

BLOCKING GUIDE FOR PEDAL STEEL:
Secrets of palm-blocking & fingertip blocking

by Dave Magram

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INTRODUCTION

To get that crisp, percussive Nashville/Bakersfield sound on the pedal steel, "blocking" (muting) of the strings is required to prevent the notes from running together. It looks easy, but can be very challenging to learn to mute (block) the notes properly.

I don't believe there is only "ONE Right Way" to shape and position your right hand, because there are several different blocking techniques in use currently, and the most optimal right-hand posture depends on which blocking technique you are using.

One's right-hand posture mainly depends on:

- Which technique you are using to block the notes (the main ones are described below)...and based on that technique, how high your hand is positioned above the strings—which, in turn, affects the fingerpick blade-angle.
- As someone has posted on the SGF: *"Everything connects to everything."*

This guide is meant to be descriptive, not prescriptive:

I have done my best to classify and describe the blocking techniques used by master steel guitar players--and leave it to you to choose the technique (or combination of techniques) that work best for you. I've listed over 55 videos of master players that you can learn from.

TIP: I'd suggest you first skim through this entire guide: to get a sense of the topic sequence, the many resources that are listed, and to recognize the *possibility* that you may need to step out of your current "comfort zone". ☺

OVERVIEW OF BLOCKING TECHNIQUES

Right-hand blocking techniques for pedal steel

The three main right-hand picking techniques to "block" (mute) previously picked notes on a pedal steel (without lifting the tone-bar) are:

- 1) "Palm-blocking" (more accurately, "Palm-edge blocking") with four hand-shape variations;
- 2) "Pick-blocking" (more accurately called " fingertip blocking" by Paul Franklin);
- 3) Not as common, but the "hybrid" technique used by Buddy Emmons combining the two techniques above, has some adherents, and is described in more detail below.

Left-hand blocking techniques for pedal steel

"Bar-tracking": Virtually all proficient pedal steel players use the tone-bar to "track" where they are picking; if (for example) the highest string they are picking is the first string, they position the nose of their tone bar right on or slightly past the first string. This is because the front third of the bar is the "sweet spot" where your left-hand index finger is exerting the most pressure on the bar and thus onto the strings.

- Joe Wright demonstrates this "bar tracking" starting at 17:31 minutes in his "*Volume 4--Blocking Basics*" video (listed in the Videos section).

Left-hand middle finger: Many players position their left-hand middle fingertip behind the tone bar to protrude slightly in front of the nose of the tone bar, so that when they pick a lower string (such as the second or third string) and pull the bar back to "track" where they are picking, their left-hand middle fingertip automatically blocks the first string.

- You can see Bruce Bouton doing the blocking move described above playing "Highway 40 Blues" at 0:36 minutes and 0:49 minutes in his "*Bruce Bouton's Neo-Traditional*

Country Pedal Steel Guitar Lessons" video (also listed in the Videos section).

Left-hand thumb: Some players also use their left thumb in front of the tone bar to block lower strings when they are ascending, which Joe Wright demonstrates at 14:30 minutes in his "*Volume 4--Blocking Basics*" video.

Right-hand blocking: Palm-blocking and fingertip blocking (a.k.a. "pick-blocking"):

- Don't take the terms "palm-blocking" or "palm-edge blocking" too literally—many players curl their ring or little finger under their right hand to augment their "palm-blocking".
- Many great players like Lloyd Green, Tom Brumley, Jimmy Day, etc. only palm-blocked, they never "pick-blocked" ("fingertip-blocked"), as far as I know.
- I'd suggest learning "palm-blocking" first, before adding "fingertip blocking" (a.k.a. "pick-blocking")--if you want to. However, because some "fingertip blocking" techniques can be used with palm-blocking, I have included a complete description (and videos) of how Paul Franklin does fingertip blocking.

I palm-blocked in bands for many years, and then much later added "fingertip blocking" for fast tempo material. An excellent source of "fingertip blocking" instruction is Paul Franklin. Some free resources from Paul are listed in the "Fingertip Blocking" section of this Guide.

- Paul calls his blocking method "fingertip blocking", rather than "pick-blocking" because blocking with just the picks is only part of what he does.
- By the way, if you just can't "get" palm-blocking, you might try "fingertip blocking" instead; that's why Paul Franklin said he developed "fingertip blocking"! ☺

Let's "deconstruct" palm-blocking first...

PALM-BLOCKING "SECRETS"

The **biggest "Secret"** of palm-blocking is that **the muting of a previously picked string is not a separate motion from the picking motion**, it is simply **part of the motion of lowering your hand onto the strings to REST IT**, just before picking the next note or chord.

DETAILS:

Here's how palm-blocking works: When you pick a note (or a chord), your entire right hand naturally rises up 1/4" or so above the strings--from the force of your finger's picking motion.

- The picking motion should come from the distal (fingertip) finger bone and the middle finger bone. The picking motion itself should be a quick flicking motion, (rather like flicking your wrist when throwing a Frisbee)—and this energetic flicking finger motion typically causes your hand to naturally rise about 1/4" (about the thickness of a pencil) above the strings.

PICKING TIP: You have an amplifier, so you don't need to pick the strings very hard to be heard. But, to sound like Buddy Emmons and other greats, you need to be able to strike the strings with a speedy flick of your finger--the way a rattlesnake strikes--to be able to play slightly ahead of the downbeat when needed.

- Striking the string a few milliseconds before the beat is how I believe Buddy Emmons

and other masters produced that exciting, forward-leaning momentum that is often called "swing" or "drive" (depending on the rhythmic groove).

VERY IMPORTANT: As your right hand comes back down after picking the note (or a chord) to rest on the strings, the edge of your palm should touch the strings a millisecond before your fingerpick lands—thus muting (blocking) the previously picked note (or chord notes).

AN IMPORTANT DETAIL: Do not actively *horizontally* rotate your right hand in a *separate* motion to block the notes. Instead, find the optimal horizontal angle of your palm to the strings that allows the edge of your palm to touch the strings just before your picks do—and then keep your hand fixed at that optimal horizontal angle while you are palm-blocking.

To summarize so far:

1) Blocking is NOT a separate motion from the finger picking motion—it is part of the motion of returning your right hand to the resting position—a millisecond before your fingerpicks land to pick the next note—and this requires...

2) Finding and maintaining the optimal horizontal angle of your palm to the strings.

- Watch some of the videos in the Videos List to see this for yourself!

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BODY POSITIONING: Always keep both of your hands, wrists, and arms relaxed and in an ergonomic posture. Keeping your right arm hanging naturally at your side will help you maintain good positioning of your right hand for palm-blocking, and avoid tension in your right arm and hand.

Also keep your left hand, wrist, and arm relaxed, for the same reasons.

- Be prepared to adjust your fingerpicks, the height of your seat, the angle of your guitar top, or anything else to be in the optimal ergonomic posture and optimal position to palm-block. If any of these things are not optimal, it may greatly increase the difficulty of learning to palm-block effectively.

- Strive for economy of motion as you learn palm-blocking; otherwise you will not be able to play at fast tempos. As a famous musician once said: "Good technique is the elimination of the unnecessary."

I know that some of this is repetitive, but these are the hidden details that are hardest to observe and understand for most new players--because they are counter-intuitive and not easily observable. 😊

THE THREE "BIGGEST SECRETS" OF PALM-BLOCKING

1. Palm-blocking is simply part of the motion of lowering your hand onto the strings to REST it before playing the next note or chord; it is NOT a separate motion. When picking, strive for "economy of motion" at all times!
2. Find the optimal horizontal angle of your palm to the strings that allows the edge of your palm to touch the strings just before your picks do—and keep your relaxed hand fixed at that optimal angle while you are palm-blocking. Do not actively twist or rotate your right hand to block the strings with a motion that is separate from the motion of lowering your hand down after picking a note or a chord.
3. Position your right hand, wrist, and forearm in a fairly straight line, allow your arms to hang naturally at your side, and sit up straight (like your mom probably told you to do at the dinner table). 😊

PERFECT PRACTICE, PERFECT PERFORMANCE

“Perfect practice makes perfect performance”: What does that mean?

Simply practicing a new skill repeatedly is not enough; the practice itself must be done correctly to achieve mastery. If you practice with incorrect form or technique, you are just reinforcing bad habits, making them "permanent" rather than improving. Instead of mindless repetition, the focus should be on deliberate, quality practice that ensures accuracy and correctness to lead to true improvement: **“Perfect practice makes perfect performance”** (attributed to legendary football coach Vince Lombardi):

- I recall reading somewhere that Jay Dee Maness watched Buddy Emmons practicing only harmonics on his steel guitar--for three hours! That, in a nutshell, is “*perfect practice makes perfect performance*” ...
- Steel guitarist Jim Palenscar recalls seeing Buddy Emmons practicing a difficult lick over several days: “*He would deconstruct it one note at a time until he got to the place where he stumbled, then he would slow it down to a snail’s pace....He [practiced] it repetitively so he **couldn’t not play it perfectly.***” (Fishell, Steve. *Buddy Emmons: Steel Guitar Icon*, University of Illinois Press, 2022. pg. 39).

That is the goal of “perfect practice”: you can’t not perform it perfectly!

“Muscle memory” doesn’t happen overnight

It takes a while to learn a new, complex manual activity like fingerpicking. This is often called acquiring “muscle memory”—in which: “*The brain creates efficient neural pathways for skills like riding a bike, while muscle cells retain structural changes from past workouts, which helps the muscles respond faster when exercise resumes.*

This phenomenon is a combination of both neurological skill retention and lasting cellular changes in the muscles themselves.”

Obviously then, acquiring “muscle memory” requires a lot of repetitions practiced slowly and perfectly so that you can perform the activity perfectly at faster speeds; often summed up as: “Learn to walk before you run”. 😊

Why practice frequently and regularly?

Because research has shown that unless you review a new skill frequently, every day you forget about 50% of what you were able to remember the day before (known as “The Forgetting Curve”)!

- This means that if you don’t review a new skill for a week, by Day 7 you will have forgotten 90% of what you had learned a week ago!
- A **proven method** of combating The Forgetting Curve is a “spaced review” schedule: For example, review/practice a new skill all seven days in Week One, six days in Week Two, etc.

For more information, see: **How to beat the “Forgetting Curve”** in the Appendix

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As is often said, “The devil is in the details”. Here are the “details” of palm-blocking...

Choosing a thumbpick & fingerpicks

CHOOSING THUMB PICKS

I used Dunlop guitar thumbpicks for many years to play pedal steel, and then noticed that a lot of full-time professional players, such as Joe Wright and Paul Franklin, were using short-blade thumbpicks (such as Herco Blue Thumb nylon thumbpicks, or red Dunlop Delrin thumbpicks).

- Why? These short-blade thumbpicks enable the player to use the exposed flesh on the side of the thumb to mute the strings—a key element of “fingertip blocking”—and they also work well for palm-blocking.
- However, both the Herco and Dunlop short-blade thumbpicks have a tendency to loosen up from your body heat while you play so you have to keep a spare at the ready at a gig—and there is a much **better short-blade thumbpick** available now...

● **A BETTER SHORT-BLADE THUMB PICK:**

I have come to prefer Fred Kelly “Speed-Picks” available at music stores or online at <https://fredkellypicks.com/product-category/speed/> because they facilitate blocking with the side of your thumb (a pick-blocking technique that also works well for palm-blocking)—and **do not loosen up from your body-heat!**



Fred Kelly “Speed-Pick”

- Fred Kelly “Speed-Picks” have a very clever “tongue” as part of the blade, which helps keep the pick in place on your thumb.
- The Delrin material they are made of does not loosen up like the Herco or Dunlop thumbpicks do.
- They last for years, so you don’t need to buy more than 2 or 3 at a time (in case you lose one). They are only about \$1 each.
- I personally prefer the stiffer white (“heavy”) Fred Kelly Speed-Picks.

CHOOSING FINGERPICKS

The shape of your fingerpicks and the material they are made of, have a lot to do with your tone and picking effectiveness.

- I realize that there are a lot of personal opinions on the subject of fingerpicks on the Steel Guitar Forum (SGF), but, with all due respect to the many well-meaning folks on the SGF, I believe that learning from master steel guitarists who are full-time professional musicians is the best starting point. 😊

The importance of choosing the best fingerpicks:

- Your fingerpicks are **the** point of contact when picking your steel guitar strings, so their shape and alloy material they are made of are very important to your tone.
- I have known good fiddlers who play an old fiddle they only paid a couple of hundred dollars for, but they then spent over \$1,000 for their fiddle bow, because the bow is **the** point of contact with the fiddle strings! So don’t hesitate to pay \$15 or \$20 for good fingerpicks to play your \$3,000 steel guitar!
- **TIP:** Always make sure you have at one or two spare sets of picks all ready to go.

