

Intro to Pentatonic Scales

Part 1: Open Position Minor Pentatonics

Penta-what?

The first scale most guitar players learn is the **Pentatonic Scale**. Minor and major pentatonic scales are familiar sounding and quite easy to play. In fact every human being on earth has been singing pentatonic scales their entire lives. For centuries cultures all over the world have based their folk music on pentatonic scales. So why does it have such an intimidating and weird looking name? The short answer is because it is a Greek name. But the translation is simple:

"penta" = "five"

"tonic" = "tone"

Pentatonic scales have five tones (or notes) in them as opposed to the major scale which has seven tones (*heptatonic*). There are also funky scales called *octatonic* and *hexatonic* scales. Can you guess how many notes are in those?

So is any combination of five different notes a pentatonic scale? Well yes, but when we refer to pentatonics we typically are referring to **major** and **minor pentatonic scales**. These are specific patterns of five repeating notes that resemble seven tone major and minor scales, but subtract a couple of notes. It is also important to mention that many cultures that have existed outside of traditional western music have arrived at the same scales through different means. There are also other popular pentatonic scales that don't necessarily relate back to major or minor scales.

The Minor Pentatonic Formula

Let's start with the **Minor Pentatonic Scale**. Many guitar players and even teachers will use the name **Blues Scale** interchangeably with the minor pentatonic, but this not correct. The blues scale is a six note (*hexatonic*) scale that adds an extra *blue note* to the minor pentatonic, so they are related but not the same. Before we begin playing the minor pentatonic lets learn the pattern or formula for the scale:

W+H - W - W - W+H - W

In this formula "W" stands for whole step and "H" stands for half step. Going from the note C to D is one whole step. D to D# (or Eb) is a half step. Thus, C to D# or Eb is one and a half steps or "W+H." This interval of a step and a half is also referred to as a *minor third*.

Make a note of that formula as we will come back to it again and again, but now let's turn our attention to actually playing the scale. The first pentatonic scales that we are going to play are both played in an open position. We are going to play the E Minor Pentatonic and the A Minor Pentatonic.

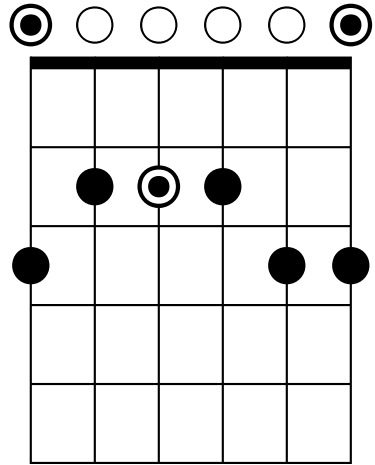
Playing Pentatonic Scales in Open Position

Let's start by just hitting the open 6th string (low E string). That is the note E and it will serve as our **Tonic**. The word tonic has several different meanings. Besides being something that mixes well with Gin, we learned that in Greek, tonic means tone or note. When using it in the context of scales the word tonic refers to a very specific note. It refers to the note the scale is named after. This is typically the first note we play when we start the scale. E Minor Pentatonic has a tonic of E. Another term you may hear is the *first scale degree*. Even closer to home would be singing "Do - Re - Mi - La - Sol - La - Ti - Do." Which of those notes that you sang is the tonic? The answer is Do, a dear, a female dear.

At this point your low E string is probably no longer ringing, so go ahead and hit it again. Now lets go up a whole + half step (W+H). Moving up a half step on the guitar is achieved by moving up one fret, so moving up a W+H (or 3 half steps) is 3 frets. Let's hit that note G on the 3rd fret of the 6th string. Now here is how to play the entire scale in plain English:

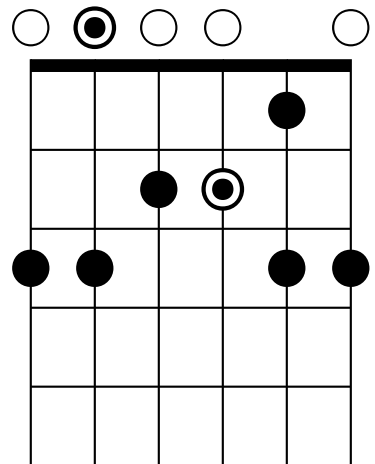
6th string: open -> 3rd fret
5th string: open -> 2nd fret
4th string: open -> 2nd fret
3rd string: open -> 2nd fret
2nd string: open -> 3rd fret
1st string: open -> 3rd fret

