

Teaching Bluegrass in the Classroom

A Practical Guide for Teachers

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Overview

This guide supports teachers in using bluegrass and old-time music in classroom and ensemble settings. The materials associated with this guide emphasize listening, repetition, and group participation rather than reliance on full written notation. The approach is designed to work with mixed student and teacher experience levels and to encourage musical independence, collaboration, and creativity.

Why Bluegrass Belongs in Schools

- Ensemble-based
- Acoustic
- Ear-driven
- Historically & culturally grounded
- Mixed-skill classes
- Reading music notation not necessary
- Works for schools with small budgets
- Teaches listening
- Builds rhythmic responsibility
- Rewards participation over perfection

Accessibility: How to Start With What you Have

Core instruments:

- Guitar
- Banjo
- Fiddle
- Mandolin
- Bass

Acceptable substitutes:

- Classical guitar
- Ukulele
- Electric bass (with tone discipline)
- Cello (bass role, or melodic instrument)
- Violin students transitioning to fiddle style

Skill Level Inclusivity

- Beginners
- Advanced
- Everyone in Between

Authenticity Without Gatekeeping

- Authentic ≠ Replication
 - Tradition
- Authentic = Understanding
 - Function
 - Context
- Serving the Song & Serving the Moment
 - Feel

Teaching Without Notation

Learning by Ear (Without Intimidation)

Techniques

- Call-and-response teaching
- Phrase-by-phrase learning
- Singing before playing
- Looping short sections

This Builds

- listening skills
- memory
- ensemble awareness

Ensemble Skills

- Timing and groove
- Dynamic control
- Role awareness
- Improvisation within boundaries
- Leadership and support roles

Practical Models for Schools

- After-school ensemble / club
- Unit inside orchestra or guitar class
- Pull-out group
- Cross-grade ensemble
- Short-term project ensemble (concert + workshop)

•Chamber groups

Quick Start Guide

The goal of these ensembles is to get students playing as quickly as possible. Students need appropriate equipment for their instruments. Mandolins and guitars are traditionally played with picks. Bases are traditionally played pizzicato. Make sure the instruments are in tune before beginning.

1. Listen to the song three times while reviewing the chord progression.

2. Review the chord changes with the students.

3. Play through the chord progression slowly

- Guitars play a bass-strum pattern, alternating between the root & 5th of the chord, or just playing the roots for beginner students.
- Bases play the root of the chord on the first beat of the measure and the 5th of the chord on the 3rd beat of the measure. Like a kick drum.
- Mandolins chop on the 2nd beat & 4th beat of the measure, like a snare drum. Ukuleles can also fulfill this role.
- Fiddles play long tones on any note of the chord triad. More advanced players can double some melody lines or add simple flourishes between vocal phrases.
- Banjos (if you have one) can play simple rolls over the chords, or an index-pinch pattern (see appendix below) on the chords. Banjo is the most complicated instrument of bluegrass music, but also one of the signature instruments.
- Singers usually sing the verses as a solo voice, and harmonies or multiple singers come in on the chorus.

4. Start the rhythm by strumming the root chord of the song until everyone joins in and gets the groove going. Then start singing the first verse/chorus. (If the song is in G, but the singing chart starts on a different chord, start by strumming G. You can usually tell by looking at the last chord of the song.)

5. The standard arrangement of a bluegrass song is

Verse-Chorus-solo-Verse-Chorus-Solo-Verse-Chorus-Solo-Chorus. Solos follow the chorus. Repeat the last line of the chorus at the end.

6. Solos can be played by individual instruments, instrument sections, or all together as a group.

7. Concentrate on listening, following the chord progression, making sure everyone can hear the singers and soloists.

8. Soloists should concentrate on playing the basic melody. To learn it, have them hum the melody as they hear it, and then find it on their instrument.

9. Go slow the first several times through the song and then speed up once most everyone is comfortable playing it. Repeat individual sections slowly if necessary.

10. Concentrate on learning the structure of the song. The chord progression, the phrasing, and the sections of the song.

11. Have fun! Students can make up their own verses to the songs

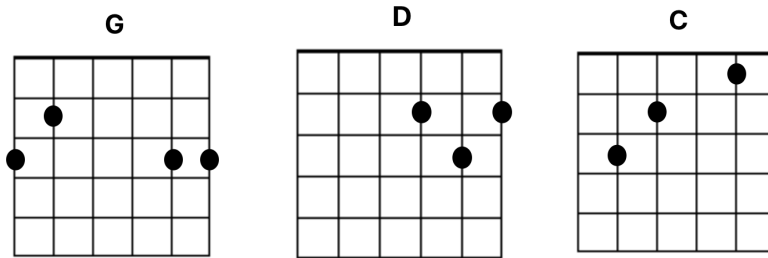
Tips:

After solos, just play the root chord of the song until the lead singer starts singing again. This is a good place to get everyone back on track and still keep the beat going.

