

Technique Check: Bends

What is a Bend?

A "bend" on a guitar is a technique where the player pushes or pulls a string up or down, effectively stretching it to increase its tension and pitch. This action raises the pitch of the note being played. Bends can vary in size, from slight (a small pitch change) to a full step or more. The technique is commonly used in various genres, especially in blues and rock music, to add expression and emotion to a guitar solo or melody. Bends require some strength and dexterity, but also a good ear to keep them in tune, as well as some specific techniques that will be covered in this unit.

Bend Basics

When bending strings we want to focus 1st on the proper technique before worrying about being strong in our fingers. Before we bend a string we want to setup proper reinforcement.

Reinforcing a bend is when we use one or more fingers behind the finger we are using to bend the string. This gives us more strength and support allowing us greater range and precision with our bends. Most bends are done with the 3rd finger pushing up on the string. When doing this we want to reinforce with our 2nd and 1st fingers. Then we want to put inward pressure on the string. Think about pushing the string through the neck and then slightly add pressure upwards on the string. If we don't push in enough the string will mute when we start to push up.

It is also important to have the proper wrist position when bending. If we keep our thumb high (maybe poking out from behind the top of the neck depending on the size of your hand) then our wrist will naturally stay up in the proper position. We want to engage the muscles on the inside of our forearm that activate when we make a fist. We don't want our wrist low which would put pressure on the outside muscles of our forearm. If we try to bend this way it puts unwanted pressure on our wrist and the tendons in our fingers. In the long run this can cause injuries and will also make your bends less efficient.

Sometimes we bend with the 1st, 2nd and 4th fingers. When bending with the 2nd finger you will be reinforcing only with the 1st finger. When bending with the 4th finger you can reinforce with the 1st, 2nd and 3rd fingers, or only with the 2nd and 3rd fingers. If you play an upwards bend with the 1st finger it is not possible to reinforce, but we usually want to bend downwards when using the 1st finger.

When bending downwards the technique is slightly different. In this situation we want to turn our wrist inwards towards our body. This will naturally put your hand in a position where it is easier to pull downwards on the string. You can do this with the 2nd and 3rd fingers as well. When playing bends on the 5th and 6th strings you will notice that a downward bend is a

better option. This will keep the strings from being pushed off the top of the neck. When bending downwards with the 2nd and 3rd finger try to maintain the same reinforcement you use when pushing the strings up.

Tuning Bends

Bends come in different sizes. Sometimes we bend the string only a little bit, and sometimes we really crank the string. The amount we bend the string determines the resulting pitch of the bends. At this point it is worth taking a minute to go over intervals.

In music an **interval** is a unit of measurement that tells us how far away two notes are. As guitar players we can use our frets to determine intervals. For example if we play the note A on the 5th fret of the 6th string and then play the 6th fret on the 6th string we have moved up one **half step**. Thus, moving up or down a fret moves us up or down one half step. 2 frets would be a **whole step**, three frets would be one and a half steps, and 4 frets would be two whole steps.

For more information on intervals check out this video lesson:



Name of Interval	Number of Steps	Other Names for Intervals
Minor 2nd	1 half step	b2, 9
Major 2nd	2	
Minor 3rd	3	b3, 11
Major 3rd	4	
Perfect 4th	5	
Tritone	6	#4, b5, #11, Augmented 4th, Diminished 5th
Perfect 5th	7	
Minor 6th	8	b6, b13
Major 6th	9	b6, fully diminished 7th
Minor 7th	10	b7
Major 7th	11	
Octave	12	

Or here's the PDF associated with that video if you'd rather read about it: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ef0ba160fd0842145419b7c/t/6515c0f6174c4e661eb1430b/1695924470712/CAGED+CHORD+THEORY+Level+1.pdf>

When bending a string we want to consider two notes: our **original note** and the **target note**. The original note is the pitch that sounds when we play the string before bending it. The target

is the pitch that sounds when we have reached the top of the bend. Bends can be broken down into the size of the interval they are intended to reach. 99% of bends will be one of the following: 1/4 step or smear, 1/2 step, whole step, 1 1/2 step and 2 whole steps or **grand bend**.