Getting the idea of the pattern now? We start each string by hitting the open string, and then we either play the 2nd or 3rd fret before moving down to the next string. Now, every guitar player has to learn how to use diagrams to their advantage. Here is the scale diagram for the open E Minor Pentatonic Scale (the bullseye notes represent the tonic. In this case that is the note E):



*IF YOU ARE UNSURE HOW TO READ THE ABOVE DIAGRAM A DETAILED EXPLANATION CAN BE FOUND AT THE END OF THIS PDF.

As you can see the E Minor Pentatonic works brilliantly in open position. Let's learn another scale that utilizes lots of open strings: the A Minor Pentatonic. When we play the open sixth string of our guitars that is the note E. If we hit our fifth string open that is the note A. We will now use that open 5th string (A) to serve as the tonic of our A minor Pentatonic. Here's the diagram for the scale:



Looks pretty similar to our E minor pattern, right? The difference in this pattern is that on the 5th string we play open -> 3rd fret, and on the 2nd string we play 1st -> 3rd fret. Also make a note of where the tonic (the bullseye notes) are in this pattern. As mentioned earlier the open A string is serving as our tonic. We are able to play notes on the 6th string as the notes E (open) and G (3rd fret) belong to the A Minor Pentatonic, but in this case the lowest note in our pattern is not the tonic. You are welcome to play this pattern starting on the 5th string or 6th. Regardless it is important to understand the tonic of this scale is on the 5th string. This concept of the tonic being on either the 5th or 6th string will come in handy when we want to move these patterns up the neck of the guitar.

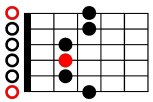
Exercise Group 1

Here are 3 simple exercises to that will help you learn the scales faster and will build strength, flexibility and dexterity in your hands and fingers.

#1 Alternate Picking

Simply play the E and A Minor Pentatonic Scales up and down using a Down - Up Picking Pattern.

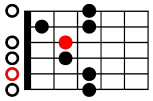
1) Alternate Picking



1 Open E Minor Pentatonic

el.guit.

5x



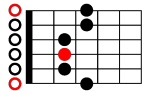
4 Open A Minor Pentatonic

5x

#2 Hammer and Pull

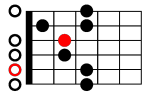
Play the scales with hammer-ons while ascending, and with pull-offs descending

2) Hammer and Pull



Open E Minor Pentatonic

4 H H H H 5 H H H P P 6 P P P P 5x



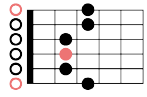
Open A Minor Pentatonic

7 H H H H 8 H H H P P 9 P P P P 5x

#3 String Skips

Start by playing the first two notes of the scale on the 6th string, then skip to the 4th. Go back to the 5th string, then skip to the 3rd. Then play the 4th and skip to the second. Then 3rd string and then 1st string. Then do the reverse while descending: 1st then 3rd string, 2nd then 4th, 3rd and then 5th, and finally 4th then 6th. Bonus points if you do it with alternate picking or hammer-ons and pull-offs.

3) String Skips

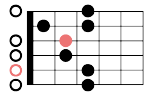


Open E Minor Pentatonic

13 14 15 16 3x

□ V □ V □ V □ V □ V □ V □ V

TAB: 0-3 0-2 0-2 0-2 0-3 0-2 3-0 3-0 2-0 2-0 2-0 2-0 3-0



Open A Minor Pentatonic

17 18 19 20 3x

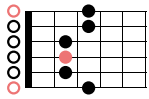
□ V □ V □ V □ V □ V □ V □ V

TAB: 0-3 0-2 0-3 0-2 1-3 0-3 3-0 3-1 2-0 2-0 2-0 2-0 3-0 3-0

#4 Up Two, Back 1

For this pattern start by playing the first three notes of the scale. After the third note descend back to the second, and then go ascend two more notes until the fourth note. Then descend back to the third note and ascend until the fifth note. Continue this pattern of ascending two notes and descending 1 until you reach the last note on the first string. Try it picking every note. Then try playing with hammer-ons and pull-offs when you have two consecutive notes on the same string. Check the TAB below for more clarity.

