

# How to buy an inexpensive beginner's guitar - 9 things you must know first

by John Chamley

So..... you, your friend or relative want to learn guitar and need to go guitar shopping. Hopefully you'll want to find a good guitar teacher too, because that can save you a lot of valuable time if you are serious about this.

In this simple guide I'll help you to take the stress out of guitar buying and avoid disappointment. This is written particularly for anyone looking to buy a first guitar who wants to find the right instrument to learn on. Even if you plan to visit a music store and ask for their help, having some knowledge about guitars before going there will help you to feel comfortable so that you can make an informed decision.

## *Here's what I'll answer:*

1. What type of guitar is best for a beginner?
2. What size guitar do I need?
3. What type of wood is good?
4. Where's the best place to buy?
5. Is it better to buy new or get a little better used guitar?
6. Where should you NEVER buy from?
7. What accessories do you really need?
8. What things should you check and ask about when buying in a store?
9. How do you look after a guitar?

## 1. What type of guitar is best for a beginner?

Below are three basic guitar types. There are other special types but the ones below are the instruments that you will typically buy as a first instrument.

Oh..... and by the way, if you are thinking about learning *bass guitar*, I recommend getting some experience with a standard 6-string guitar first. Playing bass will make more sense after learning chords and melody lines first.

Here are the types...

### Acoustic guitar:

“Acoustic guitar” usually means a steel stringed guitar. These have been around since the early 1900’s and they are probably what most people think of when using the term “guitar.” They have a sound box with a top, back and sides that resonate to amplify the sound without electronics. The advantage of these guitars over classical guitars is that they produce more volume because of the higher tension and brighter sounding steel strings and the typically larger body.

Acoustic guitars come in a variety of shapes and sizes such as dreadnaught, jumbo and grand auditorium. These terms refer to the shape and size and the one that you choose is a personal preference. One thing to note is that the bigger the body size will generally produce more volume and deeper sounding guitar.

### Classical or nylon string guitar:

These type of guitars in the past had gut strings. These days they almost always have nylon strings or nylon fibers wound with metal. Although they are acoustic guitars in the sense that they have a hollow body that amplifies and projects the sound acoustically, we usually save the term “acoustic guitar” to mean steel stringed guitars.

The characteristic sound of classical guitars is more mellow and is usually associated with classical music, but sometimes jazz, pop and other types of music.

Since these guitars have thicker nylon strings, compared to thin steel stringed guitars, they are often favored as a beginner’s guitar because they are easier on the fingers.

### Electric guitar:

Most electric guitars have a body made of solid wood with a neck attached. By themselves they produce quite low sound volume. They generally have magnetic pickups with coils that generate an electrical signal that’s sent to an amplifier.

There are also other hollow-bodied and semi-acoustic guitars with magnetic pickups that tend to be grouped together with solid bodied guitars. Although it’s fine if you decide to learn on an electric guitar, my recommendation is to learn on an acoustic or classical guitar first. You can learn how to get different sounds out of an acoustic without relying on electronics.

If you decide to buy an electric guitar as a first instrument, just make sure to look out for the same issues that I’ll explain up ahead.

**Warning:** Cheap electric guitars with tremolo arms are usually terrible. They are hard, or impossible to tune and the arm is just another distraction for a beginner.

## Acoustic electric guitars

Just a note about a popular type of guitar called Acoustic Electric or Classical Electric: These are Acoustic or Classical guitars that have a built in pickup and pre-amplifier built in to connect with an amplifier. It's important to realize that you are buying extra components that increase manufacturing cost.

Manufacturers will try to use very cheap electronics on cheaper instruments. My experience is that cheaper Acoustic Electric guitars sound awful when plugged in as well as when not. **You are better off spending the same money for just an acoustic guitar. It will probably sound better not having those features in a beginner guitar.**

## 2. What size guitar do I need?

When we talk about guitar size there are two things to consider, scale length and body style.

### Scale length

Scale length refers to the distance over which the strings are suspended between the nut on the headstock and the saddle on the main body. The chart below shows full size scale lengths established by manufacturers for various types of guitars.

Guitar Type	Scale (inch)	Scale(mm)
Classical	25.59	650.00
Classical Long	25.98	660.00
Martin Standard	25.34	643.64
Martin Short	24.84	630.94
Fender Electrics (Strat or Tele)	25.50	647.70
Gibson Electrics	24.75	628.65
Guild Acoustics	25.63	650.88

Various smaller scale options are offered by different manufacturers based on these sizes, such as  $\frac{7}{8}$ ,  $\frac{3}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{2}$  size.

For most adults a full size guitar is likely to be best, although if you have smaller hands and arms a smaller instrument may suit you better.

## Body Type

Body type refers to style. There are numerous acoustic, classical and electric guitar styles.

*Modern classical guitars* are built to the designs of Antonio de Torres Jurado (1817-1892) and mostly all have similar dimensions and proportions.

