

# FIRST UKULELE LESSON

This is a quick introductory lesson that gets your right hand strumming and your left hand fingering three basic chords. With the two skills combined, you can play some simple songs right away – in about fifteen minutes. While you cannot expect to be an expert after just a few minutes, you can slowly play a familiar song. Pretty cool, eh?

These instructions assume a right-handed player, strumming with the right hand and fretting chords with the left hand. For our left-handed friends, please reverse the two hands. A left handed player has a distinct advantage when learning from a bunch of right-handed players. When a lefty faces me, all they have to do is mirror my hand positions. A right-handed player has to see the shape, reverse it mentally, then visualize it and form it on the fingerboard – a significant extra step.

## Right Hand (Strumming)

We can basically do two things: strum down or strum up.

Use either thumb or index finger to strum, whatever feels the most natural. Neither way is right or wrong. One will probably feel more natural than the other to you, but eventually you will probably want to have both techniques in your toolbox. May as well start working on both of them now...

If using the thumb, you typically stroke downward using the fleshy part of the thumb. Then rotate slightly at the wrist, so that the up stroke is done with the back of thumbnail, with the nail at a slight angle to avoid catching on the strings.

Or you can strum with the index finger. The down stroke will occur with the back of the nail, and up stroke is done with the fleshy part (fingerprint). A bit of wrist rotation is needed here too, or you can curl the index finger slightly for the up stroke. It is harder to describe in words than to do, so don't panic.

There are three places where you can get up and down movement for strums. You can move only at the fingers, keeping the wrist in place. You can move the wrist itself, keeping the arm in place. Or you can swing the whole forearm at the elbow. The elbow gives you a lot of power, but relatively poor control. Try to start using just wrist motion, as this will give you the most accuracy and control.

Get the strumming hand and the foot tap going together, as if your hand and foot were connected by a wire. When the foot goes down, the hand goes down. And vice versa. For these strumming drills, don't even hold a chord shape. The ukulele makes a pleasant tone without holding any fretted strings.

Our first exercise is a simple down-beat strum. Slowly count 1-2-3-4 and strum down on each count or down beat. You can play a simple version of any song this way. In fact, that will be the best option when first learning.

down strokes on the beat:

/       /       /       /  
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

Take your time and get it right, and smooth. Slow is OK. Even slower is better still. Speed comes with repetition. If you don't practice a new technique correctly, you just get better at mistakes. A little patience is your best friend at this point.

Now try the four beat down-only strum, but change chords. Don't worry if you have to take a dramatic pause while changing chords. At first, your fingers are doing target practice for the specific locations, and it will take time. More about that later.

The next variation is the down-up strum. While your foot is tapping, your hand will go the same direction. When the foot goes down, the hand strums down. When the foot comes up, the hand strums up too.

down strokes and up strokes  
/ \ / \ / \ / \  
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

Work with this one for a while, and make sure that your hand stays smooth and in sync with the foot. Again, go slow - so painfully slow that you cannot make a mistake. You are rewiring your hand-eye coordination at this point, and that takes a lot of computing power in the old brain.

The first variation on the basic down-up strum misses a beat on the first "and". So the pattern is:

down strokes and up strokes  
/ \ / \ / \ / \  
1 miss 2 & 3 & 4 &

It's OK – even recommended – to say the word "miss" instead of "and" when counting this pattern out, just to reinforce what your strumming hand should be doing. In technical terms, this is a quarter note (whole beat) followed by three pairs of eighth notes (half beats). But you don't need to know that right now.

Keep the steady down-up motion going, even when you are missing the "and" beat on the upstroke. For the missing strum, the arm moves up across the strings, but you raise the hand slightly so that you miss the strings on that up stroke. It is important to keep that down-up motion fluid and steady. You won't play evenly if you are chasing up and down strokes individually.

When played up to speed, you will find that this pattern is very common. Many of the songs that the Eagles recorded use this strum pattern. There are literally hundreds of country, pop, and folk songs that use it.

We now have the two basic patterns: down strums, and down-up strums. Now we can get into other variations. Try missing the up stroke after the first beat and on the third beat. So the pattern becomes:

1 – miss – two – and – three – miss – four -- and

Strum patterns can get very fast and complex. But no matter how fancy, they are made up of these basic elements.

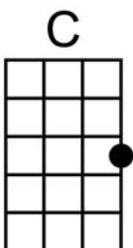
## Left Hand (Chords)

The left hand presses the strings down just above certain fret wires. Then each string will make a pitch that is part of a chord. Chords are the basic building blocks of songs. When we say the "third" fret, we really mean press the string down between the second and third frets, but closer to the third fret.