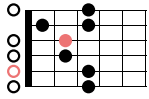
4) Up 2, Back 1



Open E Minor Pentatonic w/Alternate Picking

Musical notation for measures 21-23. The top staff is a treble clef with a melodic line. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature with strings T, A, B. Measure 21: Treble clef has notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5 with triplets. Tablature: T (0), A (3), B (3). Measure 22: Treble clef has notes E5, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4 with triplets. Tablature: T (0), A (2), B (2). Measure 23: Treble clef has notes F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3 with triplets. Tablature: T (0), A (3), B (3).

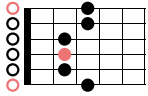
Musical notation for measures 24-25. The top staff is a treble clef with a melodic line. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature with strings T, A, B. Measure 24: Treble clef has notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5 with triplets. Tablature: T (0), A (2), B (2). Measure 25: Treble clef has notes E5, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4 with triplets. Tablature: T (0), A (2), B (2). The section ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign with '3x' above it.



Open A Minor Pentatonic w/Alternate Picking

Musical notation for measures 26-28. The top staff is a treble clef with a melodic line. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature with strings T, A, B. Measure 26: Treble clef has notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5 with triplets. Tablature: T (0), A (3), B (3). Measure 27: Treble clef has notes E5, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4 with triplets. Tablature: T (0), A (2), B (2). Measure 28: Treble clef has notes F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3 with triplets. Tablature: T (1), A (3), B (3).

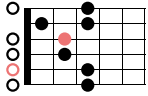
Musical notation for measures 29-30. The top staff is a treble clef with a melodic line. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature with strings T, A, B. Measure 29: Treble clef has notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5 with triplets. Tablature: T (1), A (2), B (2). Measure 30: Treble clef has notes E5, D5, C5, B4, A4, G4 with triplets. Tablature: T (0), A (3), B (3). The section ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign with '3x' above it.



Open E Minor Pentatonic w/Hammer-Pull

Musical notation for measures 31-33. The top staff is in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in tenor/bass clef. Measure 31 contains a sequence of hammer-ons (H) on strings 1-5, each followed by a triplet of eighth notes. Measure 32 continues with hammer-ons on strings 2-4 and triplets. Measure 33 features hammer-ons on strings 3-5, triplets, and pull-offs (P) on strings 1 and 2.

Musical notation for measures 34-35. Measure 34 includes pull-offs (P) on strings 1-5 and triplets. Measure 35 continues with pull-offs on strings 2-4 and triplets. The section concludes with a double bar line and a '3x' repeat sign.