Let's say we want to bend the note G on the 2nd string (8th fret) to the note G# (9th fret.) Before we try this bend it is helpful to play the note G# on the 9th fret 1st. Now you have the target pitch in your ear. Then go back to 8th fret (the note G) and using proper technique try to bend the string just enough so that you hear G#. Then play the 9th fret again and check your tuning. This is a 1/2 step bend.

Bends by nature are a detuning technique. Detuning something is when we play something slightly out of tune on purpose. So it's ok if your bend is not 100 percent in tune, but we don't want it to be on the wrong pitch or really out of tune.

Now try a whole step bend. If we use G (8th fret, 2nd string) as our original note again we want to reach a target pitch of A (10th fret). Go through the same progression you did with the half bend but now you want your bent note to match the pitch of the 10th fret on the 2nd string. That means you have to push up on the string a bit more than the 1/2 bend. Remember: focus on technique 1st. It's not all about strength. If you use the proper technique over time you will get stronger.

From there you can figure out 1 1/2 step and 2 whole step bends. 1 1/2 step bends would target a note 3 frets up from the original and 2 whole steps would target 4 frets above the original. A 2 whole step bend is often called a "grand bend." These are tough and may not happen for you if you are trying bends for the 1st time. Don't force it. Track your progress and over the course of a few weeks or months you should develop the strength to properly execute these larger bends.

Sometimes when we bend we actually just want to detune the original note. This means we are not targeting another pitch, we are simply nudging the string a bit out of tune. This called a 1/4 step bend, a **smear** or a **detune bend**.

Here's how all those bends are notated:

The image displays musical notation for five different types of bends. The top staff is in 4/4 time with a treble clef. Each measure contains a single note on the 8th fret of the 2nd string, with a curved line above it indicating a bend to a higher pitch. The bottom staff is labeled 'TAB' and shows the fret number '8' for each measure, with an arrow pointing to the target pitch and the bend amount: 1/4, 1/2, full, 1 1/2, and 2.

Bends in Action

Now that we have to basics of bending strings down let's put them to use. Let's go over a couple common uses of bends:

Pre-Bend: When we play a string while it already bent or when we strike a string while simultaneously bending.

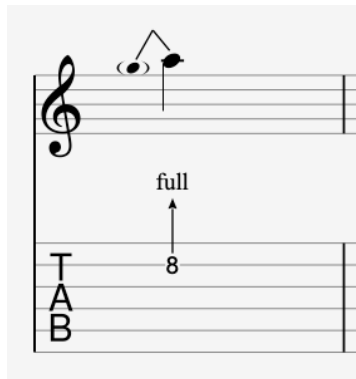
Double Stop Bends: When play two strings with one or both of the strings being bent.

Triple Stop Bends: When we play three strings with one or more of the strings being bent.

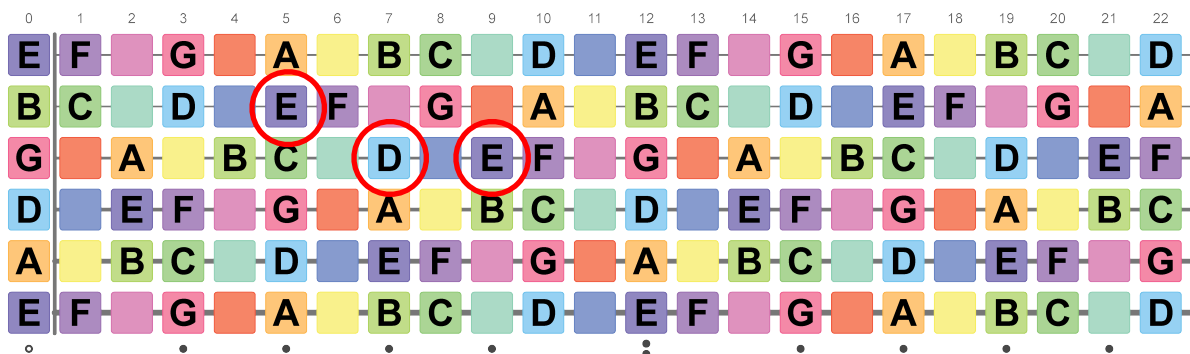
Unison Bends: A type of double stop bend in which two strings play the same note.

The Bend Release Pull (BRP): When a players bends a string, releases the bend and then pulls off to another note all in one motion.