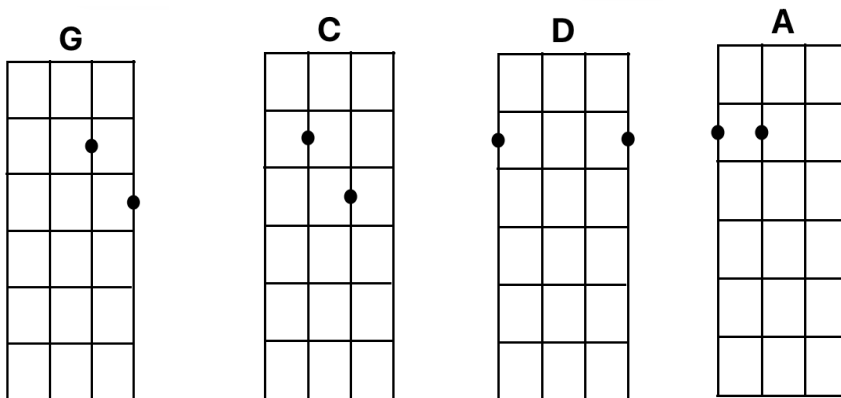
You can play these songs in different keys to suit different singers.

The goal is to learn songs and then dive deeper into tradition, style, technique, and dynamics.

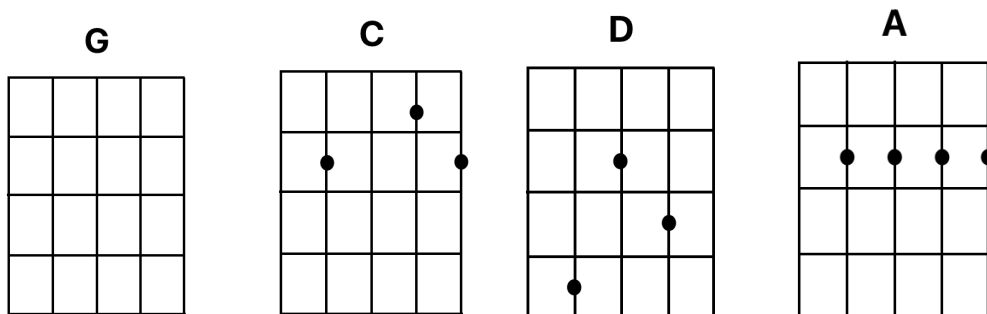
Guitar Chords



Mandolin Chords



Banjo Chords



All Open Strings

Lazy John

Traditional

Key: D **Feel:** Medium, steady groove (4/4)

 A D
Work all week in the noon day sun
 A D
Fifteen cents when Saturday comes
 A D
Goin to a dance to have some fun
 A D
Why don't you get away lazy John

CHORUS

 G A
Lazy John, lazy John
 D
Why don't you get your day's work all done
 G A
You're in the shade and I'm in the sun
 D
Why don't you get away lazy John

Every night when I come home
Peas in the pot and the old jawbone
Here today and tomorrow he's gone
Why don't you get away lazy John

CHORUS

I woke up at the break of day
Down to the fields try to earn my pay
Then much later you came along
Why don't you get away, Lazy John

CHORUS

Goin to a dance on Saturday night
Ain't coming home 'til the broad daylight
Then I'll take my darling back home
Why don't you get away lazy John

CHORUS

Verses may be omitted, reordered, or rewritten by students.

Form Reference (Roman Numerals)

Verse Form

$\frac{4}{4}$ | V | I | V | I |
| V | I | V | I |

Chorus Form

| IV | V | V | I |
| IV | V | V | I |

(In this key: I = D IV = G V = A)

Sally Ann

Traditional

Chords

A-Part

$\frac{4}{4}$ ||: **A** | **D** | **D** | **A** |
| **A** | **E** | **E** | **A** :||

B-Part

||: **A** | **E** | **E** | **A** |
| **A** | **E** | **E** | **A** :||

Phrase Map – *Learning Tool*

Form: **A A B B**

(Each part is played twice)

A-Part

P1 **P2**

P3 **P4**

B-Part

P5 **P6**

P5 **P6**

Phrase Mapping breaks tunes into small, hearable chunks so students can learn, repeat, and recombine musical ideas by ear before playing full arrangements.

More Resources & Sample Materials

www.martingilmore.com/bluegrassclassroom