*Steel stringed acoustic guitars* came into existence in the early 1900's and the most popular "Dreadnaught" style was created by Martin Guitar Company and has been copied by many other manufacturers. There are other established styles such as Grand Concert, Grand Auditorium and Jumbo. Players choose their personal preference but for the beginner, a sensible choice is probably a dreadnaught style because many are produced and it's easy to find a well priced playable instrument. Those who make it past the beginner stage can then wander into the magical world of guitars and choose a better instrument.

The most important thing to consider with **scale length** and **body style** is whether you can reach the frets easily with the left hand without raising your elbow. If the person playing has to raise their elbow then this is going to create tension in your shoulder. A visit to a guitar store will be beneficial to determine the best instrument.

## 3. What type of wood is good?

There are all kinds of tonewoods available. For example sides and back may be rosewood or mahogany with tops of spruce or cedar for traditional classical guitars. There are many other options these days and it comes down to the type of sound that appeals to you. As a beginner you can certainly listen to someone playing the various guitars and decide if you like it or not.

With inexpensive instruments however, the tops back and sides are typically made from a laminated material, while more expensive instruments use solid wood. The laminated instruments usually have less resonance, but are more durable. Starter guitars don't have to be expensive or need to use fancy woods. In fact for children it's probably best to start with a more durable instrument.

The most important thing for a starter guitar is for it to be well made, set up for ease of playing, and have a pleasant sound.

## 4. Where is the best place to buy?

These days we have many shopping choices and it's certainly convenient to buy online. I frequently do. However if you don't have a good idea about what you want and have very little or no experience buying guitars, then I don't recommend it for a first time buyer.

You might save a little money if you are lucky, but there's also a risk that you'll be disappointed with what you receive and it ends up costing you in wasted time that you could spend playing.

If you still want to buy online, it's a good idea to ask a guitar teacher or other experienced guitarist to check the instrument when you receive it. Even name-brand instruments sometimes have problems.

## 5. Is it better to buy new or get a better used guitar?

It might seem like a good idea to look for a nicer used guitar, but I don't recommend that for a beginner. There is a chance that you may be buying a guitar with wear and other problems that could possibly cost more than the guitar's value to repair. With a new instrument you'll probably have the option to return it within a certain time period. You may also want to consider paying for some kind of insurance. I remember one of my students had a Yamaha where the head stock wood separated. Luckily it had a warranty and they were able to return it to be fixed. However I usually feel that it's worth taking the risk for an inexpensive instrument.

Once you have more knowledge of guitars and know what you like, then you may want to consider buying a good second hand instrument.

## 6. Where should you NEVER buy from?

**Toy stores don't have knowledgeable staff or good instruments.** All instruments bought from toy stores that I've seen were terrible. It's tough telling parents that they unwittingly spent too much money on something that is actually a terrible unplayable musical instrument.

## 7. What kind of accessories do you need?

**Here are some essential items:**

1. Guitar tuner (clip on chromatic tuners work well especially if you'll be playing around other players. Other tuners with built in microphones are nice to have in the practice area.)
2. A hard case is the best protection, or a well padded gig bag (with straps to carry like a back-pack) makes carrying around easy.

3. Metronomes are valuable pieces of equipment that can help to develop good timing and track progress (start slow & work up to speed).
4. Music stands keep music directly in front of you while sitting upright with the guitar: They encourage better posture while playing.
5. An extra set of strings is good to have in case you break one or for when it's time to change.

## 8. Things to check and ask when buying in a store?

- Examine the fit and finish of all components (look at all edges and joints).
- Make sure that the guitar top is nice and flat (no ripples).
- Check that fret ends are nicely finished and not protruding.
- Check that action is not set too high around the 12th fret.
- Check that you can press on the 1st fret easily.
- Play each fret of each string checking for fret buzz or dead notes.
- Ask someone to play the guitar and compare the sound with other guitars. Do you like the sound?
- Compare the sound of several guitars of the same model that you've chosen and see if any stand out as better sounding and playing instruments.
- Ask about the warranty and where you can find details of what's covered.
- Can the guitar be returned for a full refund or exchanged if you or your guitar teacher don't like it?

## 9. How do I look after a guitar?

1. The number one enemy of guitars is heat. DO NOT LEAVE CLOSE TO A RADIATOR OR LEAVE EXPOSED TO THE SUN, ESPECIALLY THROUGH A WINDOW.
2. Keep the guitar in its case or gig bag and away from heat to protect it from the elements.
3. Keep the instrument clean and discourage children from playing while eating candy.
4. Change strings periodically to maintain a good sound.
5. Clean off the surface with a damp cloth.

Useful links:

[guitarinrealtime.com](http://guitarinrealtime.com) - comprehensive method of learning guitar

[guitar-lessons.us](http://guitar-lessons.us) - find a guitar teacher (US only)