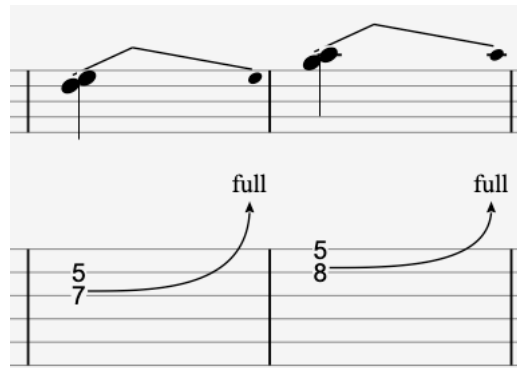
A pre-bend is a cool variation that requires us to play only the target note on a bend. This can be accomplished by bending the string before you pick it, or by bending and picking it at the same time. This is how it is notated:



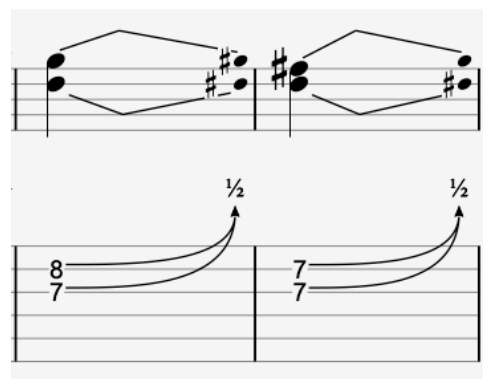
Double and triple stop bends can be quite difficult to execute. Unison bends are especially tricky as it forces us to use our 1st finger to play a note on the string below the one we are bending. That means we will only be reinforcing the 3rd finger with the 2nd finger. Let's get into the theory behind a unison bend. Check out the fretboard diagram below and make note of where D on the 3rd string is (7th fret). Then take stock of where the note E is on the 3rd and 2nd strings (9th and 5th fret respectively.)



What we now want to do is set up a bend using that D on the 3rd string as our original note. Then place your 1st finger on the note E on the 2nd string. We then bend then 3rd string it up a whole step to the note E. Now if we play the 3rd string and 2nd string they will both sound the note E. Use your ear to keep this bend in tune. You could also achieve a unison bend between the 2nd and 1st strings. Try this on the 8th fret on the 2nd string (the note G again). The 1st finger will then go to the note A on the 5th fret of the 1st string. You will notice the gap is wider here, so if you need to use the pinky finger to bend the 2nd string then go for it. Ideally we can execute this bend using the 3rd and 4th finger. Here is the notation for those two unison bends:

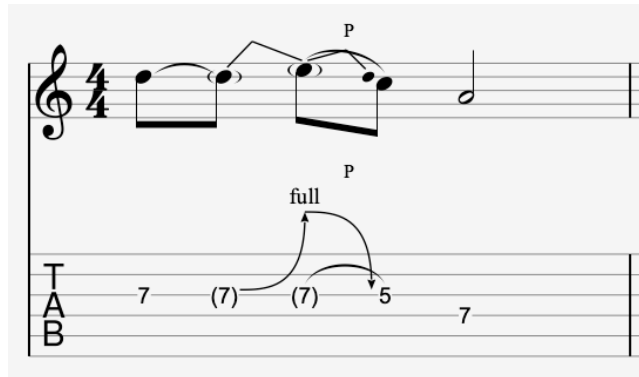


As was mentioned earlier a double stop bend can also be when two strings are bent at the same time. If we wanted to bend the same fret on two different strings we may want to utilize a partial bar with our 3rd finger over those two strings. If we are on two different frets (hopefully they are next to each other) then we will want to use 3rd and 4th fingers or 2nd and 3rd fingers to bend. Here's what those two situations would look like:

