you slide down. That makes the note gradually fade away.

Part 6: Repeats

6.1 What do the double lines with dots mean?

What they look like



A pair of double bar lines. One with dots facing to the right. One with dots facing to the left.

What they are

Repeat symbols.

When you come across a set of these with the dots facing right just breeze straight through them. When the dots are facing left, you go back to the first set (where the dots are facing right) and play through again. The second time you reach the repeat sign, play straight through it unless it indicates otherwise (by saying x3, x4 etc.).

If there is no first set of repeat signs you go back to the beginning and play through again.

In this example you play bar one and bar two. Then when you hit the second repeat sign you head back and play bar two again. Then you play bar three.

6.2 What are the bracketed bars next to the repeat?

What they look like

The image shows two musical staves illustrating bracketed repeats. The first staff shows a 4/4 time signature with three measures labeled 1, 2, and 3. A repeat sign is placed after measure 2, with a first ending bracket over measure 1 and a second ending bracket over measure 3. The second staff shows a 4/4 time signature with two measures labeled 1. and 2. A repeat sign is placed after measure 2, with a first ending bracket over measure 1. and a second ending bracket over measure 2. The first ending bracket is labeled with a '4' below it, and the second ending bracket is labeled with a '5' below it.

What they are

Bracketed repeats

Here you play the bar underneath the 1 section the first time round, follow the repeat sign as normal, then second time round you skip that bar and play the bar underneath the 2 instead.

Like before play up to the second repeat and head back to the first. This time round skip bar 4 (because it's under the 1 bracket) and go straight to bar five. So you're playing the bars:

1, 2, 3, 4, 2, 3, 5

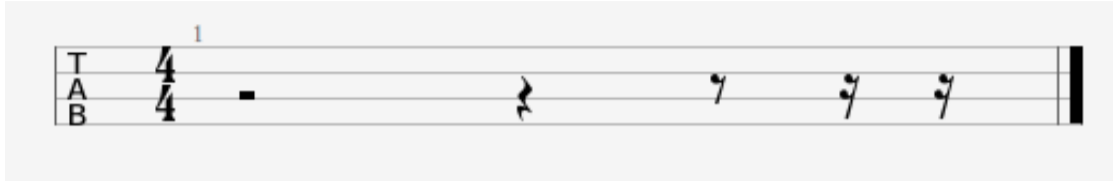
The section under the 1 can be any number of bars – the idea remains the same.

You can also have any number of alternate bars. If the section is repeated 4 times, there may be 4 different endings written. Or it may indicate playing the first section three times (indicated with “1-3”).

Part 7: Rests

7.1 What are the squiggles on the tab?

What they look like



What they are

Rests.

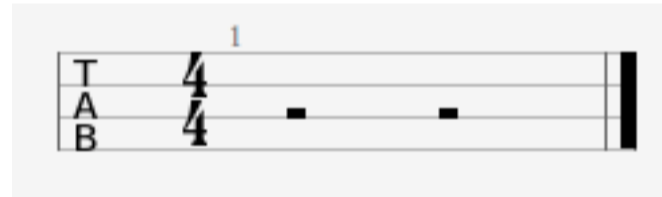
Rests indicate that there shouldn't be anything playing at all. That means if there was a note played before you should stop it ringing.

Rests look different depending on how long they last. Here's a list:

Whole Note



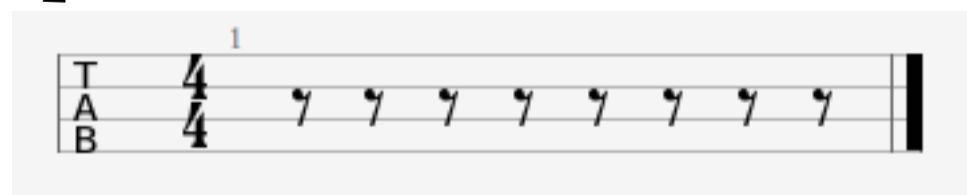
Half Note



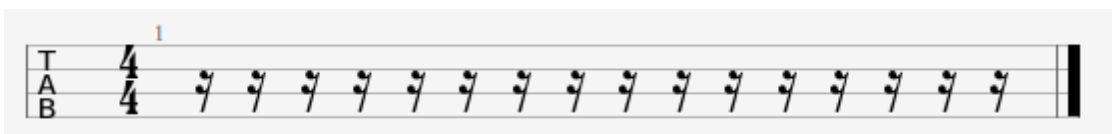
Quarter Note



Eighth Note



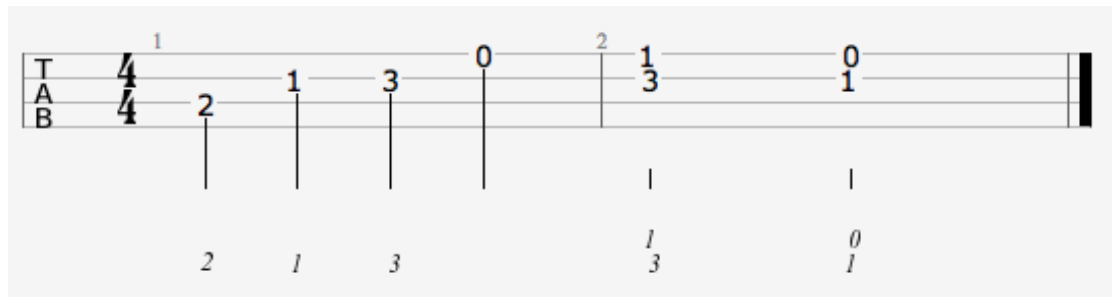
Sixteenth Note



Part B: Fingering

B.1 What are the numbers under the tab?

What they look like



Usually they'll be in italics under the tab. Sometimes they'll have circles around them.

What they are

Fingering instructions for the fretting hand.

The index finger is 1, middle finger 2 etc. When strings are played open they're either shown with a 0 or nothing is shown at all.

Play the example



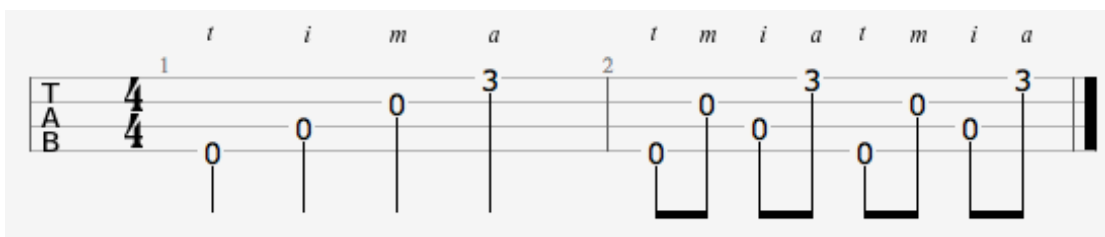
In the first bar you use your middle finger, then index, then ring finger. The last note is played open so there's no fingering.

In the second bar you're playing two notes at a time. The position of the fingering matches the position of the string the finger is on. So in the first pair of notes your ring finger is on the E-string and index finger on the A-string. The last pair of notes is index on the E and A-string open.

It's not all that common to see fingerings. They're usually only included when there's a particularly tricky section. You can take them as just a suggestion. Try them and if you prefer a different fingering do it your way.

B.2 What are the letters above the tab?

What they look like



Letters above the tab. Sometimes lower case letters in italics and sometime uppercase letters.