The old “pre-war” National fingerpicks, which the legendary steel players (Emmons, Day, Mooney, Franklin, etc.) all used were made of a soft “nickel-silver” alloy that “grabbed” the strings and produced a lot of volume and tone. Today, these old Nationals sell for big bucks--if you can find them. (NOTE: Despite its name, there is

no silver in so-called “nickel-silver” fingerpicks; the silver color is from zinc.)

- After many years of trying, Paul Franklin recently convinced D’Addario to make “Paul Franklin National Fingerpicks” to his specifications, which shows how important he thinks fingerpicks are! Only \$21 for four at the SGF Store:

<https://steelguitarshopper.com/paul-franklin-signature-national-nickel-fingerpicks-sold-individually-or-package-of-4/>

- Another good choice might be the Dean Hoffmeyer “nickel-silver” fingerpicks which claim to use an alloy similar to the old “pre-war” Nationals (\$25 a pair).
- I have heard good things about banjo fingerpicks made by Warren Yates or Richie Dotson, both of whom apparently also use a “nickel-silver” alloy similar to the old “pre-war” Nationals.
- I personally do not like Dunlop fingerpicks because their flared bands, while very comfortable, have a tendency to “catch” on each other, and the alloy used does not produce the best tone, IMHO.
- **IMPORTANT:** Be sure to take some time to shape the fingerpick blade-angles and bands for comfort and picking effectiveness, as described later in this guide.

PALM-BLOCKING: FIRST STEP-- ERGONOMICS

Good ergonomics and positioning are very important...

Adjusting your seat and guitar: Let's focus on the most important goal first, which is to be able to rest your right hand on the strings so that the edge of your palm is in full contact with the strings and your hands (and arms) are relaxed without any tension. This may require you to adjust the height of your seat or tilt the guitar slightly.

Here's why...

It is very difficult to palm-block if your hands and arms are not relaxed and the edge of your palm is not in full contact with the strings...I believe that it is much easier to learn and execute palm-blocking if the edge of your palm is in full contact with the strings and both of your hands and arms are relaxed.

- Place your right hand palm down on the strings, as if you were resting it on a table, then relax it so that a little space is naturally created between the palm of your hand and the strings. The edge of your palm and the base of your thumb should now be resting gently on the strings.

Right-Hand posture: I have found it most effective and ergonomic to have my right hand, wrist, and forearm in a fairly straight line. If your hand is at a vertical angle to your wrist (either up or down), you will not be able to rest your relaxed hand on the strings so that the edge of your palm and your thumb are in full contact with the strings (the optimal position for palm-blocking). Furthermore, a bend in your wrist (vertical or horizontal) can lead to carpal tunnel problems in your wrist.

Most proficient players keep their right arm hanging naturally at their side, with their right elbow very close to their body. I believe this is more ergonomic, reduces tension, and helps to maximize your picking effectiveness and accuracy.

- Keeping your right arm hanging naturally at your side will help you maintain good positioning of your right hand for palm-blocking, and avoid tension in your right arm.
- If your wrist and arm are not in a fairly straight line, or if your wrist is bent, you may need to do some adjustments to your seat or the legs of your guitar so that you

are in a more ergonomic position.

- Sit up straight to help avoid tension in your shoulder, arm, and hand.

There may be some good players out there who don't do all these things, but I believe that they do help you pick and block more effectively and more ergonomically.

If the edge of your hand is still not resting on most of the strings in a relaxed position, you may need to adjust the height of your seat, or even the angle of the top of your guitar.

- It may sound strange, but you may also need to adjust your fingerpick blade angles and the bands. A detailed explanation of how to adjust your fingerpicks is in a later section.
- Check out some of the photos of the hand and arm postures of some well-known steel players in the next section, and in the YouTube videos at the end of this Guide.

SEAT HEIGHT: Your feet should rest flat on the floor, and your thighs parallel with the floor. I am taller than average, so I use an adjustable-height hunting seat (the lightweight Stag All-Terrain Seat for bow-hunting) with a back support to help with good posture. I also find it optimal to tilt the top of my steel away from me by a few degrees by raising up the back legs by about an inch or two. It is hardly noticeable to the observer, but I find that this additional angle allows me to rest my relaxed hand flat on the strings so that the edge of my palm is in full contact with the strings when resting on them.

- Sitting up straight helps avoid tension in your shoulder, arm, and hand; I recommend using a seat with a back—to avoid slouching and reduce body tension.

RIGHT ARM POSITION: Most proficient pedal steel guitar players keep their right arm hanging naturally at their side, which helps them position your hand in the optimal relaxed position and angle on the strings for palm-blocking. Keeping your right arm relaxed avoids developing tension in your shoulder and arm, so it also contributes to good ergonomics. Notice how I keep referring to “resting” the palm edge and thumb of your relaxed right hand on the strings—this is the key part of the Big Secret of palm-blocking.

REMEMBER THE THREE “BIG SECRETS” OF PALM-BLOCKING

1. Palm-blocking is simply part of the motion of lowering your hand onto the strings to REST it before playing the next note or chord; it is NOT a separate motion. When picking, strive for “economy of motion” at all times!
2. Find the optimal horizontal angle of your palm to the strings that allows the edge of your palm to touch the strings just before your picks do—and keep your relaxed hand fixed at that optimal angle while you are palm-blocking. Do not actively twist or rotate your right hand to block the strings with a motion that is separate from the motion of lowering your hand down after picking a note or a chord.
3. Position your right hand, wrist, and forearm in a fairly straight line, allow your arms to hang naturally at your side, and sit up straight (like your mom probably told you to do at the dinner table). ☺

TIP: I'd suggest copying (by hand) the above "The Three Big Secrets" list onto a note-card, and stand it up in the tuning-key portion of your guitar as a constant reminder when you are practicing... because, in my experience, these are the things that new palm-blockers forget when trying to learn palm-blocking!

PALM-BLOCKING BASICS

Initial Self-Test: Let's see how you do with muting just thumb-picked strings as you ascend from low to high strings--no pedals or bar or fingerpicks are needed, only a thumb-pick.

- On the E9 neck, with your thumbpick only, play string 8, then 7, then 6 with a short one-second pause after you lower your hand (after picking the note), blocking with: the edge of your palm; the ball of your thumb; or if you have short-blade thumbpicks (as described above), with the outside (back) edge of your thumb.

VERY IMPORTANT: If you can still hear the previous note ringing after you have lowered your hand to pick the next note in the sequence, then you are not blocking effectively, and you may need to make some adjustments as described above to mute the note properly.

- On the other hand, if you hear silence during that second after you lower your right hand onto the strings to rest it before picking the next note--you are doing basic palm-blocking!

Palm-blocking basic motion

With "palm-blocking", the thumb/fingers and hand work together to palm-block effectively. With palm-blocking, unlike playing the banjo or Dobro, there is a movement of your whole hand, not just your fingers.

The finger picking motion is just that—your fingers picking the strings—which causes your hand to naturally rise very slightly (about 1/4 inch) just from the picking motion of your fingers. Do NOT deliberately lift your hand; let it rise naturally as a result of your finger picking motion.

- Strive for economy of motion at all times. Make sure your right hand doesn't rise much more than 1/4 inch above the strings after you have picked the string, for "economy of motion". The further it travels away from the strings, the further it has to travel to return, which slows down your ability to play at fast tempos! Watch the videos of great players in action to see what they do!
- Maintain the optimal horizontal angle of your palm to the strings.

Palm-blocking: Basic resting/starting picking hand position

Start by resting your picking hand flat on the strings. Relax it so the side of your palm is lightly resting flat on the strings, with your thumbpick and at least one fingerpick touching the strings, as if ready to play them. This is its resting/starting position.

Basic palm-blocking hand posture:

Your hand should be loose and relaxed with your fingers slightly curled towards your palm, fingerpicks touching the strings. If you look at your hand, it should look like you have an invisible golf ball in it, rather like just resting your hand on a table in front of you. This *is* the optimal horizontal angle of your palm to the strings that you need to maintain.

- That hollow space you create for the "invisible golf ball" Jeff Newman describes is to allow for the upward picking motion of your thumb and fingers. Check out the photos below showing four or five major palm-blocking variations....



1. Jeff Newman's hand posture with **loosely extended** little finger. Notice how relaxed his hand is.

However, Jeff recommends locating the crease in your palm above the highest string being played—which many players (including me) find rather awkward.



2. Lloyd Green's hand posture with **firmly extended** little finger.

Notice the hollow space created between his fingers and his palm—where his picking fingers travel.



3. Jay Dee Maness with ring & little finger **tightly curled** under his palm to block the notes by “covering” the big crease in his palm

Notice the slight downward “optimal” angle to the right at which Jay Dee maintains his hand

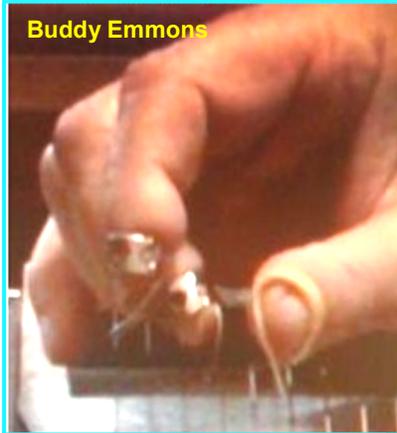
Jay Dee appears to do both palm-blocking and “fingertip blocking” with this hand-shape



4. Joe Wright's hand posture with ring & little finger **loosely curled** under his palm.

He explains his blocking technique in the “Joe Wright Palm/Pick Blocking #3” and “Volume 16--Pick Blocking” videos (See Video List below).

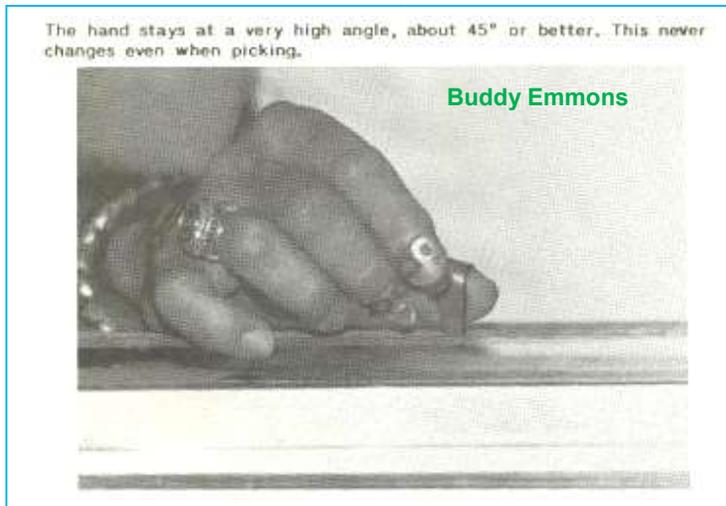
Notice the hollow space created between his fingers and his palm, and how relaxed his hand is.



5. Buddy Emmons used a **hybrid** of palm-blocking and “fingertip blocking” with his ring-finger, using his thumb and middle finger (T-M-T-M) to emulate a flat-pick and as he once said, “never run out of fingers”.

Notice the hollow space created between his fingers and his palm, and how relaxed his hand is.

Buddy lightly touched the first string with his little finger as a “reference touch-point” to locate his hand properly for picking accuracy.



A photo of Buddy Emmons' hand posture from a Jeff Newman instruction booklet.

<https://bb.steelguitarforum.com/viewtopic.php?t=323447&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=0>

Buddy's index finger knuckle was high above the strings to facilitate his unique T-M-T-M emulation of a guitar flatpick.

Watch the video “Buddy Emmons - J.D. Maness” to see close-ups of Buddy's T-M-T-M technique.

Key take-away: All of these variations on palm-blocking work very well for these master players—just find the one (or a combination of them) that works best for you!!

GOOD BODY POSTURE: For picking effectiveness and ergonomics



Buddy Emmons

Here's an excellent example of good overall body posture...

- Notice how Buddy Emmons keeps his right arm hanging down naturally so his elbow is close to his ribs, and how straight up his torso is.
- Keeping your back straight is also very ergonomic.

Both of these body postures help avoid tension in your right arm and hand—which is what you want.

Plus, Buddy always sounded great and had fun when he played, so why not try sitting up straight like he does! 😊

Who else keeps their relaxed right arm hanging down naturally?

Tom Brumley, Bobby Black, Buddy Charleton, Jimmy Day, Doug Jernigan, Jay Dee Maness, Jeff Newman, Tommy White, Joe Wright, and many more.

- Watch the YouTube videos listed near the end of this Guide to see for yourself.

Benefits of allowing your relaxed right arm to hang naturally, close to your body:

- Reduces tension in your right shoulder, arm and hand, which allows for more effective and ergonomically comfortable picking.
- Helps you to keep the proper fixed angle between your fingerpicks and the strings; if your elbow is 6" away from your body, your fingerpicks and picking motion will likely be at a 30-45 degree angle to the strings instead of the more effective perpendicular angle of 90 degrees. And it's harder to maintain the optimal horizontal angle of your palm to the strings when your elbow isn't close to your body.
- Helps you to maintain consistency of the optimal physical relationship between your steel guitar fretboard and your right arm and hand, because your elbow is against your body instead of "floating" at some inconsistent distance from it. There is so much going on physically when playing pedal steel that a consistent physical relationship with it is very important--similar to always sitting centered on the same fret to adjust for the changing parallax between the frets and your tone bar as you move it up or down the neck.

