

Developing Rhythmic Coordination on Guitar

by Dennis Winge

Rhythm is an essential part of playing music. On guitar, a big part of rhythm is in strumming. If you don't have a regular, uninterrupted, down-up motion in your strumming hand, you won't be able to feel most rhythms properly. Rhythm is not an intellectual thing. There are only 12 notes: you can think about those. But there are millions of rhythms: you must feel them. If your strumming hand is not steady, you are mentally approximating the rhythm intellectually, and it will never sound as smooth as if you're feeling it in your body.

For 8th notes, the hand strums down on the beats and up on the ands. For example, the rhythm "1 2& (3) & 4" must be played as down, down-up, (down)-up, down. (The 3rd beat is shown in parentheses because it is not played, but helpful to see on the page as visual reference in relation to the beats that are played.)

Developing rhythmic coordination can be difficult because the student must a) be aware of problem b) analyze what that correct strum should be in each case c) have self-discipline to slow it way down d) have patience & self-confidence to withstand negative thoughts while going very slow, knowing that the rhythm will, in time, be mastered and brought back up to tempo.

Some simple steps to mastering any rhythm are:

1. Observe It

Observe times when there is a body/ mind disconnect; a moment of rhythmic awkwardness.

2. Analyze It

What is the exact way the strum should go? Map it out on paper as in the following grids:

1-bar 8th notes

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
picking	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u
attacks								

1-bar 16th notes

c	1	e	&	a	2	e	&	a	3	e	&	a	4	e	&	a
p	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u
a																

To use the grid, fill in where the “attacks” are (the beats in which a new strum is to be struck). The rhythm discussed earlier would be marked as:

1-bar 8th notes

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
picking	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u
attacks	x	x	x			x	x	

The x’s show that the strum should be down, down-up, (down)-up, down.

3. Slow it Way Down

Isolate the precise spot that needs to be worked out and be willing to slow it way down. Don’t let your ego get in the way. The mind will say “I got this, I can do it at speed.” Then you will either kid yourself into thinking you have it, or struggle and get upset with yourself. Don’t let your mind trick you like this. Slow it way down in order to really master it for good.

Guitarists would do well to:

- a) say the rhythm out loud while air-strumming
- b) visualize changing chords in the right places while you air-strum
- c) put the strumming and chords together
- d) start over if it breaks down at step c), even slower this time

4. Gradually Speed It Up

Once you can do it at least 4 times in a row perfectly, you can start to speed it up. Keep a log of your goal tempo and your current tempo. This will help you keep your eye on the goal while still being patient and diligent with each step of the way.

Don’t expect fast results at this stage. In many cases where bad habits have developed, retraining yourself involves developing new neural pathways, and that takes time. Just remember that the time it takes to go from 0 to 25% is way longer than 25% to 50% which in turn is longer than 50% to 100% of a tempo goal.

5. Integrate & Implement It

If it's only a small section that you've slowed down and brought back up to speed, play the whole phrase that contained the small section at tempo. Then play the entire piece at tempo.

Conclusion

You can do it on your own, but it's way faster with a teacher. A good teacher knows how to break things down and is patient to hold your hand all the way through the most excruciatingly slow tempos. A good teacher knows that this slow tempo is temporary, and the rewards are great, so he or she will be supportive and understanding every step of the way. Put your trust in your teacher (assuming you have found a good one) and do what they tell you. With a good teacher, it doesn't have to take decades to become a master at rhythm.