

3 “Magic” Exercises For Practicing Chords And Harmony On Guitar

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1 The 1-Point Variation

Use this tactic if: you get stuck using the same few chords or the same few chord progressions. If you know only a few chords and would like to expand your vocabulary of sounds. If you are searching for inspiration or new sounds.

Here’s how to do it:

1. Pick an item that you are studying: a chord, a chord progression, a scale, a lick, etc. . .
2. Change ONE element of your item at a time.
3. Play the item and hear the difference. You do NOT need to know what you are doing theory-wise: just listen.
4. Optional: can you come up with a description of the emotion that the modified item express and the original item does not? (it’s not always possible, see examples below). Avoid descriptions such as “I like it” or “I dislike it”: try to describe the emotion instead.
5. Repeat.

Examples:

- If the item is a chord:
 1. Change ONE of the notes on the chord by moving the note up or down 1 or 2 frets on your guitar
 2. Play the modified chord.
 3. How does this chord sound respect to the original? it is happier, sadder, more tense, more relaxed, more haunting, more hopeful. . . ?
- If the item is a chord progression:

1. Change ONE of the chord in the progression. The new chord may be ANYTHING and can sound completely different (this is NOT an exercise on ‘substitutions’ where the new chord must be similar to the previous one.)
2. Play the modified chord progression
3. How does this chord progression sound respect to the original? It is more uplifting, more depressing, more hopeful, more triumphant, scarier, sadder than the original one?

- If the item is a scale: change ONE note in the scale.
- If the item is a lick, a phrase, etc: change ONE note in it.

2 The “Find Another Way”

Use this tactic if: You find that your music always “sounds the same”. If you get stuck playing always the same things. If you struggle with self-expression.

Here’s how to do it:

1. Pick an item that you are studying: a chord, a chord progression, a scale, a lick, etc. . .
2. Find another way to play the same item on your guitar.
3. Play the new position and listen to the difference between the original item and the new way you found of playing it.

Examples:

- If your item is a chord:
 1. Find out what notes you are playing in the *original* position of the chord
 2. Find a different way to play the *same* notes on your guitar:
 - In a different position of the fretboard, or
 - Play the notes in a different order lowest to highest: the set of notes is the same but maybe the highest note is not the same note as before (though still one of the notes in the original chord)
 3. Play and listen: how does the new position sound different?
- If your item is a chord progression:
 1. Write the chord progression on paper
 2. Find a different position for each chord in the progression
 3. Play and listen: how does the new version sound different?

3 The 10-Seconds Song

Use this tactic if: If you struggle in applying theory to make actual music. If your ear is not as good as you'd like. If you are learning new chords/tricks.

Here's how to do it:

1. Write a short 10-second song with the item you are studying
 - (a) Your aim is NOT to make the sound a Top 40 hit, but just to make a short, minimal piece of music using what you are learning.
 - (b) At the same time, a chord progression is NOT a song: give it some rhythm, or a melody, or something else that makes it sound more than an exercise or an example from a book.
2. Record the song in your computer/phone, or transcribe it on your notebook
3. Anytime in future you can use your song as material to create further examples:
 - (a) If you are learning about chord substitutions: how do they apply to your song? How different your song sounds if you apply the substitutions to it
 - (b) If you are learning about rhythm: how does changing the rhythm of your song affect its mood?
 - (c) If you are learning about melody, consonances and dissonances: how having a dissonant note in the melody of your song sound respect to having a consonant note? How do you need to adjust the melody or other parts of the songs to make it work?

Having a rich repertoire of 10-second songs that you wrote as examples of applications of the concept you are studying and coming back to them often to see how the new things you are learning apply to them is a key part of becoming a good composer/songwriter.

Examples:

- If your item is a chord:
 1. Can you compose a 10-Second Song with only that chord? (add rhythm, melody, arpeggiate the chord. . .)
 2. Or find a few more chords that work with your chord, write a chord progression, then give it rhythm or a melody. . .
- If your item is a chord progression:

1. Your song plan is simply your chord progression played once or twice (if you play it twice, the second time you can play it the exact same way, or you can use the “Find Another Way” exercise. . .)
2. Find a way to play the chord that adds a bit of rhythm and interest. You can strum them or arpeggiate them, you can play them in an odd time signature
3. If you want, create a short melody to go with it. An easy way to do it is to sing a few random notes a few times until you sing something that you like and then transcribe it. Your voice naturally will pick the “right” notes for that chord progression and rhythm.

Do not forget to record, keep, and come back to your 10-Second Songs often.