

HEADING: TUTION TIP: ALTERNATING VS RAKING

SUBHEADING: Plucking hand technique in new depth!

SKILL LEVEL: 2/5



Andrew McKinney
Head of Bass at Tech
Music Schools in
London. Andrew is
currently touring with the
James Taylor Quartet.

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Skill Level:

In comparison to many instruments in from the classical music world, the bass guitar is a relatively young instrument. Leo Fender introduced us to the Fender bass in 1951, which in compared to the violin's 500 or so years on the planet, makes it a spring chicken in the instrumental world.

Combining the bass guitar's relative youth with the DIY approach to rock n' roll means that there is no one universal method book for technique that we all follow. Left to our own devices we have come up with many variations in technique – some very subtle and others more dramatic.

One of the more subtle aspects on which many people have an individual take is plucking-hand technique. By this I mean when you play 'fingerstyle' – how many fingers do you use and in what order? James Jamerson famously only used one finger ('the hook'), and in recent years we have seen three, four and even five-digit techniques becoming more commonplace. The majority of players however still adopt a two-fingered approach, and this is how I would advise anyone to start.

With two-fingers it makes sense to divide the workload evenly, which would result in an 'alternating' technique: index, middle, index, middle (1, 2, 1, 2) etc. But put into action, how closely do we stick to this alternating pattern, and when and why do we deviate? Consider **Exercise 1a** – Ascending String Cross. There are two fingering possibilities for these notes, 1, 2 or 2, 1 (discounting using the same finger twice as inefficient for this exercise). However, if we reverse the order of the notes to make it a *descending* string cross (**Exercise 1b**), how many options are there now?

There are still the two alternating options – 1, 2 or 2, 1, but in this case it can also be efficient to use the same finger twice and 'drag' or 'rake' the finger across two strings in one movement. This gives us a further two viable options: 1, 1 or 2, 2.

So which is best? It would seem opinions are divided on this issue and I have read articles and books that firmly state either one of the options as the 'correct' way of doing things, and the other as 'incorrect'. It is a topic that comes up during technique classes at Bass Guitar-X, and I give students something along the lines of **Exercise 2**, getting them to try each fingering pattern in turn – A, B and C.

Normally people will find one or two of the options quite natural, and the other one or two very awkward and unnatural. Try it yourself. If you prefer option A you are 'raker', B or C then you are an 'alternater'! B is normally easier than C as the middle finger is longer than the index so it makes sense to have it on the string further away.

Now we are armed with that knowledge about our plucking preference, are we any better off? Who is right – the rakers or the alternaters? Or are you ambi-pluxterous??!

In any technique assessment at the school I never make it a requirement to do rake or alternate. The only thing I asses is the quality of sound produced, as this is the only real judge of if a technique is working or not. With such a variety of approaches to technique, there will always be examples of people who get great results with all manner of techniques, so I don't think anyone can say that one is 'better' than the other. It is more a matter of what works and is appropriate in a given situation.

The benefits of raking are that it's faster and smoother than alternating, especially when raking across 3 or 4 strings at a time, as in **Exercise 3**.

With alternating you can get more consistency and definition, and it is the only viable option when crossing larger gaps with 1 or 2 strings in between the notes you are playing, as in **Exercise 4**.

Many people haven't given this aspect of technique a moment's thought and may never need to. All I encourage students to do is to take the version of exercise 2 that they find the most awkward, practice it little and often over a period of a few weeks, and see if they notice any benefits in their playing. Certain musical phrases will demand a specific fingering, and if you're tripping up or having trouble getting the notes clear at the right tempo, it may well be because it requires a fingering that you are not so fluent with. There may well be other solutions or ways round the issue, or you may simply decide to play something else instead. In an ideal world though, we would only be limited by our imagination, not just by the fact that we started a phrase on the wrong finger!

Exercise 5 contains various string crossing permutations. Work out all of the possible fingering combinations and practice, well... all of them! Any questions or thoughts about this article, or anything you'd like me to cover, email me on andrew@guitar-x.co.uk - see you next time.

1a. Ascending String Cross 1b. Descending String Cross

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Tablature: 3 5 | 5 3

2. Fingering Patterns

A: 1 1 2 2 1 1 2 2
 B: 2 1 2 1 2 1 2 1
 C: 1 2 1 2 1 2 1 2

Tablature: 5 3 5 3 5 3 5 3

3. Raking bass line

Tablature: 5 3 5 3 5 7 9 7 0 5 7 5 7 7 7 9 9 7

4. Alternating bass line

Tablature: 3 3 3 5 3 3 3 3 5 3 1 1 3 3 1 3 1 3 3 5 3 3 3 3

5. String-Crossing Permuations

A. B. C.

T
A
B

D. E. F.

T
A
B