What they are

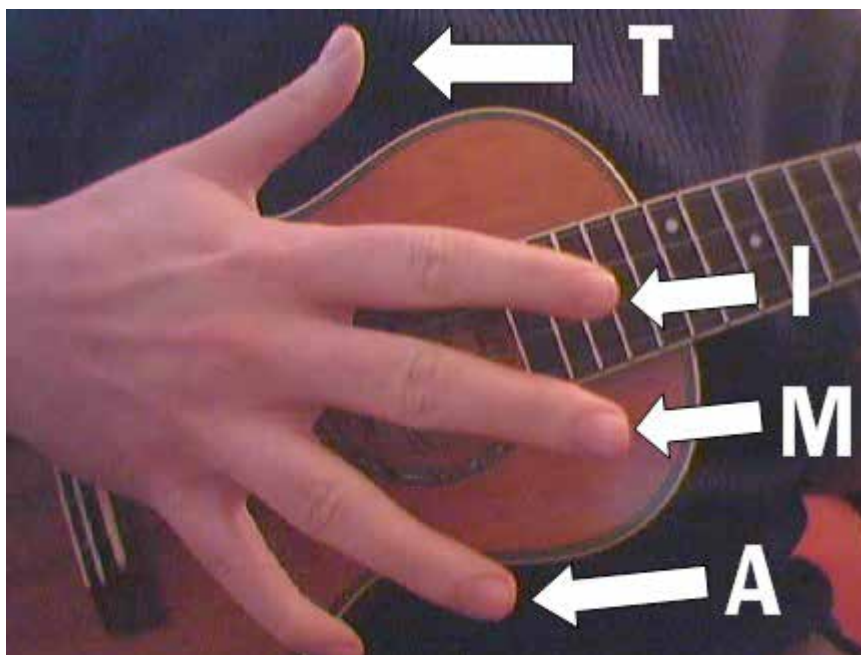
Picking hand fingering.

t or p = Thumb

i = Index Finger

m = Middle Finger

a = Ring Finger



The finger names come, apparently, from Latin (pulgar, indice, medius, annular).

Play the example



In this case the picking fingers stay on the same string throughout.

Thumb: g-string

Index: C-string

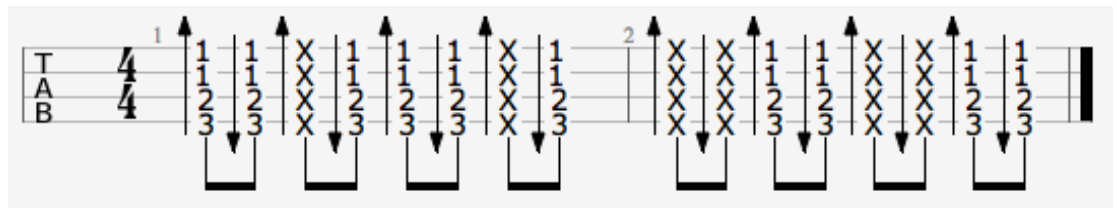
Middle: E-string

Ring: A-string

Part 9: Advanced Strums

9.1 What are the x's?

What they look like



What they are

Chnks/muted strums.

X's are used to indicate both these techniques. Chnks are where the strumming hand comes to rest on the strings as you strum. And muted strums where the fretting hand rests on the strings preventing them ringing.

The two techniques have a similar sound but note that only muted strums work can be done on up-strums. So if there are x's on an up-strum it's intending you to use muted strums.

They can also indicate single notes being muted.

Play the example

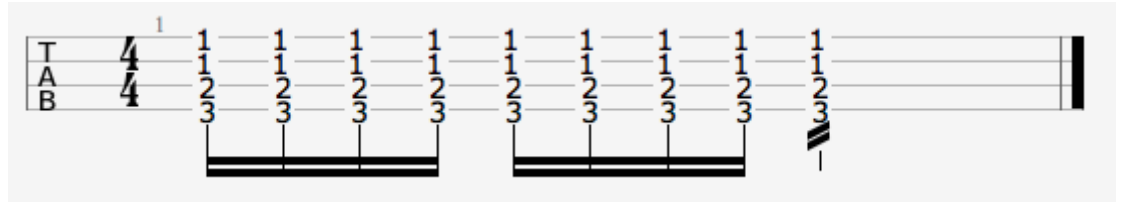


The first bar is played with a chnk. So it's a "d u x u" pattern.

The second bar - with x's on both up and down strums - is played with fretting hand muting.

9.2 What are the diagonal lines under the rhythm notation?

What they look like



What they are

tremolo strums.

