

BASICS OF OPEN G TUNING, For Beginners

Sky Roshay, 2008; rev 2025

This can seem pretty intimidating if you just skim through it, so slow down, read each sentence carefully, and stick with it. It all makes sense if you take it slow.

Tuning the guitar

This is how the strings are tuned and how you get to this tuning from standard tuning, listed from high E down to low E. This puts you in open G if you are playing without a capo.

High E -> down to D

B -> down to G

G -> stays at G

D -> stays at D

A -> down to G

low E -> up to G

So what you end up with, from low note to high note (the way a guitar is strummed) is G G D G G D, in two octaves. The D's are an octave apart, and the two low G's are the same note, with the two higher G's one octave above that.

Finding the different keys

Note: For the rest of this, it is helpful to know that notes go up on a guitar by half steps, one half step per fret: starting at C, the progression is C, C#, D, D#, E, F, F#, G, G#, A, B-flat, B and to C an octave higher. To go from C to C octave is 12 frets including both Cs.

To play in the key of A, put the capo on the second fret (open is the key of G, first fret is the key of G#, second fret is the key of A, going up in half steps) and you now have A A E A A E. If you put the capo on the seventh fret (up 7 half steps from G), you're in the key of D (D D A D D A). And so on.

Tune the guitar to G G D G G D, then put the capo on where you want it, and refine the tuning. The string that will most often go out of tune is the one that was B, because it has to drop so far to get to G. Just keep an ear open for that. If your guitar is going to stay in open tuning and not ever go into standard tuning, you might consider replacing the B string with a second G string (it already has one G string, remember).

The Key of C

The most usual key for Dance music is C, with the capo at the fifth fret. The notes are C C G C C G. The two higher C strings are the note middle C, for reading music and figuring out melodies. So the notes on those two strings go up this way, in half steps, fret by fret:

open: C

first fret: C#/D-flat

second fret: D

third fret: D#/E-flat

fourth fret: E

fifth fret: F

sixth fret: F#

seventh fret: G, the same as the high G string

The easiest way to start is to find the melody and play that. Sometimes the melody moves pretty fast, so you may want to fake chords instead.

Using Chords by Faking

One way to fake chords in open tuning is to listen to the melody and see where these three “fake” chords sound right. The chords are C, F and G, and they are formed by fretting (ie, putting your fingers on) one of the higher C strings and one of the lower C strings (leaving the G string in the middle alone). So a C chord would be open (not fretting anything), F would be fretting on the fifth fret, and G would be fretting on the seventh fret.

You use two fingers for this, one on one of the higher C strings and one on one of the lower ones. They both fall on the same fret, just on different strings.

If neither the F nor the G chords sound right, just strum C, it will be fine.

Using Chords and Transposing for Different Keys

If you are comfortable playing chords and know a little about music theory, you can use the [chord chart by Dave Nur-al-Haqq Walker](#) to refine your technique. The chord chart is written for the key of C (capo on 5th fret).

The most common chords used in any key are the I, IV and V, the numbers being based on the notes of the scale. In the key of C, the I, IV and V chords are C, F and G (C being the first note of the C scale, F the fourth note and G the fifth),

To play in A, for example, move the capo to the second fret and transpose the chords from the key of C to the key of A. The I, IV, and V chords in the key of A are A, D and E, the first, fourth and fifth notes of the A scale.

Here’s how it works:

The “form” a chord takes means what strings and what frets you put your fingers on to make that chord. The form of a C chord (I) in the key of C (when the capo is on fifth fret) is the same as the form of the A chord (I) in the key of A (capo on the second fret) because the form of the I chord is the same no matter what key you’re in. Likewise the form of the IV chord (F in the key of C, D in the key of A) is the same, and so on. This is different from standard tuning.

The main chords I find myself using are these four: I, IV, V, and relative minor (VI minor); here’s what they are in various keys:

Key	I Chord	IV Chord	V Chord	VI Minor
C	C	F	G	Am
G	G	C	D	Em
D	D	G	A	Bm
A	A	D	E	F#m

Because you change keys when you move the capo, the form of a D chord, for example, will be different when you are playing in G (where it is the V chord) than it is when you are playing in A (where it is the IV chord) or when you are playing in D (where it is the I chord). Again, this is different from standard tuning.

Note: A lot of Dance music uses the I minor and the flat VII, like Am and G (in the key of Am) or Dm and C (in the key of Dm). Those are usually not easy songs to play in open tuning and generally sound better in standard tuning.