

It's Not You, It's Your Strings

One of the most daunting things about acoustic guitar ownership is the prospect of constant upkeep. Many people like the way a guitar can be used as a tool to express their inner rockstar, but are often pushed away by the image of a guitar string snapping or having to tune your strings over and over again. Someone could have an old hand-me-down that looks sleek and enticing but have no idea where to start because it had old or broken strings. You want that new and fresh sound a recently purchased guitar has. There are so many options to choose from. Finding and replacing guitar strings are often the first things a student needs to decide on. You can put your pride aside and ask someone at a music store to do it for you, or you can be self-dependent and do it yourself. Here's how you can find that special tone you are looking for so you can get that dusty, old, attic-ridden guitar back in action.

Finding Your Strings

You have decided to string the guitar yourself. The issue is, you don't know which one to get. Where do you start? Well, that depends on what type of player you are.

Gauge



A string gauge is an easy place to start as it will mainly determine the overall feel against your fingers. This is the diameter of your string. They generally range from sizes between extra light, custom light, light, medium, and heavy. The lighter the gauge, the slimmer the string.

Tip: Some guitar models only allow for a certain string gauge - it affects the overall tension of the guitar. Smaller guitars with thinner bodies will normally need lighter options.

Light gauges are going to be a popular choice for people who are starting out because they are easier to fret (to push down on) as well as bending and add alteration to the sound. This feature also makes lighter strings more popular in styles of music that use a long of bending, such as rock, blues, and country, but obviously one can experiment with these styles of strings in a variety of songs. It's often used with fingerstyle as it allows for ease of pressing the frets and creating sound out of a softer connection with the fingers.

Heavier gauges will be used more often as the player becomes more proficient and develops calluses on the finger pads. While experienced players may opt for a lighter gauge for the reasons previously mentioned, a wider diameter string will create a more resonant and loud sound. It's for players who live playing in a more aggressive style, maybe with fast strumming or heavy plucking. They are more suited for live performances as it isn't as reduced in sound. It's good for rock, metal, bluegrass, and other styles that may want more texture or layers.

Tip: Heavier strings normally stay in tune longer than lighter strings, increasing the amount of time between not just tuning sessions, but replacing the strings as well.

Windings



Roundwound

Halfwound

Flatwound

All guitar strings have a circular structure like most wires, but some of them have little ribbed edges along them. That is the string winding, and they can provide some benefits and disadvantages along with the different sounds they produce.

Roundwound windings are the most common on the market. They have a distinctive ribbed edge. If you were to take your guitar pick and scratch along the string, it would sound a lot like a washboard. The texture allows for a better grip than other windings. They do have more wear and tear on the frets, as oils can get trapped in between the windings. They're popular with most styles.

Flat-wound windings are the opposite as they are smooth to the touch. There is less grip on the strings, which could be a benefit depending on the style you like. You won't have the common sound of your fingers rubbing along the strings when moving along the fretboard. Because they are smooth, they do last longer as the natural oils are easier to wipe off. They suffer from a lack

of grip on the fingers which might be better or worse for you, depending on the type of player you are. This style of winding is most popular in jazz music but can be found in other styles too.

Half-wound windings split the difference between the two, offering a smooth feeling of the flat wound while also having some texture in the strings. It isn't as grippy but still provides some for those who need that. Its qualities tend to vary between flat and round wounds.

Material

Guitar sound can be significantly altered based on what the strings are made out of. Certain styles of music often sound better with a different material that you are using. If you have been looking for a certain sound that you haven't been able to emulate on your instrument, experimenting with this can help you get closer to that noise you're looking for. There are many different materials, with new ones being used all the time.



Nylon guitar strings have a long history, being used in the classical style since the string material was changed from animal intestines (called catgut). They are the most common style for beginners as they provide a soft texture feel, and they are made of a cheaper material. They have a much different sound and purpose than steel/bronze-stringed guitars. Classical music, mariachi, jazz, and other older styles use nylon strings.

Bronze is one of the main materials you'll see on acoustic guitars along with a steel core, and 80/20 bronze strings are a good representation of why. These strings are technically brass, being 20% zinc (hence the name), but regardless they have been a classic choice. It can also be found in a different ratio, such as 85/15. They were one of the first materials used, originating around the 1930s. You can see it in a variety of genres as they hold a deep and rich history. They offer a bright and shimmering sound, with great harmonics for playing single-note.

Phosphor bronze is an updated and refined version of the bronze strings. They offer a better tone for chord playing, as well as having the benefit of lasting longer than 80/20. These are a great beginner strings due to their durability and versatility. Originating around the 1970s, they are accommodating for rock and country styles. Chord-heavy styles will benefit more from these.

Tip: It's important to mention some strings may also apply an extra coating onto them for better preservation of the strings. An example is D'addario's Phosphor Bronze XT strings - where an extra coating is applied to the outside to prevent the player's natural oils from mixing with the metals.

Nickel bronze is for people looking for a sound less reliant on the strings of the guitar. People often use these strings to extenuate the overall sound of a guitar, as they can provide great overtones and resonance. It provides suitable sound for unplugged performances and as a lead ensemble member.

Silk and steel are unique styles of string, as they have a much softer presence than the other materials. Rather than a loud attack, it has a subtle entrance upon playing. They would provide a great sound for someone who plays fingerstyle. Their feeling is more like nylon strings, providing a softer feel than bronze-based strings. A beginner could use these if they are having problems with pressing the harder strings down onto the fretboard.



It's a Start

Every single string setup can be utilized in a way you create. Not all strings have to conform to a certain style. Try experimenting with different string windings, materials, and gauges. Many guitarists believe their string preferences are like their taste buds - after a while they begin to prefer a different sound or tone. It becomes so much of a problem that they simply buy another guitar or two to have another string type on! Nonetheless, with the knowledge beforehand, picking out your new strings won't be as random or confusing. You might even begin to recognize the difference when listening to some of your favorite artists.

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