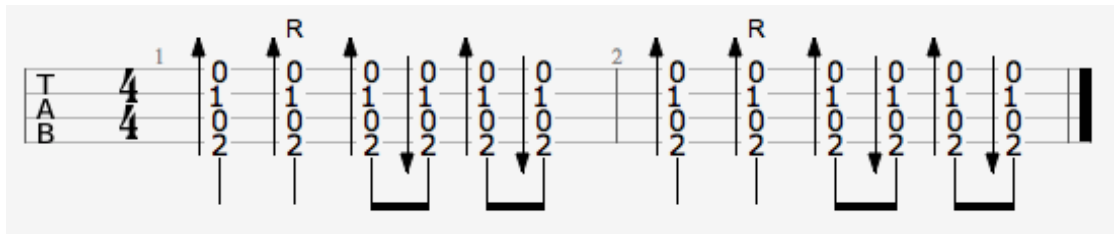
Strumming the same chord over-and-over in a regular, quick tempo. The tab indicates the total length of all the strums together with diagonal lines underneath the note.

One diagonal line under the note indicates eighth notes, two lines denotes sixteenth notes and so on.

In this example, the first half of the bar and the second half are both played in exactly the same way. Both show a constant strum of sixteenth notes.

9.3 What is the R at the top of a strum?

What they look like



A standard strum arrow but with an R at the base.

What they are

Roll strums (or rasgueados if you want to be fancy).

They are produced by strumming with each finger in quick succession. You start by flicking downwards with your little finger, then ring, then middle and finally index finger. To do a roll strum on an up-strum you do the reverse (which is much trickier and rarer).

Play the example



This example is a simple d - d - d u d u strum with the second down-strum replaced with a roll strum. So you get:

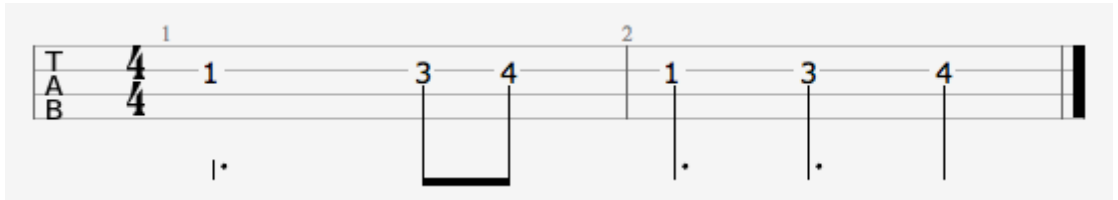
d - R - d u d u

You can learn more about roll strums, chnks and muted strums in [How to Play Ukulele Strums](#).

Part 10: Advanced Rhythms

10.1 What are the dots next to the rhythm notation?

What they look like



What they are

Dotted notes. They increase the length of that note by half as much again. For example, a note that lasted two beats would now last three beats.



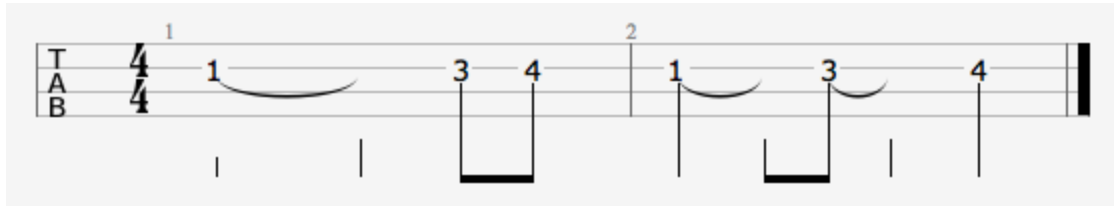
Play the example

This example starts with a dotted half note. A half note is two beats long. So add half on again (one beat) and you get three beats.

The second bar has dotted eighth notes. An eighth note is one beat long so a dotted eighth note lasts one and a half beats.

10.2 What are the arches that end in a blank space?

What they look like



They look like hammer-ons or pull-offs but don't have another number at the end. Although sometimes they will have the same number at the end in brackets - you'll see this at the start of a bar.

What they are

Tied notes.