PALM-BLOCKING EXERCISES: Step-by-step

TIP: Practice all of the exercises below very slowly at first (one second between notes, 60 bpm), so that you can make sure you are blocking (muting) the previously picked note cleanly and completely. Then try them slightly faster (65 bpm).

- Remember: "***Perfect practice makes perfect performance!***"

Do all of the exercises every day at first, and try adding about 5 bpm each day.

- **Example:** Day One at 60 and 65 bpm; Day Two at 60, 65, and 70 bpm; etc.

EXERCISE 1- Blocking Thumb-Picked Notes: Ascending & descending

No pedals or bar or fingerpicks are needed, only a thumbpick.

1A.) Blocking thumb-picked notes: Basic ascending move (two strings)

1. Play string 8 with your thumb and as your thumb leaves the string after picking it, allow the edge of your right hand to naturally rise off the strings very slightly (a 1/4 inch or so) along with it, letting the string continue to ring. [The thickness of a standard pencil is about 1/4 inch.]
2. Your wrist should stay straight and your whole forearm may rise slightly (only about 1/4 of an inch or so) above the strings when you do this.
3. Your hand, wrist, and arm should be very loose and relaxed (not tensed up).
4. **IMPORTANT--**When you lower your thumb (and hand and wrist and forearm) to play string 7, the right edge of your hand should touch the strings just before your thumbpick contacts string 7, muting (blocking) the ringing of string 8.

THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT: To repeat, the edge of your palm should touch the

strings a millisecond before your thumbpick (or fingerpick) does! To block thumb-picked notes, you can also use the ball of your thumb, or the outside edge of your thumb (if you have a short-blade thumbpick)—**and must be PART OF THE MOTION OF LOWERING YOUR RIGHT HAND TO PICK THE NEXT STRING**. It is not a separate motion!

- If you can do this blocking (very slowly) so that after you have rested the edge of your right hand back on the strings AND THE PREVIOUS NOTE IS MUTED-- **at least 12 times consecutively with perfect muting**, you have just done some basic palm-blocking successfully!

To repeat: the "Biggest Secret" of palm-blocking is that the blocking in Step 2 is not a separate motion from the picking, it is simply part of the motion of lowering your hand onto the strings to REST IT before picking the next note.

Optimizing your hand-position: Blocking thumb-picked notes (ascending)

If the blocking isn't quite working, you may need to optimize your resting hand position...

- This is normally accomplished by changing the (fixed) horizontal angle of rotation of your right-hand position by a few degrees (usually clockwise) to allow the edge of your right hand to land on the strings just before your pick does—in one single motion. **THIS IS CRUCIAL!**
- This slight horizontal rotation is as if you were just starting to open a door by turning the knob clockwise with your right hand. Once you have discovered the optimal horizontal angle of rotation, you must teach your hand ("muscle memory") to maintain this fixed position when palm-blocking.
- You should not actively rotate your hand while you are playing--it always stays fixed at this optimal angle for blocking, and is part of the motion of lowering your hand on to the strings to pick the next note.
- Make sure to keep your hand relaxed, with no tension in your hand, wrist, or arm. Keep your right elbow touching your ribs--to help reduce tension in your arm.

ALTERNATIVES: If you are having difficulty palm-blocking thumb-picked notes, there are two other ways to block them:

1. Get a short-blade thumbpick, like the Fred Kelly Speed Picks, and block with the side of the distal joint of your thumb (the joint where your thumbpick is). This is what "pick-blockers" like Paul Franklin and Joe Wright do—it also works for palm-blocking. This is described in the "Fingertip-Blocking" section.
2. Use the base of your thumb to block thumb-picked notes (which is how some players block thumb-picked notes), rather than the edge of your palm.

Now, repeat the two-string Ascending Exercise 1, steps A1 through A4 playing string 7, then string 6 very slowly (about 60 bpm or one note per second), always blocking the previous note with the edge of the palm of your right hand (or right thumb) before picking the next string.

VERY IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER: 1) The blocking is part of the motion of lowering your hand to rest on the strings; it is **NOT a separate motion!**
2) Maintain the optimal horizontal angle of your hand.

EXERCISE 1B- Blocking Thumb-Picked Notes (ascending on three-strings)

1. Once you have "mastered" (meaning you are able to repeat the **ascending**

two-string exercise at least 12 times consecutively with perfect muting)

playing just two strings ascending, now let's play the ascending sequence of three strings (8, 7, 6), making sure that the previous note is always blocked just before a new note is picked.

2. Practice the three-string Ascending Exercise 1, B1 through B4 several times until you are blocking the previous note cleanly before you play the next note. Always strive for as little motion as possible when lifting your hand from the strings--a 1/4 of an inch is all you need. The further your fingers travel away from the strings, the further they have to travel to return, which slows down your picking speed!
3. Do it slowly (about 50 bpm, not quite one note per second) so that you can hear the previous note ring--until your hand lands on the strings to play the next note. (If you can still hear the previous note after your hand lands back on the strings, you haven't blocked it properly).
4. Once you can do that consistently, then try it slightly faster (55 bpm). You may notice the edge of your hand appearing to "bounce" lightly off the strings as you play each note, but **do NOT deliberately "bounce" your hand!**
 - Your right hand should be loose and relaxed.
5. Now repeat the exercise slightly faster (about 60 bpm, one note per second) ascending from string 8 to 7 to 6 until it can be done without thinking about it, and all the notes are being blocked cleanly.
6. Once you've mastered this for the day (**meaning you are able to repeat this exercise at least 12 times consecutively with perfect muting**), go on to the next exercise.

Congratulations--You have just blocked ascending notes with your thumb, and you are ready to go on to the next exercise...

However, if you can still hear the previous note ringing while the next note in the sequence is ringing, then you are not muting effectively; go back to Step A1 and try again until you have isolated the problem, and fixed it.

When you can do Exercise 1B (ascending 3 strings) **at least 12 times consecutively with perfect blocking**, you are ready to go on to Exercise 1C (descending) and do the same. Be sure to practice this blocking every day at first, until it becomes second nature.

Check out the Palm-Blocking Instructional Videos in the Video List at the end of this Guide for more exercises like this.

EXERCISE 1C--Descending exercise for thumb-picked notes (three-strings):

1. With your thumbpick, play string 6, then 7, then 8 with a 1-second pause between each note. If you can still hear the previous note after you play the next note in the sequence, then you are **not** blocking effectively.
 - Either block using the edge of your palm, or curl your ring and little fingers under your palm (like Jay Dee Maness' photo above) to cover up the crease in your palm, or the base of your thumb—and try blocking the previously picked strings with them.

2. Practice this descending (three-string) exercise several times slowly until you are blocking the previous note effectively when you rest your hand on the strings, just before you play the next note.

Always strive for as little motion as possible when lifting your hand from the strings. Make sure your right hand doesn't lift more than about 1/2 inch above the strings after you have picked the string. This is to maximize your economy of motion.

Repeat the exercise very slowly (about 50 bpm) until it can be done slightly faster (about 55 bpm) without thinking about it. Then play the exercise slightly faster (about 60 bpm). **Once you've mastered this blocking for the day (repeated it at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly), you are ready to go on to the next exercise.**

Congratulations--You have just blocked ascending and descending notes with your thumb! You are now about 33% of the way to full palm-blocking!

- Be sure to practice Exercises 1A, 1B, and 1C **every day at first**, increasing the tempo slightly each day by about 5 bpm, always repeating each at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly.

Check out the Palm-Blocking Instructional Videos in the Video List at the end of this Guide for more exercises like this.

Palm-Blocking with your fingerpicks: Preparation

As you might have guessed, now it's time for your fingers to go to work...

THE 'TRICKY PART': BLOCKING WITH FINGERPICKS

Even though you use a thumbpick and two fingerpicks, unlike playing "rolls" on the banjo or Dobro, most palm-blocking steel-players play single-note licks with just thumb and one finger, and use the other finger mainly for chords. Watch some of the videos of Buddy Emmons listed near the end of this Guide to see how he does this.

- Many steel players primarily use their middle finger to pick with; some use their index finger. Some players use both at different times.
- Choose whichever finger you prefer as your primary finger, but it may be useful to learn to use both.

Palm-blocking finger-picked single notes is a little trickier than blocking thumb-picked notes, because the edge of your hand nearest to your fingers has a big crease in the palm running from the base of your little finger to the base of your index finger, and another smaller crease where your little finger connects to the palm.

- Many palm-blockers curl their ring finger and/or little finger under their palm to "fill in" the creases in their palm.

There is no single "The Only Right Way" to palm-block; everyone's hand shape and flexibility is slightly different. **Basically, whatever works to mute the notes is fine, as long as it is effective and ergonomic!**

However, don't waste time trying to "reinvent the wheel"--learn from master players! As Yogi Berra famously said, "*You can observe a lot just by watching!*" ... Watch some of the YouTube videos provided at the end of this guide to see master palm-blockers at work, and you may notice that there are four major variations of hand shapes for palm-blocking.

FOUR COMMON RIGHT-HAND SHAPES FOR PALM-BLOCKING

1. Some players **stiffly extend** the little finger of their right-hand straight out to straighten out the big crease in their palm, and block only with the edge of their hand. Examples are Lloyd Green and Tom Brumley. Doug Jernigan uses a unique version of this technique. You can see Tom on YouTube with Buck Owens; "Cajun Fiddle" shows Tom's picking style clearly. (See: Videos List at the end of this guide.)
2. Some players **loosely extend** their little finger in a very relaxed way to lightly anchor to the first string, such as Jimmy Day, Bobby Black, Jeff Newman, David Hartley (U.K.), and many others.
3. Some players **tightly curl their little finger** (and/or ring finger) under their palm, to "fill in" the big crease in their palm, and use it to block the finger-picked notes. Examples are Jay Dee Maness, Bruce Bouton, and Hal Rugg.
4. Some players **loosely curl their little finger** (and/or ring finger) under their palm, to block the finger-picked notes. An example is Joe Wright (when he palm-blocks).

A FIFTH RIGHT-HAND SHAPE: Buddy Emmons

5. Buddy Emmons had a unique way of blocking that is a "hybrid" of palm-blocking and fingertip-blocking (aka "pick-blocking") in that he uses the edge of his right hand to palm-block thumb-picked notes and ascending finger-picked notes, and the tip of his ring finger to block descending (middle) finger-picked notes. This allows him to play very fast single-note passages almost as if he were using a flat pick.

As Buddy described it: "I use (pick with) the thumb and second finger, muting with the palm edge and third finger. There are two occasions for using the palm edge. One, when picking with the thumb, and the other when going from a lower string to one higher. When going from a high string down to a lower string always use the third finger to mute."

<https://bb.steelguitarforum.com/viewtopic.php?t=323447>

As you can see in the YouTube clips, Buddy lightly anchored his relaxed little finger on the first string--to stabilize his hand and locate the strings more accurately. (A "light-touch anchor" is the way a lot of flat-pickers lightly touch their little finger on the face of their six-string Spanish guitar.)

Buddy's hand-position was very high in the air-- higher than most palm-blockers-- so he could easily **swing his thumb and middle finger back and forth**--as can be seen on the YouTube clips. Other players using a picking technique very similar to Buddy Emmons' "hybrid" technique are Buddy Charleton, Terry Crisp, and Tommy White.

As I recall, the way Buddy described it in an old *Guitar Player* magazine column and what it looks like on YouTube could be described as a hybrid combination of fingertip-blocking and palm-blocking. It's important to note that Buddy would typically play fast single-note passages

with just his thumb and middle finger as if they were the two sides of a flat-pick.

Herb Steiner wrote on the SGF in 2016: “Years back, I wrote BE an email asking his fingering for his solo on “Liberty” from the “Western Strings” album. His reply, verbatim, was as follows: ‘T M T M T M’.”

<https://bb.steelguitarforum.com/viewtopic.php?t=308480&sid=0c34bb1ad65622a03c62299c19b36373>

Buddy Emmons’ “hybrid” picking style is different from classic palm-blocking as done by Lloyd Green, Tom Brumley, Jeff Newman, etc. When you watch these great palm blocking players on YouTube, you can see their hand appears to “bounce” to block the just-played notes with the edge of their hand; Buddy’s hand does not bounce, it swings!

Emmons’ “hybrid” picking style is also different from fingertip-blocking as done by Paul Franklin, Joe Wright, Barbara Mandrell, etc. When you watch these great players on YouTube, there is zero hand-bouncing or hand-swinging to block the notes, because most of their blocking (when ascending or descending to other strings) is done with the tips of their ring and little fingers and the side of their thumb, so they keep their hands much closer to the strings than Buddy Emmons did.

