
Frailing *the 5 String Banjo*



BASIC TECHNIQUES

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Technique for learning Frailing, or Clawhammer, banjo

This technique is called Frailing or Clawhammer. Some people distinguish between the two names, but in my opinion they are the same basic style. People get heated up about definitions, and maybe Clawhammer is more melodic and Frailing is more rhythmic, but since neither of the terms is well defined, the name does not really matter. Every player can develop their own particular style if the basic technique is practiced. It is useful to listen to the great old-time players – Wade Ward, Hobart Smith, etc., and if you like that style it may be a good idea to try to imitate them. Once you have mastered the BASIC STRUM, you can and should then try to find your own natural style – whatever sounds best to you.

About 75 % of frailing technique is in the BASIC STRUM, which is done as a sequence of DOWNSTROKES, using the back of the nail of the middle finger, (or index finger if you prefer) alternating with the thumb in a particular way. (see below.) The other 25% of the technique uses embellishments or ORNAMENTS which fit into the basic strum and make it sound more interesting. Once the basic strum is learned, the ornaments follow more easily, and speed then gives it the characteristic driving style.

It is also worth remembering that the banjo is a drum with strings, and the percussive sound of the fingers beating on the skin is a matter of personal choice. Some people play without beating the skin, others like to follow through each downstroke with the fingers so that there is a constant drumming sound underneath the tune. The percussive sound is very useful for keeping the beat when playing for dances.

NAMES of the STRINGS: First, make a mental note which string is which:

Taking each string in order, starting from the shortest, or DRONE STRING

The DRONE String, (the shortest) is also called the FIFTH STRING

The BASS STRING (the lowest in pitch) is also called the FOURTH STRING

The MIDDLE STRING is also called the THIRD STRING

The next string is called the SECOND STRING

The last string (furthest away from your head) is called the TOP or the FIRST STRING

TUNING: First, tune the banjo to OPEN G Tuning

FIRST STRING	D (The D above Middle C on a piano)
SECOND STRING	B
THIRD STRING	G
FOURTH STRING	D (octave below 1 st string)
FIFTH STRING	G (Octave above middle string)

(Quick Tip: In this tuning you can play a C chord by stopping all the strings (except the short drone) with a 'bar' at the 5th Fret, and a D chord by stopping all the strings except the drone with a 'bar' at the 7th Fret.) These bar chords are 'starter chords' – you will learn other (and more interesting) chord shapes later, using the bar as a basis, but you can play a lot of tunes with just these three bar chords to start with,

The BASIC STRUM is a repeated cycle of FOUR BEATS of EQUAL DURATION, described in more detail below. When starting to learn, play this cycle of four strokes **very slowly**, because it is a slightly un-natural movement and must be practised slowly before building up speed. When you do get faster, after a few days or weeks, and start to play tunes or songs, you will find that each cycle of four strokes in the basic strum takes place inside ONE beat of the tune. If you practice every day, it will not take long, but you have to be patient. A 10 minute session every day is better than an hour once a week, but an hour once a week is better than not playing at all.

When practising the basic strum, keep up a strict, even, count on each stroke: One, Two, Three, Four, so that each Down Stroke comes at exactly the right time. It is particularly important to leave a gap of the right length for Down Stroke 2.

If you are left-handed, you will need a left handed banjo, as the drone string needs to be above the others.

Down Stroke 1: Hit the first string with the back of the nail of the middle (or index) finger of the right hand in a downward motion, towards the floor.

Down Stroke 2 Do not strike the strings, but bring the right hand back up ready for Down Stroke 3. This gap on the second Stroke is very important when you start learning *ornaments*.

Down Stroke 3 Hit the first string again, with the back of the nail of the middle (or index) finger of the right hand. Just like Stroke 1.

Down Stroke 4 Hit the fifth string (or drone) with a downward stroke of the thumb.

REPEAT Immediately repeat the cycle, starting again with the Down Stroke 1. If you can't do it EVENLY, then slow down and try again. It does not matter how slow you go at the start, just concentrate of getting an even sequence of the four equal downstrokes repeating round and round and round. Once you have it smooth you can speed up. You can try speeding up at any time, but you will only be able to keep the fluid and even sound by getting a little bit faster each time – if you try to play too fast when you have not mastered the stroke slowly, it won't work. It is easier to demonstrate the basic strum than it is to describe it, so find a player to show you if you can.

The rhythm is:	1	2	3	4
	Dum	-	did	dy
OR	One	-	and	a
Or	Finger Down	-	Finger Down	Thumb

The sound of four basic strokes is:

Dum Diddy Dum Diddy Dum Diddy Dum Diddy

THE ORNAMENTS:

All these ornaments occupy the gap you left at DOWN STROKE 2, and are learned AFTER you have the basic strum

The HAMMER ON:

Use the BASIC STRUM but with an extra hammered note on Down Stroke 2.