Play the example

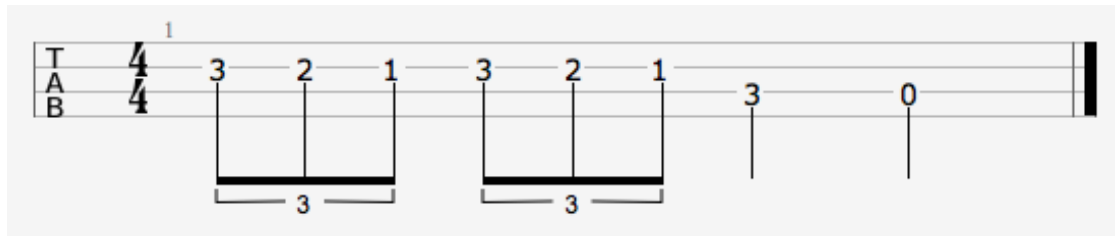


Yes, it's exactly the same video as the dotted note example. Because a dotted half note is the same length as a dotted half note tied to a quarter note (three beats).

In the second bar you have a quarter note tied to an eighth note. Then an eighth note tied to a quarter note. They're both last the same amount of time (one and half beats) the order doesn't make a difference.

10.3 What is the bracket with a 3 in it?

What they look like



What they are

Triplets. Three notes where there would usually be two.

Triplets can group together any length of note. So a group of three quarter notes would fit in the place of two standard quarter notes. And three eighth notes would fit in the place of two standard eighth notes.

Play the example



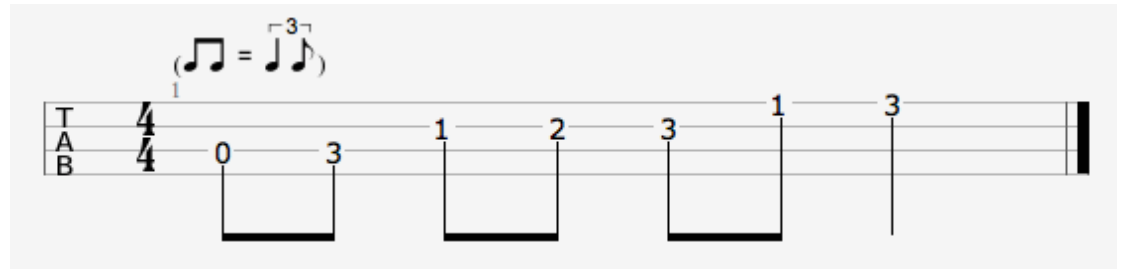
This example has two sets of eighth note triplets. The best way to count these is:

1 and a 2 and a...

Make sure that your triplets are evenly spaced within the time.

10.4 What does this crap at the beginning mean?

What they look like



You might also see the words “Swing Time” at the beginning of the piece.

What they are

Swing time. Rather than the all the eighth notes lasting half a beat, now the first of a pair of eighth notes lasts two thirds of a beat and the second of the pair lasts for one beat.

Play the example



You can count swing time as you did triplets (1 and a 2 and a...). The first note will be on the number and the second on the “a”. But once you get the feeling becomes natural to play it and you’ll be able to do it without thinking about it.

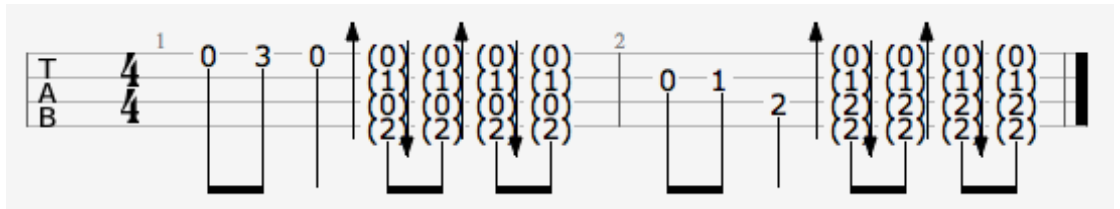
This example is just a run up the blues scale. Swinging it adds to the bluesy feel. Without the swing it sounds like this:



Part 11: Note Volume

11.1 What are the brackets around the notes?

What they look like



What they are

Background notes. They're played more softly.

