

How to Buy a Guitar

(From: *How to Play the Acoustic Guitar*, Lawrence G. Beekman, © 2001)

Before you begin to play, one minor detail is that you should have a guitar. This section is for those who do not have a guitar, or who want to find out if the instrument they have is going to be suitable for them.

1. Nylon Strings or Steel Strings

The first thing to consider is that there are two types of acoustic guitars: Nylon string (classical) guitars and steel string (folk) guitars. In addition to the strings, you should be aware that they have a few other important differences. (Note: you don't have to play only classical music on a classical guitar, or only folk music on a folk guitar).

1. Unfortunately, there is a little pain involved with learning the guitar. The left hand fingers will be pressing down on the strings. This can hurt, at least until the fingers get toughened up (this doesn't really take too long). However, nylon strings don't hurt the fingertips nearly as much as steel strings when you are learning. For this reason, if a student has no guitar when they start, I usually try to steer them toward a classical guitar.
2. Classical guitars have a wider neck than folk guitars. If you have large fingers, this can be a big advantage (it is sometimes hard for people with large fingers to get them between the strings on the narrow steel string neck). If you have small hands, of course, you might be more comfortable on the folk guitar neck. Another consideration is that for the finger-style technique (see "How to Play the Guitar, part 1" for an explanation), the wider neck is an advantage.
3. Sound is a very subjective thing. The point here is not to say that one is better, but just to point out that they sound very different. You really need to hear both types to decide which you prefer. Keep in mind that if you ask a guitar player which is better, they are going to be biased toward one or the other. For example, a folk guitarist might describe steel string guitars as sounding "bright" and nylon string guitars as "dull". A nylon string player, on the other hand, would probably describe folk guitars as sounding "tinny", and the classical guitar as having a nice "warm" tone.

The most important thing to know is that there is no correct answer; you have to decide for yourself which type you prefer. I personally prefer to play (and the sound of) the classical guitar.

2. Quality of the Instrument

The soundboard is the most important piece on the guitar. It can be either a solid piece of wood (usually spruce or cedar), or laminated. In general, solid top guitars sound better at first, and also sound better with age. But, they are also more expensive, and unfortunately, more fragile. For a first guitar, laminated top guitars are perfectly adequate.

3. Some Important Things to Check

1. Cracks in the wood (there shouldn't be any!).
2. Tuning gears: do they work? When the gears are turned, the corresponding string's pitch should change (see "How to Tune the Guitar").
3. Strings: they should be no more than two or three months old, or it is impossible to tell what the guitar should sound like. Old strings tend to sound very dull, and can make a good guitar sound bad.
4. Bridge: Is it coming up? Sometimes, especially on used guitars that have been sitting around a long time, this can happen. There should be no gap between the bottom of the bridge and the guitar's top.
5. Neck: Is it warped or bowed? Hold down the sixth string at the 1st fret, and at the 12th fret. It should not touch, but on the other hand, it should be very, very close to all the frets it passes over.
6. Action (how high the strings are from the neck):
 - Nylon string: 1/8" to 5/32" from the bottom of the bottom of the 6th string to the top of the 12th fret.
 - Steel string: 3/32" to 1/8" from the bottom of the bottom of the 6th string to the top of the 12th fret.
7. Intonation (or, can the guitar be tuned?): harmonics (see p. 68) and fretted notes at 12th fret should match. If one string is off, it is probably a bad string. If several are off, on the other hand, it is probably a bad guitar.