Down Stroke 1: Hit the first string with the back of the nail of the middle (or index) finger of your right hand.

Down Stroke 2 Hammer the first or second finger of your LEFT Hand onto the FIRST STRING at the Second fret, so that an extra note appears on Down Stroke 2.

Down Stroke 3 Hit the first string with the back of the nail of the middle (or index) finger. Just like Down Stroke 1.

Down Stroke 4 Hit the FIFTH string (or drone) with the thumb.

The rhythm is:	1	2	3	4
	Dum	a	did	dy
	One	a	and	a
	Finger	hammer	Finger	Thumb

The PULL-OFF:

Use the BASIC STRUM but with an extra pulled-off note on Down Stroke 2, so you need to finger the first string at the second fret before you start, so that you have something to pull-off. So, with your left hand, (second finger,) stop the FIRST string at the second Fret.

Down Stroke 1: Hit the first string with the back of the nail of the middle (or index) finger of your right hand.

Down Stroke 2 With your left hand (first or second finger), pluck the FIRST string downwards OFF the Second fret, with a crisp pulling motion so that an extra note appears on Down Stroke 2.

Down Stroke 3 Hit the first string with the back of the nail of the middle (or index) finger. Just like Stroke 1.

Down Stroke 4 Hit the FIFTH string (or drone) with the thumb.

The rhythm is:	1	2	3	4
	Dum	a	did	dy
	One	a	and	a
	Finger	pull off	Finger	Thumb

DROP THUMBING

(also called double thumbing)

Down Stroke 1: Hit the first string with the back of the nail of the middle (or index) finger of your right hand.

Down Stroke 2 With your RIGHT hand THUMB pluck the FOURTH or THIRD or SECOND string downwards so that an extra note appears on Down Stroke 2. Start with whichever string is easiest to pluck with the thumb, and when you have got that right, try another string for the thumb stroke on Down Stroke 2.

Down Stroke 3 Hit the first string with the back of the nail of the middle (or index) finger. Just like Stroke 1.

Down Stroke 4 Hit the FIFTH string (or drone) with the thumb.

Once you have the DROP-THUMBING technique reasonably smooth, try a sequence of four BASIC STRUMS, but hit a different string with your double thumb on each Down Stroke 2. You may not want to use the double thumb on all the strings all the time, , but it is very good to practice the sequence of three double thumb strokes, each hitting a different string, in order to get accuracy with the right hand thumb.

MELODY

In order to play tunes on the banjo, rather than just a chord accompaniment, you need to be able accurately to hit any individual string with your middle (or index) finger of the right hand, in such a way that you ONLY hit that string without touching the others. This takes some time to learn, but the more you practice the easier this will get. If you learn to play old-time fiddle tunes on the banjo from tab, the notes will come naturally as each note is represented by the tab. If you play chords to accompany singing or just to fill in the sound, you will have to decide which string to hit on Downstroke 1 and 3.

CHORDS

Many old-time banjo players do not use chords, but only use a series of single strings hit with the right hand and fretted with the left hand. Don't let this put you off – although single-string 'melodic' playing maybe best for fiddle tunes, playing chords can be very effective for dance music and for backing a song – do as you like.

TUNINGS

The 5 string banjo is a DRONE instrument, and the precise tuning of the 5th string drone is important. Unfortunately, because the head or skin is flexible, when you change the tuning on one string, it affects all the others. Because the drone must be re-tuned to whatever key you are playing in, when you change key you will usually need to fine-tune more than one string.

There are well over a hundred different ways of tuning the banjo to play in different keys, and with different effects. If you would like to experiment, try this site for starters: <http://www.banjr.com/tunings.htm>. Anita Kermode has a website with over a hundred: <http://www.zepmusic.com/banjo/aktuning.htm> .

Start with the Open G (notes as set out above.) B using a Capo and a series of small hooked nails on the 5th string, you can raise this G to play in A, C or D.

By tuning the second string up one semi-tone you get Sawmill Tuning, also known as Mountain Minor. By using the Capo and nails you can get Gm, Am, Cm, Dm.

When in Sawmill tuning, by tuning the Bottom D string down one tone you can play in C, and by capo and nails on the second fret you get D, which fiddlers like.

Finally – learn to relax as much as possible when playing, particularly with the left hand - the constant gripping of the fret board to play chords can injure the tendons.

It helps to sing along while you are practicing, and it helps to play with other people. Best of all is to play for dancing – you can practice for hours on end, and you really get a chance to play the rhythm without worrying too much about the melody – so find a Ceilidh band and get started. You might not want to stop!

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