

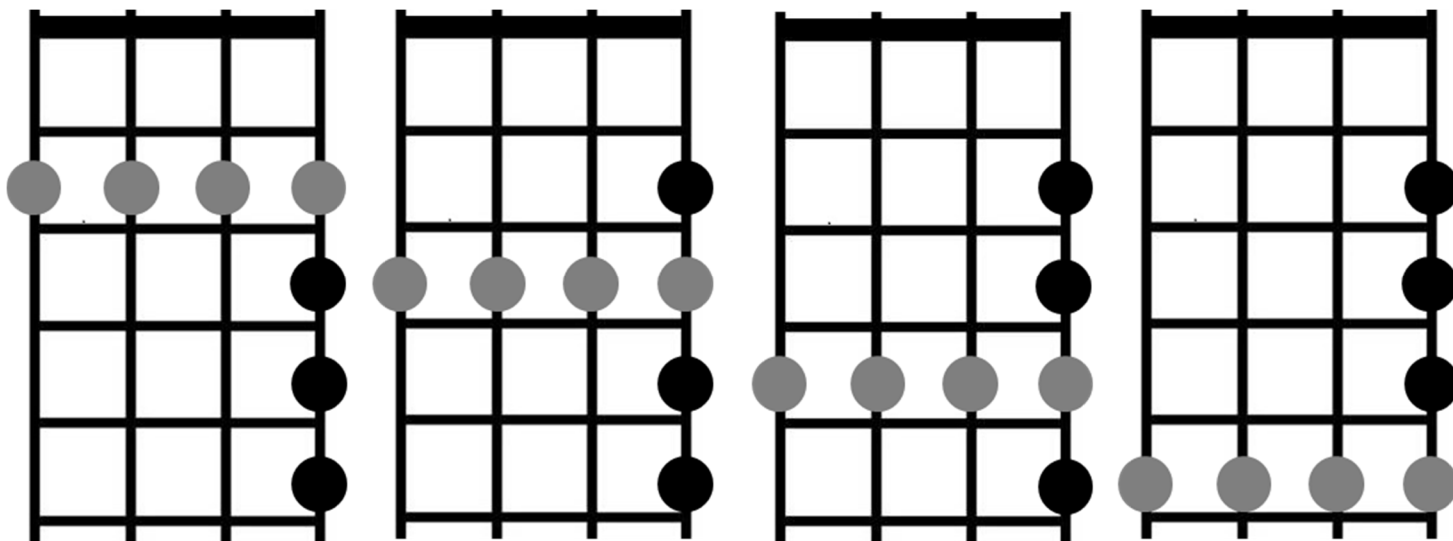
Plectrum banjoists are generally not noted for stellar fretting hand technique; playing block rhythm chords and chord melody doesn't exactly demand it. In my own efforts to go *past* chord melody (which depends in large part on *stellar fretting hand technique!*), I have always relied on more-difficult and technical worked-up solos to develop my fretting hand. Lack of proper technique is a major stumbling block to playing this more-difficult music; develop the necessary *technique*, and the *music* will follow.

I have recently discovered some simple exercises that are quickly transforming my playing like never before; I call them "finger isolation" exercises. The basic idea of finger isolation is that you take 1, 2, or 3 fingers out of the equation by, well, *isolating* them—keeping them busy by holding down one or more notes and forcing the remaining fingers to do all the work. Not only do you get more effective exercise for the over-worked fingers, but the isolated fingers quickly learn they are not invited to this particular party and will relax. In addition, your hand is forced to stay in a good "ready" position throughout the exercises. The overall effect is vastly improved fretting hand position and finger independence, allowing for increased speed and accuracy. These exercises are *tuning non-dependent*; they work perfectly on all tunings (tenor, plectrum, ukulele, guitar, etc.), and could of course be used on all fretted instruments; they are *physical* rather than *musical* exercises.

