

Guitar

The Basics

Column #25 – What Is Economy Picking?

This question comes up all the time with my students, both new and experienced. It seems nobody quite understands the function of economy picking or how to use it. So this lesson will be devoted to introducing you to the whole concept and how it can be employed in practical fashion.

Economy picking is a technique employing a principle that is called "**economy of motion**". Economy of motion is basically using motion in an efficient way - no matter what you are doing - it doesn't just apply to music. However, since we are learning music here, and guitar specifically, we'll focus on how this practice applies.

Basically, when you are moving from one string to the next, you do not pluck individual strings, you literally drag the pick across the string into the next string, much like a strum stroke, but slowed down. When you strum a chord, you don't pluck each string individually, you drag the pick across all six strings, both in your down stroke (lower notes to higher notes) and in the up stroke (higher notes to lower notes). Slow that process down so you can hear each individual note ring out, one after the other, but without changing how you are dragging the pick across them, and you have basically played an arpeggio, because you hear each note individually through the process of strumming the strings slowly.

Play any Barre chord you wish. Drag the pick slow enough across the strings to hear the individual notes of the chord. There you go. Economy picking is a controlled application of this principle.

As with anything you are learning, the first thing you do is figure out what you're being asked to play, without tempo constraints. Then you work to smooth it out at a slow tempo. You need to **put everything to the metronome** so you can make sure you are playing smooth and flowing. Remember, you can't play new stuff "at speed", and shouldn't try. Simply work the parts out and increase tempo as you are able to bring the technique forward with you, in a relaxed way with a little tension in your fingers and even your arm and upper back and neck. The way you learn a thing is the way you'll do it. If you learn with tension, you'll play with tension. And you'll be exhausted when you are done. Don't do this! Relax and just take your time to learn. It will happen.

The first example of this technique is to actually play an arpeggio. This is where economy picking (also known as "sweep picking") really comes in handy. This is how I began my process of learning the technique.

You're going to play an **A major 7 arpeggio**. As you may recall from **Lesson 16**, an arpeggio is simply the action of playing a chord one note at a time across multiple strings.

The directional motion of the pick really helps to make playing arpeggios easier and more fluid once you get it down.

When you move from one string to the next, if your pick is already moving in that direction, you **continue the motion**. So basically, you are alternate picking (down and up with every stroke), except where it is more economical and efficient to continue the same motion when moving to the next string. Whether ascending (going up in pitch) or descending (going down in pitch), when you move from one string to the next, if your pick is already moving in that direction, use that same motion, that movement, to play the next note on the adjacent string.

This next exercise is a **three note per string run** (mostly) in the key of **G minor** to show how you can use this when soloing. This makes moving to the next string a bit easier when picking because the last note you pick on the 6th string will be a down stroke, and the first note you play on the 5th string is also a down stroke; the last note you pick on the 5th string will be a down stroke, and the first note you play on the 4th string will be a down stroke. There is one anomaly, you will be playing four notes on the 4th string, both ascending and descending. Pay attention to the fingering on the 4th string section.

The benefits of economy picking cannot be over-emphasised. However, to be fair, sometimes just straight ahead alternate picking is better for the flow and sound of a run than the "proper technique". If you examine the playing of many renown players, you will see that they are not always strict adherents to this model. That said, let's continue...

For the third example, a cascading run in **G Pentatonic minor** with the economy picking technique employed. Some pull-offs help make this run flow pretty smooth - and save you a bit of picking in the process. This is actually just a pattern on the part of your picking hand, so pay attention and you'll find it is actually pretty easy.

This next lick is a strict arpeggio that you can play with a lot of the "sweep" thing going on. Here it is basically an **A minor** chord. Play through this slowly to work out the mechanics of motion, how your picking hand must operate to make this flow smoothly. And your fretting hand, too, will need to get comfortable with the motion expected.

4 2 1 2 1 4 2

□ □ □ □ □ ∇ □ ∇ ∇ ∇ □ □ □ □ □ ∇ □ ∇ ∇ ∇ ∇

T 8 12 8 10 9 10 9 10 8 12 8 10

A 12 10 9 10 12 10 9 10 9 10 10 12

B 12 10 9 10 12 10 9 10 9 10 10 12

The next example has you picking only the first note on each string: down strokes when ascending, and up strokes when descending, but picking the very last note (which could be played using a pull-off if you wish).

1 4 1 3 4 4

□_H □_H □_H □_H □_H ∇ □ ∇ □ ∇ ∇ ∇ ∇ ∇ ∇ □

T 8 11 8 11 8 11 8 10 8 10 8 11 8

A 8 11 8 10 8 10 8 10 8 10 8 10 8

B 8 11 8 10 8 10 8 10 8 10 8 10 8 11 8

The next example is going to show you two ways to play the same passage. First, the "tried and true" alternate picking approach most players use

The image shows a musical score for guitar in 4/4 time. The top staff is a treble clef with a melody. Fingerings are indicated above the notes: 4 2 4, 3 1 4, 3 1 1 3, 4 1 3, and 4 3. Below the melody is a picking pattern consisting of a sequence of 'V' (down) and 'v' (up) strokes. The fretboard diagram below shows the string and fret positions for the melody: T (10 8), A (10 8), B (9 7), and then 9 7 \ 5, 7, 7 5, 7 5, 7 5, 7 5, 7 5, 7 5, 8 5.

The second is the "economy" picking approach. You decide which is more efficient in the long run. Give yourself time to learn and play both relatively well. Don't cheat!

The image shows a musical score for guitar in 4/4 time, identical to the first score. The top staff is a treble clef with a melody and fingerings: 4 2 4, 3 1 4, 3 1 1 3, 4 1 3, and 4 3. Below the melody is a picking pattern consisting of a sequence of 'V' (down) and 'v' (up) strokes. The fretboard diagram below shows the string and fret positions for the melody: T (10 8), A (10 8), B (9 7), and then 9 7 \ 5, 7, 7 5, 7 5, 7 5, 7 5, 7 5, 7 5, 8 5.

As you can see, there can be benefits to playing in a strictly "alternate" picking way. But there are obvious advantages to "economy" picking. As mentioned before, many players mix the two techniques, depending upon what they believe is the best approach to a given passage. Arpeggios are obviously economy picked for the smoothest execution. But lead lines are not always so obviously cut and dried, "this one should be alternate picked", and "this one should be economy picked". You have to decide for yourself.

If you are coming late to this economy approach, be patient. You are trying to change a process you've been using for years. It will not happen overnight. And when you're jamming? You will in many ways revert to what you know, what is familiar. So during slow runs, try to remember to modify your "natural" inclination and use the economy approach. But remember, this will take time. I speak from personal experience.