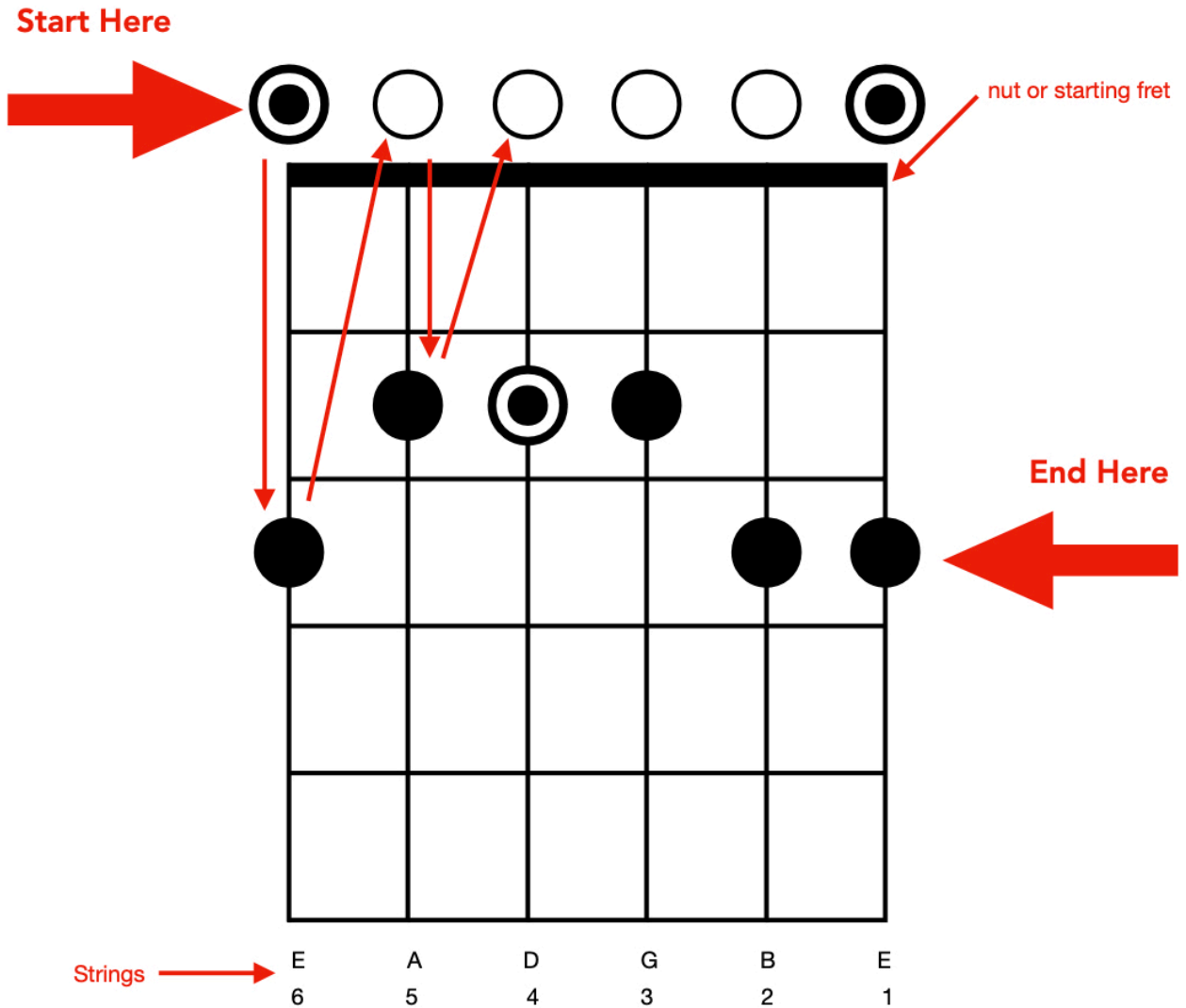


Open A Minor Pentatonic w/Hammer Pull

Musical notation for measures 36-38. Measure 36 contains hammer-ons (H) on strings 1-5 and triplets. Measure 37 continues with hammer-ons on strings 2-4 and triplets. Measure 38 features hammer-ons on strings 3-5, triplets, and pull-offs (P) on strings 1 and 2.

Musical notation for measures 39-40. Measure 39 includes pull-offs (P) on strings 1-5 and triplets. Measure 40 continues with pull-offs on strings 2-4 and triplets. The section concludes with a double bar line and a '3x' repeat sign.

Reading a Scale Diagram



1. Start by holding the guitar upright with the strings facing you. This is the perspective from which you are looking at the diagram.
2. The first note of the scale is indicated by the dot in the top left corner. In this example it happens to be the tonic which is indicated with a bullseye.
3. Now, follow the red arrows. Go down the string until you hit another dot. In this case it is on the 3rd fret of the 6th string.
4. When you run out of dots on that string then move to the fifth string. Then continue down the fifth string playing all notes indicated by the dots.
5. When you run out of dots go down to 4th string.
6. Now just follow this pattern until you've reach the note on the bottom right corner.
7. Once you've reached the end it is time to play the whole thing backwards. Don't forget to play your scales backwards!