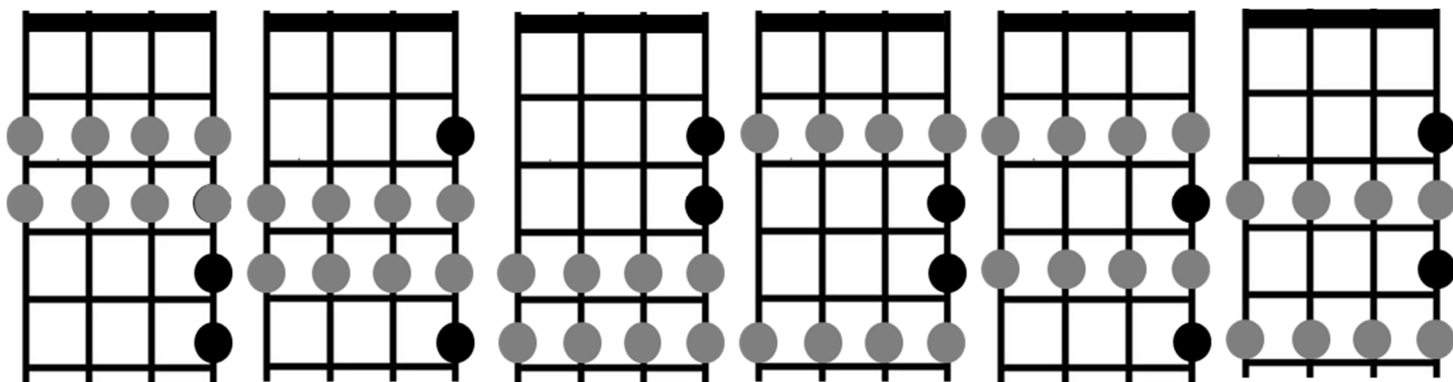
Even though these are fretting hand exercises, they are also an opportunity to work on two-handed coordination; picking the notes also guarantees that your fretting technique is clean and accurate (no "fat-fingering" allowed!). Use down-up-down-up picking throughout, even when switching between strings; strive for tonal clarity at all times. **Important note:** The resulting "melody" is not important, and will vary with your particular tuning and what fret you start on; again, these are physical exercises, not musical. By using a metronome (as in the video examples, available on YouTube here: <https://youtu.be/VCVc5R65EJ0>), you will gain a third benefit of working on your sense of time!

All of these exercises are shown on the 2nd-5th frets, but that doesn't really matter; if you have difficulty reaching that far, move up to the 10th-13th fret; as your flexibility improves, move down one fret at a time until you *can* play it as shown. And yes—within your own physical limitations—this *will happen*.

The first exercise uses one finger, while isolating the other three (see illustration). First, place all of your fingers on the first string, each to a fret; be sure to arch your fingers (make a claw). Next, lift your index finger and place it on the 2nd string (same fret). Now play this pattern: 2nd string/1st finger—open—3rd string/1st finger—open—4th string/1st finger—open; next, play back up to the first note. Now play the same physical pattern with the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th fingers, as shown here (see video).



The next exercise uses two fingers while isolating the other two; first, place all four fingers on the first string as before. Now, while holding down the 3rd and 4th fingers, play (on the 2nd string) 2nd finger—1st finger—open—(3rd string) 2nd—1st—open—(4th string) 2nd—1st—open—play back up to first note. Next play the same pattern with *all* of the two-finger combinations shown below (see video):



The last exercise uses three fingers while isolating one finger at a time, with the same basic idea of the two-finger exercise (see video).

Additional notes:

- Strive to keep your fingers arched and as close to the strings as possible; another positive result of the finger isolation is that your fingers *can't* be lifted too far, and your hand is forced to keep a good position. The eventual goal of course is to be able to use this good hand position and finger efficiency at all times. I myself have always struggled with these things; in the short time I have been doing these exercises, my playing has improved dramatically.
- This is *supposed* to make your forearm muscles burn! As with any physical exercise (musical technique can be quite physical), the pain will diminish as you continue to literally *wake up* your underused muscles and condition them. The burn should serve as a reminder that you haven't really used your fingers very much before; you have muscles you didn't even know you had!
- If you have never before practiced single-note technique of any kind, these exercises will obviously be awkward at first; *that is reason enough to do them*. Just because you *can't* do something *at first* doesn't mean you *can't ever* do them! Physical improvement = better playing = more fun! And don't think you don't need single-note technique for playing the plectrum banjo—*because you do!*
- The dexterity and strength developed through these exercises will obviously make chords easier to play, and *new* chords easier to learn. Forcing your fingers to do these strange things will make them much more compliant to your wishes and musical needs!
- Once learned and *mastered*, practice them until your forearm burns—then take a short break (shake out your hand)—then *do it again*. The *longer* you practice them of course, the *better* you'll do them, the *less* your muscles will complain, and the *more benefit* you'll get from them.
- It is always a good idea to use a metronome! For these exercises, I recommend you set it at 80 bpm to start with. When they are mastered at this speed, bump up the metronome to 85 bpm and repeat, etc. Obviously, the only "speed limit" is your advancing skill, coordination, and desire! Just know that "slow and precise" easily beats "fast and furious" in effectiveness.