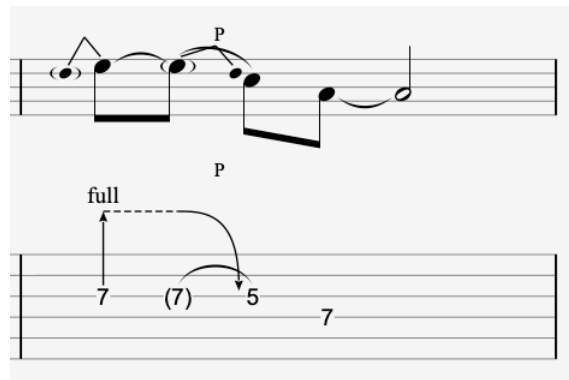


The bend release pull (BRP) is a super fun technique that allows us to play several notes in a row with one pick stroke. The name says it all. We start by playing a note. Let's use D on the 3rd string again (7th fret). Then we bend that string (can be a half or whole bend). After bending we release the bend back to the original note and then pull off to another note. Let's use C on the 5th fret of the 3rd string as the note we pull off to. After that go ahead and pick the 7th fret on the 4th string to turn it into a common blues lick. When releasing the bend keep

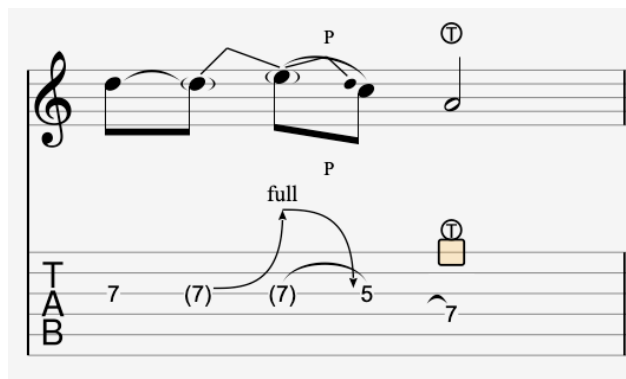
pressure in on the string as you let it back down. If you've ever lifted weights think of this as a negative. Here is that BRP:



A common variation on the BRP is to initiate it with a pre-bend:



You can also tap the last note with the left hand instead of picking it. **Tapping** with the left hand (aka hammering from nowhere) is when we get a string to sound simply by quickly forcing the finger down on the string without picking it. If you can play this lick then you can play 5 notes in a row with only one pick stroke.



More Bend Licks

Below are a few licks that you can try that incorporate bends. Remember to go slow and focus on technique and tuning.

Chuck Berry Lick Variation A. This is a triple stop unison lick made popular by the guitar legend Chuck Berry:

Musical notation for Variation A. The top staff shows a treble clef with a triple stop unison lick consisting of four groups of three notes. Each group is marked with a '3' and a 'full' bend arrow. The bottom staff shows the guitar tablature with fret numbers 5, 5, 7, 5, 5, 5 for each group. A vertical 'TAB' label is on the left.

Chuck Berry Lick Variation B:

Musical notation for Variation B. The top staff shows a treble clef with a triple stop unison lick consisting of four groups of three notes. Each group is marked with a '3' and a 'full' bend arrow. The bottom staff shows the guitar tablature with fret numbers 7, 5, 5, 7, 5, 5 for each group. A yellow box highlights the second fret on the second string of the first group. A vertical 'TAB' label is on the left.

Chuck Berry Lick Variation C:

Musical notation for Variation C. The top staff shows a treble clef with a triple stop unison lick consisting of four groups of three notes. Each group is marked with a '3' and a 'full' bend arrow. The bottom staff shows the guitar tablature with fret numbers 7, 5, 5, 7, 5, 5 for each group. A yellow box highlights the second fret on the second string of the third group. A vertical 'TAB' label is on the left.

Eddie Van Halen Lick from Panama Solo. This lick is the opening part of Eddie's solo on the song Panama. It requires a triple stop unison figure that goes into a BRP.

The image displays a musical score for a guitar lick. The top staff is a standard musical staff with a treble clef, showing a sequence of notes: a quarter note G4 (with a sharp sign), a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note G4, and a quarter note F4. There are various articulations including slurs, a 'P' (palm mute) above the final notes, and a wavy line indicating a vibrato effect at the end.

The bottom staff is a guitar tablature (TAB) with six lines. It shows fret numbers: 9, 7, 7, 9, 7, 7, 9, 7, 9. There are slurs connecting the 9-7-7 and 9-7-7 sequences, and a 'full' label with an upward arrow above the first 9. A 'P' (palm mute) is indicated above the 9-7-7 sequence, and another 'full' label with an upward arrow is above the final 9. The TAB is labeled 'TAB' vertically on the left side.