[More details on Buddy’s technique are in the Appendix of this Guide.]

WATCH TOP PLAYERS PALM-BLOCK ON VIDEOS

Examples of these five palm-blocking variations can be seen on YouTube videos; a long list of videos is further along in this guide.

My preferred palm-blocking hand-shape (for what it’s worth) 😊

I’ve tried all of these variations, and personally found that curling my ring and little fingers under so that they lightly touched my palm (and covered up that big crease in my palm) was the most comfortable palm-blocking method for me—similar to the right-hand posture of Jay Dee Maness, Bruce Bouton, and others—for many years.

- One slight disadvantage of this is that it doesn’t allow one to use one’s little finger on the first string as a reference touch-point. I think I used the rear edge of my palm on the 10th string as a touch-point when palm-blocking.

However, I recently noticed that I have unconsciously adopted Paul Franklin’s “fingertip-blocking” right-hand posture as my “go-to” hand posture for both “palm-blocking” and “fingertip-blocking”, as it seems to work for both!

- I also occasionally employ a bit of Buddy’s “hybrid” technique at times...whatever works!

That’s what has worked for me, but you should choose what works for you!

I’m mentioning this only to demonstrate that different blocking techniques can be combined and employed when needed.

FINGERPICK ADJUSTMENTS & SHAPING: Very important!

NOTE: If you are having difficulty blocking in the exercises below, you may need to adjust your picks. It may be a good idea even if you are not having difficulty.

- Why? Because effective palm-blocking seems to require a very specific angle of

the fingerpick blade.

When I learned to do fingertip-blocking (after palm-blocking for many years), I spent several hours experimenting with re-adjusting the blade angles of my fingerpicks so I could do both. I was surprised at how much difference changing the fingerpick blade angles just one or two degrees made in my picking speed and accuracy!

- I found that I needed to curl my fingerpicks around the tips of my fingers slightly more for fingertip-blocking than I did for palm-blocking.
- This makes sense because your hand is closer to the strings and rarely lifts off them when you are fingertip-blocking. Watch some videos of Paul Franklin in the Videos List at the end of the Fingertip Blocking section to see this for yourself.

Fingerpick blade-angles

From careful examination of photos and screenshots of videos, the blade-angles used by a number of steel guitar masters appear to be within a fairly narrow range, depending on if the player mostly used palm-blocking or fingertip blocking. All of the pro players seem to curve the pick-blade to match the curve of their fingertips, as can be seen in the screenshots above and the videos listed below. I posted some of these at <https://bb.steelguitarforum.com/viewtopic.php?t=298186>.

Because the different blocking techniques described above require different hand shapes and positioning above the strings: fingerpick blade-angles seem to vary depending on the blocking technique being employed...

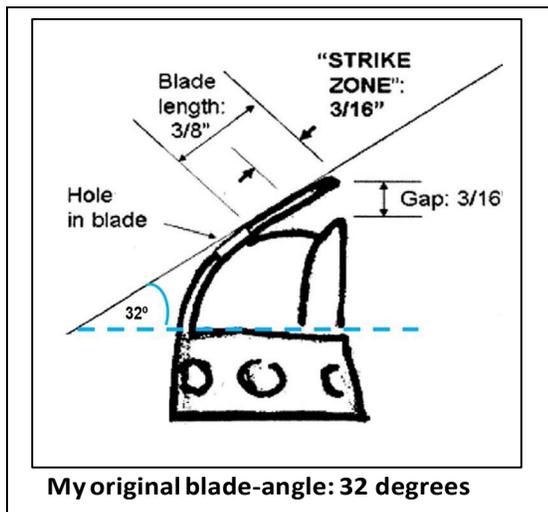
- Fingerpick blade-angles ranged between: ~26° for Paul Franklin (a “fingertip blocker”); to ~32° for Joe Wright (fingertip blocking & some palm-blocking); to ~34° for Buddy Emmons (a “hybrid” style combining fingertip blocking & palm-blocking); to ~35° for Bobby Black (mostly a palm-blocker with some fingertip blocking). I believe that the difference in blade-angles is due to how high off the strings these players hold their hands for their different picking techniques.

The blade-angles I personally found most effective for both fingertip-blocking and palm-blocking are right in the middle of that range: 33-degrees for my index finger pick, and 31-degrees for my middle finger pick, measured from the bands to the blade-angle at the end of the blade.

- These blade-angles enable the string to glide off my fingerpick blade, instead of slamming into it—which is not optimal for picking effectiveness, slows down your picking, and can cause pick noise.
- These exact angles may not work best for you, but may offer a good starting point to work from.

PLEASE DO NOT SKIP THIS STEP!

You want a blade-angle that allows the string to “glide” off the pick, and the fingerpick bands adjusted for maximum comfort and minimum slippage. Be prepared to spend 20 or 30 minutes with a needle-nose pliers, or better--a jeweler's round-nose pliers (~\$7 on Amazon) to shape your fingerpick blades just right.



Measuring the blade-angle: Make a gauge

To make a template, I use a note-card taped to a block of wood (or the inside page at the back of a book that is at least an inch thick) on which to draw the blade-angle lines with a protractor: the dashed blue line represents the bottom edge of the book (or block of wood).

- To make an initial gauge, reverse the process (start with the protractor line as shown in the diagram).

I then rest the side of the blade (without my finger in the pick, of course) on the block of wood (or book page), square up the band to the bottom of the book page, and bend the blade with a needle-nose or round-nose pliers just above the bands until the blade tip lines up with the band line.

Bill Keith offers two very useful suggestions, both which I have adopted: *"First, I like them [fingerpicks] to fit closely around the flesh of the finger. It's hard to get the bend distributed evenly around, but I like to take the time to do that with a pair of pliers. [Round-nose pliers help with this.]*

I bend the corners [of the bands] down so that they touch the fingernail, taking a little pressure off the flesh so the blood doesn't curdle in there quite so quickly. And, also in bearing on the fingernail, they gain stability; they're sort of anchored to the fingernail."

TAPERING THE FINGERPICK BANDS

As Bill Keith recommends, **taper the fingerpick bands**. I find that slightly tapering the fingerpick bands so they exactly match the taper of my fingers makes them much more comfortable--and less likely to slip off your fingers. I spend 10-15 minutes shaping the bands of each fingerpick with a taper so they fit like "little gloves" on my fingers, using a needle-nose pliers, or even better, a jeweler's round-nose pliers (used for shaping rings).

How I taper the fingerpick bands using a jeweler's round-nose pliers...



You can see how smoothly rounded the bands are, and how the tapering exactly fits the taper of my fingers--very comfortable!

Inexpensive "jeweler's round-nose pliers" only cost about \$7 on Amazon.

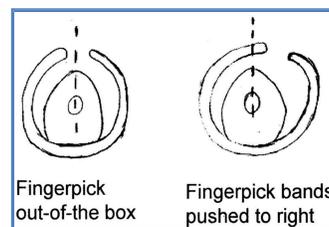
TIP: After tapering each fingerpicks to perfectly fit my fingers, I file a tiny notch on the top edge of the band of my index finger fingerpick, so I can tell which is which--even on a dark stage.

ROTATING YOUR FINGERPICKS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE STRIKING

I also adjust the bands slightly to **rotate my fingerpicks** around my finger a bit so the flat of the blade strikes the strings instead of striking them with the edge of the blade.

- I like the fuller tone (and reduced pick noise) that striking the strings with the flat of the blade seems to produce—as Wright, Franklin, and others recommend.

- To rotate your fingerpicks on your finger: After shaping the bands as described above, gently push the bands slightly off-center, as shown in the diagram.



Rotating the fingerpicks: View is from the band end of the pick towards the inside of the fingerpick

COMFORT TIP: If, after adjusting the fingerpick bands, your fingerpicks slip around on your finger or you just want to make them more comfortable, you can buy a package of self-adhesive eyeglass nose-pads at your local pharmacy (usually about \$2 for 10 nose-pads).

- Cut one nose-pad in half with an Xacto knife blade, and adhere each half to the inside of one of your fingerpicks, right where the band crosses the groove on the side of your nail.
- Now do the same for the other fingerpick with another nose-pad.

No slippage, and very comfortable to wear! These pads help to prevent painful inflammation of your fingernail grooves from lengthy wood-shedding sessions.



A **BETTER** EYEGLASS NOSE-PAD: Made of **silicone**

A couple of years ago, I started using eyeglass nose-pads made of silicone. The cushioning does not seem to wear out and they work great! Here's what they are called on Amazon: "TOODOO 18 Pairs Eyeglasses Nose Pads Adhesive Silicone Glasses Replacement Anti Slip Nosepads for Eyeglass Glasses Sunglasses (Transparent, 1mm)".

- Cut each pad in half as shown, and adhere each half to the inside of one of your fingerpicks where the band crosses the groove on the side of your nail. One pad per fingerpick.
- Current price on Amazon for 18 pairs (likely a lifetime supply) is only \$6.99!

These tiny silicone cushions not only mean that you needn't tighten your fingerpick bands so much that they hurt--**they actually make wearing fingerpicks pleasurable!** 😊



Silicone nose-pads; cut in half as shown

EXERCISE 2--Palm-Blocking With Your Fingerpicks: Ascending & descending

NOTE: Do not attempt these finger-picking exercises until you have mastered the two thumb-picking exercises (ascending and descending) in Exercise 1 above.

- Why not? Because if you are still having trouble with blocking the thumb-picked notes, it is unlikely that you will be able to effectively palm-block finger-picked notes.

Remember: Palm-blocking is simply part of the motion of lowering your hand onto the strings to REST it before picking the next note; it is **NOT** a separate

motion from that lowering motion.

- The key hand-posture is to adjust the angle of your right hand to the strings so that the edge of your palm (or curled-under little or ring finger) touches the string a millisecond before your fingerpick does as you lower your hand back on the strings.

BLOCKING CHECKLIST: If you are having difficulty with your blocking, re-check:

- Make sure the edge of your relaxed hand is resting flat on the strings and is loose and relaxed, and your relaxed thumb also rests on the strings.
- Keep your right elbow touching your ribs, and sit up straight.
- Optimize your hand's angle to the strings, so that when you lower your hand after picking, the edge of your palm touches the strings slightly before your fingerpick does.
- Make sure to do the exercises in slow-motion and figure out how to block your thumb-picked notes cleanly and consistently before proceeding to the finger-picking exercises.
- Make sure your right hand doesn't lift much more than 1/4 inch above the strings after you have picked the string, It only has to be slightly above the string—the closer the better... for economy of motion, accuracy, and speed!
- Try using a short-blade thumbpick.
- If needed for picking effectiveness or ergonomics, try adjusting:
 - a) the rear legs of the steel to tilt the steel slightly forward or back,
 - b) the height of your seat, or
 - c) the blade-angle of your finger-picks.

EXERCISE 2A -- Descending exercise for picking single notes with fingerpicks (No pedals, bar, or thumbpick are needed, just fingerpicks)

1. **Self-test:** With your index or middle finger, play string 6, then 7, then 8 with a one-second pause between each note (60 bpm), while palm-blocking before playing the next note. If you can still hear the previous note after you play the next note in the sequence, then you are not blocking effectively.
2. When you lower your hand and finger to play string 7, the right edge of your hand (or curled little or ring finger) should touch the string just before your fingerpick contacts string 7, muting (blocking) the ringing of string 6.
3. Repeat Steps 1 and 2 for string 6. Now play the sequence a bit faster (65 bpm), making sure that the previous note is always blocked before a new note is picked. You should notice the edge of your hand *appearing* to "bounce" slightly as you play each note. Make sure your right hand doesn't lift more than 1/4 inch above the strings after you have picked the string.

Check out the Palm-Blocking Instructional Videos in the Video List at the end of this Guide for more exercises.

Once you've mastered this (for that day) so the notes are crisp and clean (**repeated at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly**) and there is only one note ringing at a time, you are ready to go on to the next exercise.

EXERCISE 2B - Ascending exercise for picking single notes with fingerpicks:

1. Self-test: With your index or middle finger, play string 8, then 7, then 6 with a one-second pause between each note, while palm-blocking. If you can still hear the previous note after you play the next note in the sequence, then you are not blocking effectively and need to go to Step 2 (just two strings). Otherwise, you can skip to Step 5.
2. Repeat Step 1 for just strings 8 and 7 very slowly. When you lower your hand and finger to play string 7, the right edge of your hand (or curled-under ring and little finger) should touch the string just before your fingerpick contacts string 7, muting (blocking) the ringing of string 8.
3. Always strive for as little motion as possible when lifting your hand from the strings. Make sure your right hand doesn't lift more than 1/4 inch above the strings after you have picked the string.
4. Practice this exercise several times very slowly until you are blocking the previous note (string 8) effectively before you play the next note (string 7).
5. Now repeat the ascending exercise for strings 8, 7, and 6 *very slowly* until you can do it correctly without thinking about it. Then play the exercise a wee bit faster, like 60 bpm (one note per second). Now try it a bit faster, like 65 or 70 bpm.