Our basic chording lesson uses these chords:

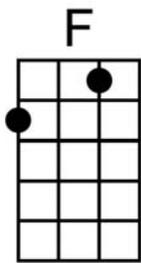
C one finger is the chord of "C"  
F two fingers is the chord of "F"  
G three fingers is the chord of "G"

The first chord uses only one finger. "One finger is the chord of C". The chord chart is:



The C chord is held using the ring finger (preferably) on the third fret of the 1st string. You can use any finger for this simple shape, but the reason for choosing the ring finger will be obvious in a minute.

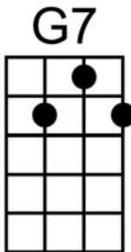
Next we will make an F chord, which needs two fingers. “Two fingers is the chord of F”.



Put your middle finger on the 4th string, second fret. Then put your index or “pointer” finger on the 2<sup>nd</sup> string, first fret.

Notice that your unused ring finger almost hovers over the C chord position. That helps you switch between F and C.

And finally, we have the G7 chord. “Three fingers is the chord of G”.



Index finger stays in place on the 2<sup>nd</sup> string. Middle finger moves over to the 3<sup>rd</sup> string. Add ring finger on the 1<sup>st</sup> string, second fret.

We want to leave your index finger in place. That will be a little challenging at first, because most people let all their fingers fall away and start a new chord shape from scratch. But leave it there, and learn to put the other fingers down in addition to, not instead of.

Going from F to G7 involves three distinct steps: leave the index finger where it was. Move the middle finger from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> string, at the same fret. Now comes the hard part. Put your ring finger on the 1<sup>st</sup> string at the second fret. This will be underneath the other fingers and will feel awkward. You might need to let your elbow fly out to the left a bit to change your wrist angle and help with the alignment.

Note that we have shown the G7 chord. Many times in songs, you could use either G or G7. The G7 chord is shown because it has something in common with the F chord. The index or “pointer” finger does not move when changing from the F to the G7. That handy point of reference makes the change easier and quicker.

Earlier, we suggested using the ring finger to make your C chord. Moving from G7 to C, all you have to do is slide the ring finger up one fret, from second fret to third fret. Then lift up the other two fingers. Voila – you are now on the C chord. You did not have to lift all your fingers and do target practice once again to form a C chord from scratch. Whenever a finger stays in one place, or stays on the same string but moves to a different fret, it is much easier to switch accurately to the next chord. We like these reference points, similar to the “home row” keys when learning to type.

It will take some time and ~~practice~~ playing experience to be able to move smoothly and quickly between these three shapes. We usually do a drill where we give eight beats on the C chord, then switch and do eight more beats on the F chord, then switch again and do eight more beats on the G7 chord, before ending with four beats on C chord again.

Notice that we crossed out “practice”. To many people that is a dirty word, a remnant of forced piano lessons as a child, with endless drills and scales. Ukulele is fun, so we *play* at it, rather than practicing.

## SIMPLE SONGS

There are a million songs that use these three chords that we have just learned. Some simple songs only use two of the chords, just C and G7. These include:

Jambalaya  
Clementine  
Eensey, Weensy Spider  
Buffalo Gals

Row, Row, Row Your Boat  
Three Blind Mice  
How Much is that Doggie In the Window  
Mary Had a Little Lamb

Familiar songs using all three chords include:

The Lion Sleeps Tonight (Wimoweh)  
Happy Birthday  
Twist and Shout  
Hound Dog  
Jingle Bells

Camptown Races  
On Top of Old Smoky  
Swing Low Sweet Chariot  
This Land is Your Land  
Dixie

Start with the C chord. Then there are only two other options – either F or G. Even if you just guess, you have a 50-50 chance of having the right one. Be bold.

Not all songs will go directly to the F chord. Some will go to the G7 chord first. Before long, you will be able to hear and tell which one you need to switch to. Congratulations, that is the first step to playing by “ear”.

## SUMMARY

Use this information to get your right hand strumming, then your left hand chording. Then switch back and forth between the chords until you can do it with some degree of smoothness and speed. Now use these skills to play the songs that are listed above. Don't worry about getting sheet music, or chord charts, or tablature. Just wing it.

Once you have some basic skills, we can add a few simple new chords. A-minor and D7 are the next chords to learn. That opens up an incredible realm of possible songs to play. Many popular songs have only four chords, and the added chord is the A-minor. Some complex songs may have five, six, or maybe even seven chords, but they all build on a simple framework.

The BUG website has a downloadable chord chart which shows the basic major, minor and seventh chords for each key, A through G. That is only 21 shapes, some of which overlap or are part of a different shape. With a bit of effort, you can get all 21 shapes down under your fingers in a few weeks. Then there will be very few songs that you cannot play.

Alternately, we have another page called “chord groups”. Chords that work together naturally are grouped on each line. For example, the C chord line shows the F, G and Am too. Download that page and learn all of the chords on the C line first.

And remember: four strings, four fingers, no problem.