

Lesson #4: Fingerpicking Technique

So far, you've reviewed how to tune your ukulele and how to hold the ukulele, as well as gotten a crash course into reading ukulele tab and sheet music. It's now time to pick up the ukulele and start fingerpicking!

There are two main techniques to fingerpick the ukulele. Each way has its advantages and disadvantages. You use both of these techniques to play different songs throughout this course.

In this lesson, learn:

- The four-finger picking technique
- The alternating thumb picking technique
- How to pick a simple fingerpicking pattern and play an easy song

Four-Finger Picking Technique

As the name implies, the four-finger picking technique is a way of fingerpicking the ukulele using four fingers on your picking hand, with each finger assigned to pluck one of the four strings on the ukulele.

The thumb (represented by a *p*) is used to pluck the top g-string, index finger (represented by an *i*) to the C-string, middle finger (represented by an *m*) to the E-string, and ring finger (represented by an *a*) to the bottom A-string.

To practice this technique, pluck each string in succession starting with the top g-string, as shown in the following example. Don't worry about playing a chord right now—just pluck the open strings:

The musical notation consists of two staves. The top staff is a treble clef in 4/4 time, showing a sequence of quarter notes: G4 (thumb, *p*), C4 (index, *i*), E4 (middle, *m*), A3 (ring, *a*), G4 (thumb, *p*), C4 (index, *i*), E4 (middle, *m*), A3 (ring, *a*). The bottom staff is a four-line ukulele tablature with strings T, A, B, and C from top to bottom. It shows the sequence of plucking open strings: T (0), A (0), B (0), C (0), T (0), A (0), B (0), C (0).

The above example is counted in four, as indicated by the 4/4 time signature (please see Lesson #3 to learn more about time signatures). Each pluck gets one count.

While picking, your wrist should be straight, extending from the forearm. Your fingers should be relaxed and bent slightly, as if you were lightly holding an imaginary golf ball in your hand. Aim to pluck the strings where the nail and flesh of the tip of your finger meet.

The goal is to make each string ring out with equal volume and tone. For example, the string you pluck with your thumb should not be significantly louder in volume than the string you pluck with your ring finger.

Take it slow at first and keep it relaxed. Any tension in your picking hand works against you in the long run slowing you down and making your picking less accurate. Remember, it only takes a little bit of contact with the tips of your fingers to produce a sound from the strings. Think about just grazing or “kissing” the strings with the tips of your fingers.

If you’re new to fingerpicking, be patient. It takes time for your fingers to build up independence from one another and get used to the motion of picking the ukulele. Don’t be discouraged; you can do it!

You aren’t required to grow out your nails to successfully fingerpick the ukulele. Longer nails produce a brighter tone and attack, while shorter nails produce a warmer, darker sound. The length of your nails comes down to personal preference. I prefer to keep the nails on the fingers of my picking hand just a few millimeters long past the flesh of the fingertip.

Alternating Thumb Picking Technique

The alternating thumb technique is a way of picking the ukulele using only three fingers: thumb, index, and middle fingers. Assign your thumb to pluck either of the top two strings—the g-string and C-string.

Some people prefer this way of picking the ukulele because you don’t need to worry about picking the strings with your ring finger, which can be a weaker finger. For those that come from a guitar background, this way of picking the

ukulele also might make more sense, since you're assigning the thumb to pluck the lowest string of the ukulele—the C-string.

The only real downside to using this technique is that it can give your thumb more of a workout since it's assigned to both the top two strings. To practice the alternating thumb technique, take a look at the following example:

As you can see, the picking pattern is different in the second measure, with the thumb alternating to pluck the top g-string.

In the lessons ahead, you learn to play songs and pieces that make use of both fingerpicking techniques. One technique might work better in one song over another, which means it's good to practice both techniques.

Play “Frère Jacques (Are You Sleeping?)”

Let's start making music! Before getting too crazy, start simple. Use the four-finger technique and alternating thumb technique to fingerpick the chords for *Frère Jacques*. This song can be played over a C chord the entire song. Hum or sing the melody of the song as you fingerpick. The first piece uses the four-finger technique and the second piece uses the alternating thumb technique.

Again, focus on making your picking as even as possible. Each string should ring out in similar volume and tone as the other strings.

Note: In the music that follows, the top line shows the melody of the vocal line you sing or hum on a music staff with the lyrics written underneath. The middle line shows another music staff with the notes that are reflected and indicated in the ukulele tab on the bottom line.

FRÈRE JACQUES (ARE YOU SLEEPING?)

Four-Finger Technique

TRADITIONAL
Arr. BRETT MCQUEEN

C

Are you sleep - ing, Are you sleep - ing, Bro - ther John? Bro - ther John?

p i m a

1 2 3 4 1 2 etc.

TAB 4/4 0 0 0 3 0 0 0 3 0 0 0 3

Detailed description: This system contains the first four measures of the piece. It features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics, a guitar melody line in treble clef with fingerings (p, i, m, a) and a 'etc.' instruction, and a guitar tablature line in 4/4 time with fret numbers 0 and 3.

5

Morn-ing bells are ring - ing, Morn-ing bells are ring - ing, Ding, ding, dong. Ding, ding, dong.

TAB 4/4 0 0 0 3 0 0 0 3 0 0 0 3

Detailed description: This system contains the next four measures of the piece. It features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics, a guitar melody line in treble clef, and a guitar tablature line in 4/4 time with fret numbers 0 and 3.

FRÈRE JACQUES (ARE YOU SLEEPING?)

Alternating Thumb Technique

TRADITIONAL
Arr. BRETT MCQUEEN

C

Are you sleep - ing, Are you sleep - ing, Bro - ther John? Bro - ther John?

p i m i p i m i

1 2 3 4 1 2 etc.

TAB 4/4 0 0 3 0 0 0 3 0 0 0 3 0

Detailed description: This system contains the first four measures of the piece. It features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics, a guitar melody line in treble clef with fingerings (*p i m i p i m i*) and a tablature line in bass clef with fret numbers (0, 0, 3, 0, 0, 0, 3, 0, 0, 0, 3, 0). The time signature is 4/4.

5

Morn-ing bells are ring - ing, Morn-ing bells are ring - ing, Ding, ding, dong. Ding, ding, dong.

TAB 4/4 0 0 3 0 0 0 3 0 0 0 3 0

Detailed description: This system contains the next four measures of the piece. It features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics, a guitar melody line in treble clef, and a tablature line in bass clef with fret numbers (0, 0, 3, 0, 0, 0, 3, 0, 0, 0, 3, 0). The time signature is 4/4.

Practice Objectives

For this lesson, make it your goal to meet the following objectives before moving to the next lesson:

1. Practice the four-finger picking technique
2. Practice the alternating thumb picking technique
3. Play *Frère Jacques* using the four-finger and alternating thumb picking technique

There's no need to rush through this lesson. Fingerpicking can feel awkward and clumsy at first. If you're new to fingerpicking, take your time and be patient with yourself. With consistent practice, you are sure to see improvement.