Once you've mastered this for the day (**repeated at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly at each speed**), you are ready to go on to the next exercise...

- Be sure to practice Exercise 2A and 2B every day at first, increasing the tempo slightly each day by about 5 bpm, always repeated at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly.

[Check out the Palm-Blocking Instructional Videos in the Video List at the end of this Guide for more exercises like these.]

EXERCISE 3 – Palm-blocking with thumb-picks and fingerpicks

Alternating your thumb and middle (or index) finger to pick single notes—now we are getting into "real" playing!

NOTE: Do not attempt this exercise until you have completely mastered the previous exercises.

- If you are still having trouble with those, it is very unlikely that you will be able to do this one successfully!

EXERCISE 3A: Ascending exercise with thumb & middle (or index) finger:

1. Play string 8 with your thumb and allow your hand to naturally lift off the string very slightly (no more than 1/4 inch above the strings), letting the string continue to ring.
2. When you lower your hand and middle (or index) finger to play string 7, the right edge of your hand (or curled-under little or ring finger) should touch the string just before your fingerpick contacts string 7, muting the ringing of string 8 with the edge of your hand.
3. Play string 6 with your thumb and blocking string 7 with the edge of your hand.
4. Play string 5 with your middle (or index) finger after blocking string 6 with the edge

of your hand.

This T-M-T-M (or T-I-T-I) picking pattern is often called a “crossover” pattern.

Check out the Palm-Blocking Instructional Videos in the Video List at the end of this Guide for more exercises like this one.

Once you've mastered this for the day (repeat at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly), go on to the next exercise.

EXERCISE 3B: Descending exercise with thumb & middle (or index) finger:

1. Reverse exercise 3A above, starting with the middle (or index) finger on just two strings: string 5, thumb on string 6.
2. Practice this exercise very slowly several times until you are blocking the previous note effectively as you play the next note. Always strive for as little motion as possible when lifting your hand from the strings. Repeat slowly until the exercise can be done without thinking about it. Then play it a bit faster.
3. Now play exercise 3B on four strings, starting with the middle (or index) finger on string 5, thumb on string 6, then finger on string 7, thumb on string 8.
4. Practice this exercise very slowly several times until you are blocking the previous note effectively as you play the next note. Always strive for as little motion as possible when lifting your hand from the strings. Repeat slowly until the exercise can be done without thinking about it. Then play it a bit faster.

Check out the Palm-Blocking Instructional Videos in the Video List at the end of this Guide for more exercises like this one.

Once you've mastered this for the day (repeat at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly at different speeds), you are ready to go on to the next exercise...

- Be sure to practice Exercise 3A and 3B every day, increasing the tempo slightly each day by about 5 bpm, always repeated at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly.

EXERCISE 4: Palm-blocking single notes with pedal action

Alternating thumb & middle (or index) finger and using the A & B pedals...

1. Putting it all together--with the A & B pedals (ascending T-M-T-M “cross-over” pattern):
 - Play string 8 with your thumb.
 - Play string 7 with your middle (or index) finger.
 - Play string 6 with your thumb and while it is still ringing, engage the pedal that raises string 6 (usually pedal B).
 - Play string 5 with your middle (or index) finger and while it is still ringing, engage the pedal that raises string 5 (usually pedal A).
2. Play Step 1 in reverse (descending “cross-over”) sequence, with the pedal disengaging on string 5, and the pedal disengaging on string 6.

Tablature for the above two “crossover” sequences...

5.	0~0A~				0A~0			
6.	0~0B				0B~0			
7.	0				0			
8.	0				0~			
	T	M	T	M	M	T	M	T
	1-Ascending				2-Descending			

3. Practice these “crossover” exercises several times slowly until you are blocking the previous note effectively before you play the next note.
- You can also try using your index finger (instead of your middle finger) to play this little riff; either is fine: T-I-T-I .
 - You could also try T-I-T-M, as Buddy Emmons sometimes does.

If you can repeat the above single-note exercise **at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly, you have mastered it—for the day!** Be sure to play it every day at first, gradually speeding up the tempo.

...And you are ready to go on to the next exercise...

Congratulations, you are almost there!

Be sure to practice Exercise 4 every day, increasing the tempo slightly each day by about 5 bpm, always repeated at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly.

- Check out the Palm-Blocking Instructional Videos in the Video List at the end of this Guide for more exercises like these.

EXERCISE 5: Palm-blocking “chord-grips”

This is the exact same principle of blocking as you used above, but now using both fingers and your thumb at the same time to play “chord-grips”. Your hand should be loose and relaxed.

Blocking chord-grips with thumb-picks and fingerpicks.

NOTE: Do not attempt these exercises until you have mastered the previous exercises. If you are still having trouble with those, it is very unlikely that you will be able to do this one successfully.

EXERCISE 5A – Ascending chord-grips:

1. Go to the basic resting hand position, with your thumbpick touching string 8, index-fingerpick on string 6, and middle-fingerpick on string 5. This is your initial chord “grip”.
2. Pick all 3 strings in the chord “grip”, lifting your hand slightly (about 1/4 of an inch), and return to the same 8, 6, 5 chord “grip”.
3. Repeat a few times to get used to picking these three strings at once and then blocking them. Make sure your right hand doesn’t lift more than 1/4 inch above

the strings after you have picked the strings.

4. Now pick the 8, 6, 5 grip and ascend to the next chord grip of 6, 5, 4. Make sure the 8, 6, 5 grip got blocked cleanly with the right edge of your hand (or curled-under little and/or ring finger).
5. Repeat 12 times consecutively and perfectly.
6. Now pick the 6, 5, 4 grip and ascend to the next chord grip of 5, 4, 3. Repeat until you can block all the grips cleanly at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly, at slow and slightly faster tempos.

EXERCISE 5B – Descending chord-grips:

1. Now reverse the process above to practice descending chord grips.
2. Start with the 5, 4, 3 grip, then pick the 6, 5, 4 grip, the 8, 6, 5 grip in succession.
3. Repeat until you can block all the grips cleanly at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly, at slow and slightly faster tempos.

EXERCISE 5C – Chord-grips with pedal action.

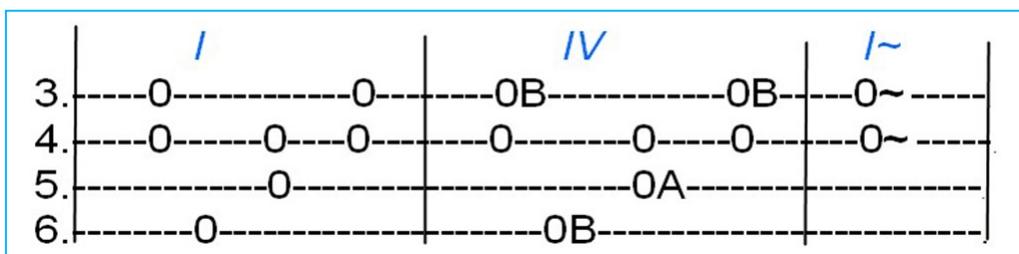
Now try adding the A & B pedals to change the chords using the same chord “grip”.

1. With no pedals engaged, play open strings 5, 4, 3, (no blocking), then while the notes are still ringing, engage pedals A&B to change the chord from E to A.
2. While pedals are still engaged, lower your hand to block them and strike strings 5, 4, 3, then while the notes are still ringing, release pedals A&B to change the A chord to an E chord.
3. Is it starting to sound like a pedal steel guitar should? 😊

EXERCISE 5D –Blocking different chord “grips” with pedal action.

Now try pressing the A & B pedals to change the chords and blocking different chord “grips”—no bar is needed.

A Buck Owens “I, IV, I” steel guitar ending lick...



All notes are blocked, unless marked with a “~” symbol (indicating a sustained note).

- This ending lick can be played as shown: “I, IV, I~”, or double-extended: “I, IV; I, IV; I~”, or even triple-extended: “I, IV; I, IV; IV, I; I~”.
- The resulting change from a I chord to a IV chord and back to a I chord, if blocked properly, should sound similar to the classic Buck Owens “I, IV, I” steel guitar ending. Listen to Tom Brumley’s ending on “Buck Owens Truck Drivin’ Man” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jcQSlyGOJK> to get a sense of the timing, rhythm, and percussiveness of the lick.
- Without using a bar, the lick changes from an E chord to an A chord, and back to an E chord. Once you have mastered this lick without a bar, try playing it in the keys of G, A, B, etc. with your bar.
- You might notice that Tom is doing a lot of this “I, IV; I” action in his solo too!

=====

Be sure to practice Exercise 5 (A,B,C,D) every day, increasing the tempo slightly each day by about 5 bpm, always repeated at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly.

If you can do all of the exercises (1 through 5) above while successfully muting the strings (at least 12 times consecutively and perfectly)...you have arrived!!

CONGRATULATIONS- You are now fully palm-blocking!! 😊 😊 😊

For fun, you might want to try learning the classic 8-second, two-measure 55 51 “chord-grip” intro that Jimmy Day recorded with Skeeter Davis on “The Devil’s Doll” (in the Videos list).

Putting it all together: Let’s play a famous solo

BONUS: Here’s an iconic solo for you to try out: “Together Again” by Buck Owens, played by the great Tom Brumley.

Buck Owens Together Again (Studio recording)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6-wKFK4sQM>

Tablature: Together again/steel break/key of C#/E9th pedal steel

– as played by Tom Brumley (tabbed by Ricky Davis)

<https://steelguitarforum.com/Forum8/HTML/000257.html>

“Together Again” was originally recorded in the key of C# because at that time (1964), Buck had his band tune down a half-step to better suit his voice: the band played in the D position, but it came out in C#, which is why the tab is in C#.

- A benefit to learning the solo in C# is that it will make it easier to play along with the YouTube videos listed below!
- The chords for “Together Again” are just I, IV, and V, and the tempo is slow.
- Almost the entire solo is played on strings 3 and 5, which makes most of the blocking easy—only the last few notes are played on strings 4, 5, and 6.

(C#)					
1.	_____				
2.	_____				
3.	9b	~9	7	~9	~9
4.	_____				
5.	9	9a	~9	7~a	~9 ~9
6.	_____				
(F#)					
1.	_____				
2.	_____				
3.	4b	~7	4b~2b	2b~2	2
4.	_____				
5.	4a	~7	4a~2	2a~2	2
6.	_____				
(G#)					
1.	_____				
2.	_____				
3.	2	2	~2	~2	~2~1b~2_2~1b~
4.	_____				
5.	2	2	~2a	2~2a~2_2~1~2_2~1~	~
6.	_____				
(C#)					
1.	_____				
2.	_____				
3.	7	~9	9b~9	7	
4.	_____				
5.	7	7	~9	9a~9	7_9 _9a~9~9
6.	_____				

“Together Again”

Listen to these recordings to hear how Brumley phrased his solo and his masterful use of the volume pedal as an “expression” pedal:

- **Buck Owens Together Again (Studio):**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6-wKFK4sQM>

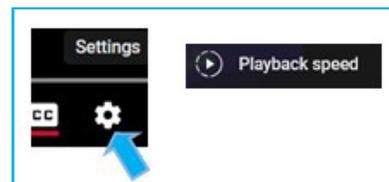
- **Buck Owens - "Together Again"** (Live): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYKVb7T1n2I>

VIDEOS LIST: Palm-blocking

Here are some videos on YouTube you may find helpful. Check out how each steel-player holds their hand, and how relaxed each one is, as well as how little upwards movement they use for palm-blocking.

DO YOU KNOW THIS YOUTUBE PLAYBACK TRICK?

You can click on the little “Settings” gear-icon on most YouTube videos to bring up a menu including “Playback speed” to slow down the video (without altering the pitch)!



Instructional Videos: Palm-blocking

Joe Wright Palm/Pick Blocking #3 (a FREE 13 minute tutorial by a master player)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3IPxVdOr9gg&t=695s>

Joe Wright is a master player—he toured with Charlie Pride for many years. Here he teaches both palm-blocking and "pick-blocking". The first 7 minutes are about palm-blocking. Notice how short his thumb-pick is—he uses the side of his right thumb to block thumb-picked notes (as Paul Franklin does), and also his left thumb (which Paul Franklin has said he does not do).

- Joe curls his little finger & ring finger under his palm to “fill in” the crease in his palm when he is palm-blocking.

Joe Wright used to charge about \$50 each for his 18 instructional videos; but a few years ago, he very generously made them available free of charge at: <https://pedalsteel.com/prt/members/video.html>

Pedal Steel Guitar Lesson with Jim Ashton

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjWKJpeG9Tw>

An excellent hour-long overview explanation to a student of how to sit at the guitar, ergonomics, blocking, grips, shaping fingerpicks, using the pedals, bar-tracking, etc.