Play the example

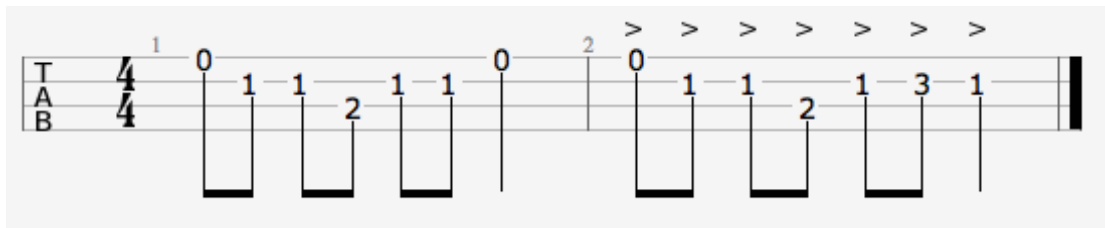


The most common use of bracketed notes is for supporting chords to back up a melody. And that's how they're used in this example.

The single notes are played as usual. But the notes in brackets are strummed very lightly. Ideally it should sound like there are two ukuleles: one playing the melody and one playing the chords.

11.2 What are the arrows above the notes?

What they look like



What they are

Accents. Notes played more forcefully than the notes around them.

Play the example

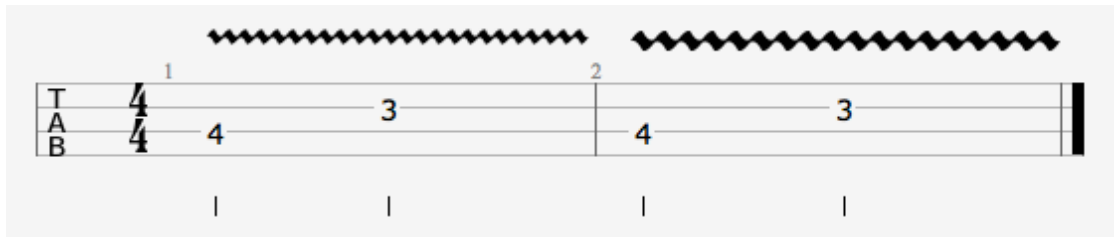


Some times you'll see just one note or chord emphasised at a time. But in this example the whole of the second bar is emphasised. It gives the example a call-and-response feel.

Part 12: Changing the Pitch

12.1 What's with the wavy lines?

What they look like



What they are

Vibrato. It gives the note a shaky quality. This is used particularly when playing melodies as it emulates the way notes tend to be sung.

Play the example



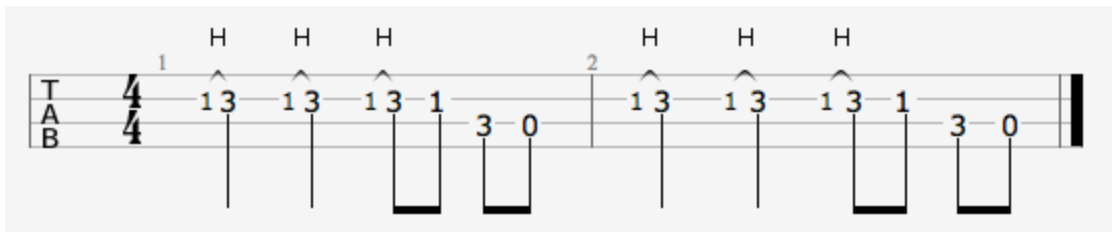
There are a couple of ways of producing vibrato.

The shallower wavy lines are done with the classical vibrato technique. You slide your fretting finger back and forth within the fret you're playing. This creates a subtle vibrato.

The second bar with the deeper waves is the blues/rock vibrato technique. This involves bending and releasing the string repeatedly. This can be used to create a much wider vibrato.

12.2 What are the tiny numbers?

What they look like



What they are

Grace notes. Very short notes played before the main note. They usually contain a slide, hammer-on or pull off. Grace notes are too short to make picking both possible.