Jeff Newman - Right Hand Alpha course sample

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nB1UIPip2iw>

I am not necessarily recommending using Jeff’s “Alpha” hand-shape and the way he avoids the crease in his palm (somewhat awkward to me and many others) starting at 0.42 minutes, but the exercises he demonstrates (starting around 12:55) are very similar to what I recommend above.

Learn to Play Pedal Steel Guitar by Bruce Bouton

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DeueCww9Qc>

Bruce’s excellent work with Ricky Skaggs put him on the map; he now tours with Garth Brooks and does recording sessions. He palm-blocks in this video with his little finger curled under his palm. He uses a short-blade Blue Herco thumb-pick on

this old video.

.....
Bruce Bouton's Neo-Traditional Country Pedal Steel Guitar Lessons

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S86_lmaXQNs&list=PL9s_xxUJxS4rWbtVw-RNZwvm_bjSt05NA
 Great close-ups of Bruce explaining how he palm-blocks. Notice that in “Highway 40 Blues”, he blocks his first string by moving the tone-bar back from the first string as he “tracks” his right-hand with the bar.

.....
Beginners PEDAL STEEL GUITAR - Video 6 - Right Hand Technique

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbEncGKqstQ>
 Scott Poley provides a pretty good explanation and demo of palm-blocking, as well as a bit of basic “pick-blocking”. Scott curls his little finger under his palm to “fill in” the crease in his palm.

.....
Right Hand Technique Simplified - Lap Steel - Troy Brenningmeyer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tq9dtS6dMs>
 Very detailed explanation of palm-blocking with some good exercises to do. Troy curls his little finger under his palm to “fill in” the crease in his palm.

.....
Picking Patterns and String Groupings | Pedal Steel Guitar Lesson – Steel Picking (Aaron Marshall)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7j8Nqw6hKU&t=461s>
 Aaron demonstrates both palm-blocking and “pick-blocking”, and provides some useful exercises using “grips”. Good close-ups of his right hand. Aaron curls his little finger under his palm to “fill in” the crease in his palm. He uses a Fred Kelly Speed Pick on his thumb.

How to Mute, Pick Block, and Palm Block on the Pedal Steel Guitar | Lesson – Steel Picking (Aaron Marshall)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWqfqOLzLc4>

Videos of master players in action: Palm-blocking

Desert Rose Band - Hello Trouble (Jay Dee Maness)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkeZqtpJMhc>
 Notice that Jay Dee uses the “flat-hand” shape (that Jeff Newman advises against), curling his ring & little fingers under his palm. Close-ups of Jay Dee’s hand @ 0:46 minutes. Jay Dee does some “fingertip blocking” too.

.....
Ricky Skaggs Live 1983 (Bruce Bouton)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPtaSFGviiw>
 Bruce Bouton’s iconic solo on “Highway 40 Blues” starts at 2:24. His solo on “You May See Me Walking” starts at 4:57. He palm-blocks with his little finger curled under his palm.

Tennessee Waltz - Anita Camarella and Bruce Bouton

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpq_unRGVI4
 In this unusual 2018 video of just Bruce on steel and Anita’s singing, he shows great technique, impeccable intonation, and superb musical taste.

Cajun Fiddle – Buck Owens

(Tom Brumley starts @ 0:34 minutes; close-ups @1:20)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZIsDN_fDQ

Tom was an absolute master of palm-blocking, Bakersfield-style! Tom keeps his littlefinger firmly extended straight out for blocking.

Lloyd Green & Jay Dee Maness "Hickory Wind"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqQ7CMJypPg>

Two great players, each using a different hand-shape. Lloyd keeps his little finger firmly extended straight out.

Lloyd Green - Bars Of Steel - Live 1980, France - RARE pedal steel guitar performance - complete

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzxzHa6c7Jc&list=RDo8pptEhFIZo&index=2>

Lots of close-ups of Lloyd's right hand in action.

George Jones and Tammy Wynette - Milwaukee Here I Come (Hal Rugg solo @1:55)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pQObXNIQvo>

Hal Rugg seems to curl his ring finger under his palm to cover that crease in his palm. I could never hold my little finger up in the air like Hal does on this video!

Jimmy Day w/ Ray Price's Cherokee Cowboys - Liberty Drive 1961

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8pptEhFIZo&list=RDo8pptEhFIZo&start_radio=1

Jimmy palm-blocks with a loosely extended, relaxed little finger.

Willie Nelson Jimmy Day - Fraulein

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSbmahCNwwk>

Jimmy Day – The Devil's Doll, Skeeter Davis [Audio only]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyAB03U6Ydo>

This is the song (really just the 8-second intro) from which I learned how to palm-block. I spent many hours over several days working on this simple two-measure 55 51 "chord-grip" intro that Jimmy Day recorded with Skeeter Davis, trying to block each note cleanly. It seemed almost impossible at first, and then when I finally learned it, I wondered why it took me so long. It's all about "muscle memory"!

- Jimmy's playing on this entire album ("I'll Sing You A Song, and Harmonize Too") is a master lesson of how to play steel guitar supporting a vocalist:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6RIqmUXAXPAohFpek-13z_tLlvuIP1xE

Bobby Black improvises an instrumental

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGaMma2ap0U>

Bobby changes from curled-under little-finger to loosely extended, relaxed little-finger, and often pick-blocks as well. Close-ups of Bobby's hands @ 1:07 minutes.

Doug Jernigan "Eight Days A Week" Steel Solo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvxiz57N6CE>

Doug has a very unusual way of "palm-blocking" (extending his little-finger straight out, and anchoring his hand with his ring-finger) that I find impossible to do—but it sure works for him!

John Hughey (R.I.P) / Laney Hicks - My Baby's Gone - Operation Russless

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9W0i-OuL80>

John was a great steel guitar player, known for his work with Conway Twitty, Dickie Betts, The Time Jumpers, and Vince Gill.

"IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT"– Time Jumpers (with John Hughey)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbacmmKvdeA>

John curls his ring finger under his palm for blocking, and loosely extends his little finger as a reference point on the first string. Notice how relaxed his right hand is, and his excellent economy of motion, even on this up-tempo song.

My Weakness Is Too Strong – Time Jumpers (with John Hughey)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnjHc_-hpk&t=178s Good close-ups of John's right hand.

Tony Goodacre Duo featuring Sarah Jory on pedal steel guitar - Highway 40 Blues

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JI3COTJbNAI>

Some very fine, very fast palm-blocking from UK-based Sarah Jory.

Curly Chalker

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4w-A3klF4dY>

(Curly's front neck is C6; his back neck is E9.)

Buddy Emmons on his best - SS Cool

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55W8kMDm6_w

Buddy Emmons has a unique way of blocking that is a hybrid between palm-blocking and fingertip blocking (aka "pick-blocking") in that he uses the edge of his hand to palm-block thumb-picked notes and ascending finger-picked notes; and the tip of his ring finger to block descending finger-picked notes ("fingertip blocking").

(For fun, check out Buddy's impossible "bar-spinning" trick from 5:27 to 5:44!)

Buddy Emmons in Japan 1982 with great Jazz Band. "Little Darlin' ~Gonna Build a Mountain"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w43Rdp3TI-4>

A lot of great close-ups of Buddy's hands and body posture.

The Texas Troubadours -- Cool It -- Buddy Charleton, Leon Rhodes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViY2WXvVXYU>

A lot of close-ups of the great Buddy Charleton's right hand. Charleton appears to be using Buddy Emmons' "hybrid picking" technique—a combination of palm-blocking and "fingertip blocking".

Buddy Emmons & Hal Rugg Live @ Bell Cove (2002)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGb9XLFY6C4&t=3209s>

Two great players. Lots of close-ups of their hands.

Tom Cattin by The Great Tom Brumley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2wVuEmWopc&pp=ygUMVG9tIEJydW1sZXkg>

Tom Brumley had a unique right-hand posture for his excellent, percussive palm-

blockingtechnique. Close-ups of Tom's right hand at 0:36 minutes.

Barbara Fairchild & Brian Sklar - If It Ain't Love Let's Leave It Alone - No. 1 West(Outro) - 1988

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iGuU8ao9UA>

I believe the steel guitar player in this video is Rob Anderson, a Canadian. At 1:11 minutes, he does some very fast, very clean palm-blocking!

I Love You Because (Gary Carter on the pedal steel guitar)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztXiyTEpifc>

Gary plays great steel with Connie Smith and Marty Stuart.

Eastbound and down_Rick Wright_Gary Carter_Sundowners

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4qjOkXagbU>

Gary Carter seems to be using Buddy Emmons' "hybrid" picking style here.

Tommy White 7 Steel Guitar

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-U9emNhzdNs>

Tommy is a Grand Ole Opry staff and recording session steel guitarist. In these short clips, he uses both palm-blocking and fingertip blocking.

Ricky Skaggs & The Whites Austin City Limits 1988

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRbjlqzujCM&t=2263s>

A lot of great close-ups of Terry Crisp on steel in this hour-long video.

Hank Snow - The Countdown 1966 (Jimmie Crawford on steel)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lwqEAd3VFo&list=RD7lwqEAd3VFo&start_radio=1

Jimmy Crawford palm-blocks with his little finger extended straight-out and his ring finger lightly anchored to the first string.

He did a lot of percussive "chicken-picking" with this technique.

1997 SMJ Russ Hicks & Jimmie Crawford

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HW2zTxEIVN8&list=RDHW2zTxEIVN8&start_radio=1

Russ Hicks palm-blocks with his little finger and ring finger curled under his palm.

Russ and Jimmy play some amazing harmony parts together, even on very fast tempo material.

FINGERTIP BLOCKING (a.k.a. "Pick-Blocking")

Fingertip-blocking explanation: Paul Franklin

Paul Franklin explains, in one of his videos below, that "***fingertip blocking***" is a much more accurate description than "pick-blocking" for his innovative technique—because **blocking with just the picks is only part of how he mutes the strings.**

Paul's resting hand shape...



- Notice how the back side of Paul's thumb rests on the lower string he has just thumb-picked, to block it when he is ascending to higher-pitched strings?
- Notice how Paul keeps his ring finger and little finger "wedged" together--with the fingertips just slightly forward of his middle finger and resting on the strings, ready to block any higher finger-picked notes as he is descending to lower-pitched strings?

Paul has said that he developed his "fingertip blocking" technique because he couldn't learn to palm-block. So, if you're still having difficulty with palm-blocking, you can try "fingertip blocking" instead. It worked out pretty well for Paul, didn't it? 😊

Here's how Paul explains "fingertip blocking"...

In Paul's "Tackling Blocking" post on his blog, he explains "fingertip blocking" in just 54 words:

"For the ascending lines across ten strings, the backside of the thumb blocks (the previous note)..."

When picking descending lines moving across the ten strings I use the fronts of the 'webbed' fingers to accomplish the muting....

For the ascending lines across ten strings, the backside of the thumb blocks in the same fashion"

<https://www.paulfranklinmethod.com/post/tackling-blocking>

Paul's Picking and Blocking Technique – Paul Franklin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFumqjf8dRs>

At 0:58 minutes, Paul demonstrates the basics of "fingertip blocking" with great close-ups starting at 0:59 minutes. You can see how he uses the "backside of the thumb" to block thumb-picked notes when ascending.

The Do's & Don'ts of Pick Blocking – Paul Franklin

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBPXH2-AX_0

Paul explains why a more accurate name for "pick blocking" is "***fingertip blocking***".

At 0:42, he explains how he blocks finger-picked notes with the tips of his ring and little fingers: "***Wherever my middle finger goes, my ring and little fingers follow—because they are all 'webbed' together.***"

Pedal Steel Guitar Lesson: Bluegrass Ending Licks (Paul Franklin)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-QtjySISFY>

Paul demonstrates a couple of bluegrass licks, with very tight close-ups. You can see how he uses the side of his thumb to block thumb-picked notes. These are great practical exercises to do.

Sounds simple, doesn't it?

- It is, but that doesn't mean it is easy! Teaching your fingers to block with their fronts or tips is just part of the challenge.

- Because Paul employs his three fingers like a Scruggs-style bluegrass banjo player does, he has spent many, many hours practicing what he calls picking “permutations” (what bluegrass banjo players call “roll patterns”)--so he doesn’t have to consciously think about which finger will play the next note.

EXERCISES FOR "FINGERTIP BLOCKING": Paul Franklin

I'd suggest watching Paul Franklin's three short videos listed above to see exactly how he does his “fingertip-blocking”.

- Then slowly and methodically go through the five palm-blocking exercises described earlier, using "fingertip blocking" instead of palm-blocking.
- After you have mastered those, then you might try some of Paul's more advanced "fingertip blocking" exercises shown in the videos listed above.

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PAUL FRANKLIN'S ONLINE COURSES

And, of course, Paul's rather inexpensive online instruction courses contain a number of exercises and drills to help you with “fingertip-blocking”, along with a lot of other very valuable information on playing pedal steel:

A LIST OF PAUL FRANKLIN'S COURSES: Currently 13 courses are available; each course contains from 30 minutes to 46.5 hours of pre-recorded lessons.

<https://www.mmmlearn.com/collections?category=franklin>

One of his courses that covers “fingertip-blocking” is his **“Foundations: E9 Pedal Steel Basics with Paul Franklin”** course (4 hours), which *includes*:

PICKING AND BLOCKING

- Warming Up Your Right Hand
- Picking Exercises: The Arpeggio
- How To Practice H.O.T.R.S. TAB PDF
- **Intro to Blocking The Strings**
- **Pick Blocking**
- **3-Element Blocking: Tommy and Buddy**
- **Picking and Blocking Exercises**

More detail on this course at: <https://modernmusicmasters.com/paul-franklin-e9-foundations>

- **Cost is just \$99 for 14 months.**

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Another of his courses that covers “fingertip-blocking” is his **THE PAUL FRANKLIN METHOD**: (46.5 hours) A complete Course in E9 & C6 Pedal Steel Guitar. Learn how to play, the right way . . . right away. Access a library of over **560** instruction videos!

It *includes* the same lessons as the “Foundations” course (plus much, much more):

PICKING AND BLOCKING

- Warming Up Your Right Hand
- Picking Exercises: The Arpeggio
- How To Practice H.O.T.R.S. TAB PDF
- **Intro to Blocking The Strings**
- **Pick Blocking**
- **3-Element Blocking: Tommy and Buddy**
- **Picking and Blocking Exercises**

More detail on this course at: <https://www.mmmlearn.com/courses/the-paul-franklin-method-e9-c6>

- Cost is \$49 per month.

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If you have any questions before you purchase one of these courses, you can ask them via the chat function on the course description web-pages listed above.

[NOTE: I do not receive anything for promoting Paul's courses; but I have heard very positive things about them, and his free samples above certainly seem very clear and very well done.]

Videos of Paul Franklin in action

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Barbara Mandrell - Satisfied (& Old Time Religion), 1972 [with a young Paul Franklin]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYXoJsRq0m8&t=102s>

.....
Barbara Mandrell - Show Me [with a young Paul Franklin]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ts7NcMPQ_to

Mark Knopfler - Walk Of Life (A Night In London | Official Live Video [Paul Franklin]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeNUq-rf2fw>

Paul Franklin plays a fantastic extended outro with several extreme close-ups, starting at 4:05.

Pick It Apart- Mark O'Connor (Studio version)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKNEHlpPtjw&list=RDfKNEHlpPtjw&start_radio=1

Paul Franklin's incredibly fast solo begins at 1:09. (I clocked it at a blistering 190 bpm!) Hearing this tune caused me to decide to try to learn how to do "fingertip blocking"—because I couldn't imagine how anything could be played at this tempo with palm-blocking!

Best country band ever, Mark O'Connor & New Nashville Cats - American Music Shop - "Pick It Apart" (Live version)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJkBnt8Uww8>

Paul Franklin's solo begins at 1:10, with several close-ups of his right hand. I clocked this live version at a very speedy 183 bpm!

Instructional Videos: Fingertip-blocking (Other players)

How to Play this Bakersfield Intro on Pedal Steel. Dale Rivard

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rij4fAUZkwI>

Dale explains step-by-step how to play an intro from the Vince Gill & Paul Franklin "Bakersfield" album, using Franklin's "fingertip blocking" technique.

Volume 4--Blocking Basics, [Pick-Blocking] Joe Wright (40:15 minutes)

<https://pedalsteel.com/prt/members/flash/v4/v4.html>

Joe is a master player—he toured with Charlie Pride for many years.

Joe uses the side of his right thumb to block thumb-picked notes (as Paul Franklin

does) at 16:01 minutes, and also uses his left thumb in front of the tone bar to block (14:30 minutes).

Joe often blocks his descending finger-picked notes with his left hand middle finger behind the tone bar or with the front of his right-hand ring finger curled under his palm (17:31 minutes). Joe demonstrates a number of basic exercises to learn his pick-blocking technique.

(NOTE: Joe's technique is very different from Paul Franklin, who uses the fingertips of his right-hand ring and little fingers to block middle-finger picked descending notes, and has said that he doesn't use his left hand for blocking.)

Volume 16—Pick Blocking. Joe Wright (52:40 minutes)

<https://pedalsteel.com/prt/members/flash/v16/v16.html>

Joe uses the side of his thumb to block ascending thumb-picked notes (as Paul Franklin does) at 7:23 minutes. Joe uses his right hand index finger to block descending thumb-picked notes at 8:45 minutes. Joe blocks his descending finger-picked notes with his left hand middle finger behind the tone bar, or with the front of his right-hand middle finger (42:10 minutes) or index finger (45:21 minutes). Joe demonstrates a number of basic exercises to learn his pick-blocking technique.

(NOTE: Joe's technique is very different from Paul Franklin's, who uses the fingertips of his right-hand ring and little fingers to block middle-finger picked descending notes.)

Joe Wright's Pedal Steel Technique Supercharge #8. (37:07 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zV57exErhgE>

Numerous drills and exercises to practice pick-blocking--using thumb, index and middle fingers in various combinations.

The most important exercise to learn for beginning pedal steel guitar players! PickBlocking 106 - Johnny Upok

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1d1if2v-XYU&t=3s>

Johnny demonstrates "pick-blocking" step by step.

(NOTE: Instead of using the his ring and little fingertips to block notes picked with his middle finger as Paul Franklin does, Johnny uses the front of his middle finger.)

An entire **FREE 2-1/2 hour seminar** on how to play the pedal steel:

Joe Wright Seminar 2006 @ Scotty's

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5c30VeceU&t=464s>

Master player Joe Wright demonstrates "pick-blocking" starting at 6:45, and palm-blocking at 9:05. He describes some advantages of "pick-blocking" at 9:55, and why you should learn both. He also demonstrates some picking drills & exercises that he uses himself.

And there is much, much more in this seminar than just blocking instruction!

Joe is an excellent teacher, and you can learn a lot from this video about how Joe mentally approaches playing pedal steel guitar!

.....
Joe Wright's Seminar 2007 Part 1 (47:49 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jw4Q1jQXBVo>

Joe goes into right hand techniques, left hand techniques, scales, pedal movements and more.

(NOTE: Joe's technique is very different from Paul Franklin's, who uses the fingertips of his right-hand ring and little fingers to block middle-finger picked descending notes.)

Barbara Mandrell: The World's Most Famous Unknown Band [Not instructional]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAGdt9d92Q&list=RD1IAGdt9d92Q&start_radio=1

A bunch of the hottest pickers ever...and then at 1:40 minutes, Barbara Mandrell takes a pick-blocked solo on the C6 neck that is "hotter than a two-dollar pistol"!

Barbara has said that she learned "pick-blocking" from Norm Hamlet, who had learned it from Vance Terry, a legendary California pedal steel player. Here's a little-known fact: Barbara began playing pedal steel with professional country bands and on television when she was only 13 years old!

APPENDIX

Additional details on Buddy Emmons' "hybrid" picking technique

 Originally posted by me on SGF, 2017-11-17

<https://bb.steelguitarforum.com/viewtopic.php?t=323447>

Here's my understanding of how Buddy Emmons did his blocking (muting) and anchoring, based originally on a column that Mr. Emmons wrote in Guitar Player magazine many years ago, and later reinforced by seeing him play live--and also in close-ups on YouTube.

In his GP column, Buddy said that he used the tip of his right hand ring-finger to block notes played with his middle finger as he descended to a lower string, and used the edge of his hand to block his thumb-picked notes and finger-picked notes as he ascended to a higher string.

Here is a quote from Buddy Emmons (that I believe came from his GP column) on how he utilizes his palm and third finger to mute the strings:

"I use (pick with) the thumb and second finger, muting with the palm edge and third finger. There are two occasions for using the palm edge. One, when picking with the thumb, and the other when going from a lower string to one higher. When going from a high string down to a lower string I always use the third finger to mute."

 Ernie Renn (a very good steel guitarist and personal friend of Buddy's) described it this way on the SGF in 2001: "Buddy does use the tip of his ring finger to block notes played by his middle finger and the fleshy part of the side of his hand for the other ones."

<https://steelguitarforum.com/Archives/Archive-000005/HTML/20041212-5-001997.html>

 And in this 2012 thread, there's a quote from Mike Cass, (who played steel guitar for Ray

Price and was a personal friend of Buddy's): "Buddy gets the middle finger notes blocked with the tip of his right ring finger. It trails along with his middle finger and also gives him a nice popping/ compressed sound.

Another thing, when Buddy plays a triad with the strings laying next to each other (ex. 4, 5 & 6) he doesn't usually pick all three notes. Instead, he brushes the lower 2 notes with his thumb and picks the highest with his middle finger. This thumb brushing is a technique I've also seen Jay Dee Maness use a number of times."

<https://bb.steelguitarforum.com/viewtopic.php?t=222631&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=0>

.....
When asked to compare his method of blocking to palm-blocking, Buddy replied:

"The full benefits of conventional blocking [palm-blocking] require an open hand so all areas of the hand are close to the strings. Curling the pinkie and third finger under lifts the palm slightly higher, reduces the blocking area of the palm, and prohibits the use of the third finger for blocking.

I use the palm for thumb notes and keep the third finger close to the second to block second finger notes with it. The addition of the first finger for notes requires a slightly different technique, but still requires an open hand."

("Ask Buddy", Re: Blocking, Date:10 May 2002, http://www.buddyemmons.com/board_toc.htm)

TIPS FROM BUDDY EMMONS ON "ASK BUDDY"

CROSSOVER PATTERN (for a four-note sequence): Buddy Emmons

When asked on "Ask Buddy" how he played a three or four single string sequence, Buddy replied: "I use the thumb and two finger method for three string groupings and for four note crossovers, T, 1, T, 2 and reverse the sequence coming back."

("Ask Buddy" Re: Picking approach, Date: 02 May 2002, http://www.buddyemmons.com/board_toc.htm)

.....
Re: Practice

From: Buddy

Date: 25 Mar 2002

Even though I practice a lot in my head, if I don't have some sort of physical contact with the guitar over long periods, my thumb tires quickly and becomes lazy, which in turn throws the timing off.

When it becomes a problem, I resort to a couple of 'chop builders' I used to suggest in seminars. One is to pick any open string, place the bar where it will be a unison note with the string and repeat the following pattern with the thumb and second finger until tired: TT2T22T2, or reverse it: T2TT2T22.

A metronome is essential because if you don't have the discipline of steady time, you'll slow the pattern down just to be able to play the notes properly. Better to start at the speed you can do it without problems. Also work on the lower strings as well. Your hand doesn't rest on the strings when playing low notes, so it becomes a bit more difficult to play the pattern.

For blocking and bar control, I play open strings 4 and 5 on the C neck and ascend one fret at a time up to the twelfth fret. Then I descend back down until I get to the open position again. Without stopping, the next time jumps to two frets up to the twelfth fret and down and then three, and finally four. Over the entire series, you cover chromatic, whole tone, augmented, and diminished patterns.

The thumb and finger pattern is 2T2T2T2T, etc. When you're comfortable, reverse it and start with the thumb.

By approaching long layoffs in that fashion, I find it easier to recoup through this routine than trying to get it back by playing songs. They are patterns that pop up frequently in my playing, so for me it's best to isolate them and get right to the source of the problem. You might want to study the patterns you use in your playing and set up your own thumb and finger sequence using the same open string technique.

("Ask Buddy" Re: Practice, Date: 25 Mar 2002, http://www.buddyemmons.com/board_toc.htm)

=====

Videos with close-ups of Buddy Emmons' right hand

Buddy Emmons - J.D. Maness

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bpoke1wt0cU&list=RDBpoke1wt0cU&start_radio=1

Many shots of Buddy playing fast single notes with just his thumb and middle finger...and making it look completely effortless!

Buddy Emmons on his best - SS Cool

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55W8kMDm6_w

Close-ups start at 3:02. (And Buddy's crazy bar-spinning trick starts at 5:29.)

Buddy Emmons - Johnny Bush - Darrel McCall - Pick Me Up On Your Way Down

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPh39y0UrPY>

Laney Hicks & Buddy Emmons (A Love Like This/Nameless Shuffle)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0wqgAS8xD0>

NASHVILLE STUDIO MUSICIAN(S) BUDDY EMMONS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIXaj4GWam8>

Advanced picking & blocking exercises

These advanced picking & blocking exercises were contributed by a SGF member who has asked to remain anonymous.

- He is a very accomplished steel guitar player, and toured for many years with several well-known Nashville artists.
- He personally likes to practice these exercises on a 10-string practice board tuned to E9, and recommends this as a good use of time for players who can't sit at their steel guitar for hours.
- I really appreciate this very accomplished steel guitar player taking the time to write all of these exercises out for inclusion in the Blocking Guide.