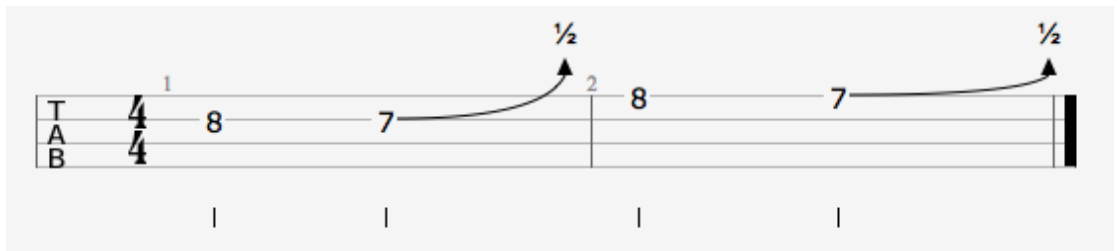
Play the example



This example has a grace note on the first fret. Start by plucking the string while holding the first fret. Then immediately hammer-on to the third fret. Don't wait around!

12.3 What are the arrows pointing up?

What they look like



The number at the end of the arrow is the number of steps the bend raises the note by. $1/2$ step = one fret. 1 step = 2 frets.

What they are

Bends. They are produced by plucking the string and pushing it up (towards your head) or down (towards the ground). This raises the pitch of the note.

Play the example

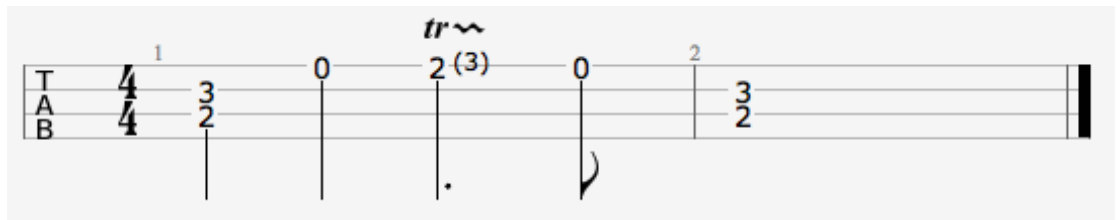


This example has two half-step bends at the seventh fret. So by the end of the bend the note is one fret higher i.e. the same pitch as a note at the eighth fret.

So listen carefully to the notes at the eighth fret in this example and aim for that with the bends.

12.4 What does "tr" mean?

What they look like



What they are

Trills. They are produced by repeatedly hammering-on and pulling-off the same two notes for the length of the note indicated.

Play the example



Here the trill is between the second and third frets. Start by playing the second fret then hammer-on to the third fret. Then pull off to the second again. Keep doing that for the length of the note (one and a half beats).

Part 13: Advanced Repeats

13.1 What's with the Italian writing and Masonic symbols?

As well as the more simple system in Part 6, there are an array of scribbles and scrawlings that can be used to indicate repeats. Here's a quick glossary of the most common terms:

Capo

The start of the piece.

Coda

The final section of the tab. The start of the coda is indicated with a target.

Fine

The end of the piece.

Segno

Meaning "sign". This little squiggle that looks like a drunk dollar sign indicates a certain place in the tab.

Da

Meaning, "from the". For example *Da capo* is telling you to go to the start and play from there. You'll see it shorted to *D.C.* for *Da Capo* and *D.S.* for *Da Segno* (to the squiggle sign).

Al

Meaning, "to the," (or, "exceptionally handsome ukulele blogger"). You'll see it after *Da*. For example *D.C. al fine* means, "from the start to the finish." So you'd go back to the beginning then end the piece where it says *Fine*.

Putting them together

The first time round, you can breeze past the symbols until you reach *D.S. al Coda* at the end of bar 5. Then go back to the *segno* (bar 2) and play through until the *Da Coda*

Then you play through until you reach *Da Coda*. At this point you go to the little target symbol and play the final bar.

So in this example you'll play bars:

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 2, 3, 6.

Don't worry if you didn't get all of that. I still have to double check when I come up against this sort of repeat.