We are blessed to have some very helpful great players in the Steel Guitar Forum community like this gentleman!

From our anonymous SGF member/contributor...

"Some comments to help ground the reader/player regarding the purpose of these particular exercises:

- *They are all submitted together because they incorporate elements that are intended to help the player master some basic techniques and then build from them. For*

instance, Joe Wright advocated that a player should master the ability to start several licks with any digit (thumb, index, or middle finger).

- This group of licks doesn't incorporate ALL of those elements, but they are a good start. If there's enough interest I can submit more.

Secondly, the licks are designed to be musical when utilizing open strings (because I utilize a Practice Board with open E9th tuning) which helps me with retaining my attention.

Thirdly, these licks are designed to be practically useful for a lifetime. (I made notes next to some that indicate where you can hear some of them.)

Lastly, they are designed to help develop Palm, Pick, and Hybrid picking. From personal experience, a player needs smaller grouped licks to gain dexterity for any of the techniques -this group of exercises enables that."

Comments about each lick/phrase:

- **Forward Roll:** this lick starts with the thumb and it's a very useful lick with A&B pedals, and pedals A, B and the D lever (that drops the 4th & 8th strings a half-tone).

Handwritten musical notation for Forward Roll on a six-string guitar staff. The staff is numbered 1 to 10. The notation is as follows:

- Line 1: Forward Roll
- Line 2: (empty)
- Line 3: (empty)
- Line 4: (empty)
- Line 5: (empty)
- Line 6: M M (Repeat)
- Line 7: I I I
- Line 8: T T T
- Line 9: (empty)
- Line 10: (empty)

- **Reverse Roll:** This lick starts with the middle finger, same pedals/lever as the Forward Roll

Handwritten musical notation for Reverse Roll on a six-string guitar staff. The staff is numbered 1 to 10. The notation is as follows:

- Line 1: Reverse Roll
- Line 2: (empty)
- Line 3: (empty)
- Line 4: (empty)
- Line 5: (empty)
- Line 6: M M M (Repeat)
- Line 7: I I I
- Line 8: T T
- Line 9: (empty)
- Line 10: (empty)

- **Combo Roll:** Same comments as the Forward Roll

1 Combo Roll
2
3
4
5
6 M M M (Repeat)
7 I I I
8 T T T
9
10

- **Emmons Style Banjo Roll:** on pedal steel with the E9th tuning the player would engage the A&B pedals in the pedals down position or use the lever that drops the second string a half-tone in the non-pedal position.

1 Emmons Style Banjo Roll
2 M M M
3 I I (Repeat)
4 T T T
5
6
7
8
9
10

- **4-note Roll (A):** Starts with the thumb, the alternate version (B) is a way to build on Joe Wright's philosophy of using any digit at any time

(A) 4-Note Roll
4-note M
I (Repeat)
T T
5
6
7
8
9
10

- **4-note Roll alternate (B):** Starting to build on the basics and expand the repertoire.

③ 4-Note Roll (alternate)

1 M
2 I
3 (Repeat)
4 T T
5
6
7
8
9
10

- **4-note Roll expanded (C):**

④ 4-Note Roll expanded

1 M M M M
2 I I I I M
3 I
4 T T T T T T T T (T)
5
6
7
8
9
10

Either note is good practice

- **Joe Wright Style Banjo Roll:** starts with the middle finger, pedal and lever combinations are the same as the previous rolls

① Joe Wright Style Banjo Roll

1
2
3
4
5
6 M M M (Repeat)
7 I
8 I I T T
9
10

- **Joe Wright Style Banjo Roll (alternate):** starts with the index finger, pedal/lever combinations are the same as previous rolls

(B) alternate

- **Whiskey River Lick:** starts with the index finger, on E9th the player would engage the A,B, & lever that drops string #2 a half-tone, you can hear this lick on Johnny Bush's track of Whiskey River and "a thousand other recordings".....there are other licks in the group that utilize this....

Whiskey River Lick

- **Franklin style lick:** Paul used this on his track of Nervous Breakdown when the song went to a minor, this can be used in several situations.

Franklin Style Lick

* Do the first 6 notes sound familiar? (Whiskey River)
 * Do the last 5 notes sound familiar? (4-note expanded Roll)

Can do this lick with A-pedal as a minor lick
 Very similar to one on Nervous Breakdown

- **Backwards Rake:** starts with the middle finger

Backward Rake

1
2
3
4 M (Quickly & clearly)
5 I
6 T
7
8
9
10

- **Backward Rake Expanded:** this is to master moving you hand backward slightly to pick each 3-string group, the player needs to master this as it is written AND in reverse fashion---start with strings 6,7,8, and move up to strings 5,6,7,, then 4,5,6, then 3,4,5 to master moving the hand forward for each group

Backward Rake Expanded

Ⓐ as written below
Ⓑ Start with the last (3) notes and go up the groups

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10

How to beat the “Forgetting Curve” and learn faster

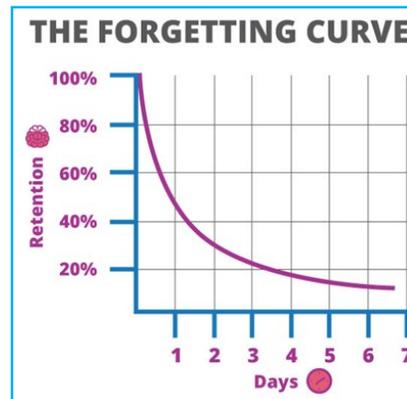
How quickly do we forget new information?

Dr. Ebbinghaus’ “Forgetting Curve” shows that we forget over 40% of new information within an hour, and without systematic reviewing, about 90% is forgotten within the first seven days!

- Our retention of new learning works out to a “half-life” loss of nearly 50% per day—unless you regularly and systematically review it!

More information: “The forgetting curve” (McGill Teaching and Academic Programs):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpAq9EZpL5A&t=64s>



Dr. Ebbinghaus’ “Forgetting Curve”

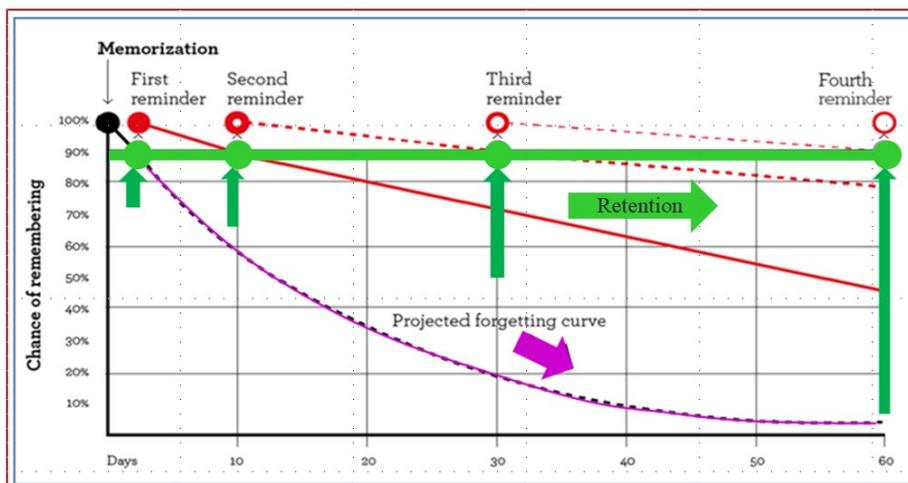
How to retain new information more effectively, based on scientific research...

Here is a effective, systematic way to retain new information with “spaced repetition” to counteract the “Forgetting Curve”, that I recommend to my music students.

- A **proven method** of combating The Forgetting Curve for complex musical skills is a “spaced repetition” review schedule.

A “**spaced repetition**” review schedule involves a variable daily practice schedule to improve your retention of new information and counteracts the projected “Forgetting Curve”, as shown in the above diagram:

- An ideal basic daily practice schedule is to review and practice a new musical skill within one hour after learning it, then every day for a week, then fewer days the next week, etc.
- A “spaced repetition” review schedule increases your “Chance of Remembering” and counteracts the projected Forgetting Curve, as shown below...



A generic “spaced repetition” review schedule of periodic “reminder sessions” increases your retention of new skills--and counteracts the projected “forgetting curve”

As can be seen in the above diagram of a (generic) “spaced repetition” review schedule, the green arrows show how each reminder session “pulls” the newly learned information back up to your “top of mind” (green line), and increases retention (green arrow) at a high level.

- For more generic information: “The Spacing Effect: How to Improve Learning and Maximize Retention” (Farnam Street Media): <https://fs.blog/spacing-effect/>

Musical skills are complex

However, because much of the research on the Forgetting Curve involves simple tasks, like memorizing lists of nonsense words--not the complex fine-motor skills and major brain activity needed for playing a musical instrument—it may require more closely-spaced repetition for a musical instrument review/practice schedule than what is shown in the generic “spaced repetition” review/practice schedule shown above.

For more specific information: “**How to Use Spaced Repetition in 3 Minutes**”, Karl Avillo, M.D. Karl explains how a “spaced repetition” review schedule helped him get through medical school (which I understand is almost as complicated as playing a pedal steel)! ☺
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_TWGOxz8X4

SPACED-REPETITION REVIEW/PRACTICE SCHEDULE	Number of Review or Practice sessions each week								
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9
Skill to practice:									
EXERCISE 1- Blocking Thumb-Picked Notes	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0	1
EXERCISE 2--Palm-Blocking With Fingerpicks		7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
EXERCISE 3 - Palm-blocking with thumb-picks and fingerpicks			7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Suggested schedule: Week 1: 7 days; Week 2: 6 days; Week 3: 5 days; etc. to Week 7: 1 day. Then Week 8: 0 days; Week 9: 1 day, Week 12: 1 day, etc.									

Example of a “spaced repetition” review/practice schedule

I used Excel for readability in this Guide, but you could just draw one by hand in a notebook or on graph paper—which is easier, quicker, and works just as well!

- As shown in the example above, little dots (or tally-marks) have been marked on the chart to indicate how many review/practice sessions you did that week, to keep you “on track”.
 - The seven small red dots in Week 1 represent the seven days you practiced Exercise 1 during that week.
 - The three small red dots in Week 2 represent the three days you have practiced Exercise 1 and 2 during so far this week.
- Spacing “variability”: When you get to Week 7 where you practice Exercise 1 just once that week, after that you skip Week 8 and practice it once in Week 9, then skip two weeks, then three weeks, etc. between weekly practices.

The big advantage of a variable “spaced repetition” Daily Review Schedule

The big advantage of a variable “spaced repetition” Daily Review/Practice Schedule is that when you learn a new skill, you might review it every day for the first week, but only six days in the next week, and five days in the week after that--so that over time you do not end up with 50 things to practice every day every week forever! ☺

Making a systematic “spaced repetition” review/practice schedule:

If you make a list of the skills you need to practice, then put it on a written review/practice schedule (in your notebook, for example), you can then mark off what you’ve reviewed and practiced each day—and help you meet your learning goals more effectively and quicker.

- This systematic “spaced repetition” review schedule will probably help you accelerate your learning significantly—and you’ll never need to wonder “*What should I practice today?*” 😊

YOUR FEEDBACK AND SUGGESTIONS ARE WELCOMED

This Blocking Guide is provided free of charge...

All I ask is for you to please provide some feedback if it is helpful or not, and any suggestions you may have to improve it.

- I can be reached via “Private Message” on the Steel Guitar Forum.

May I ask you for a big favor?**Please support the Steel Guitar Forum with a donation...**

Think about this--If there had not been a Steel Guitar Forum to connect steel guitar players around the world, this Blocking Guide would not be available to you.

- Because the non-profit Steel Guitar Forum relies on sales at the SGF store and donations to keep the lights on, I am going to ask everyone I am sending this Blocking Guide to, that they donate to the Steel Guitar Forum by clicking on the “**Click Here to Send a Donation**” button at the top right of the SGF web-page.

How much to donate to the SGF?

In the mid-1990’s, when I wanted to learn how to pick-block, Paul Franklin’s audiotope course was temporarily unavailable, so I purchased a pick-blocking videotape for \$50 from another instructor, and a pick-blocking booklet from a third instructor for \$25—neither of which I found very helpful.

- That was \$75 (about \$150 in 2025 dollars) of mine “down the drain”.

On the other hand, based on the feedback I have received so far, many Forumites are getting quite a bit of value from my Blocking Guide.

So, considering the “value for money” aspect, please be generous in your donation to the SGF.

- Of course, I get no money from your SGF donations—I just want to keep this great music forum going!
- I’ve heard from one Forumite that he donated \$200 to the Steel Guitar Forum upon receiving this Guide—that’s the spirit!
- I would greatly appreciate it if, when you are donating to the SGF, you mention my Blocking Guide in the box marked “*Add a note to your donation.*”

Will you please give generously to the Steel Guitar Forum?

Thanks,
Dave Magram