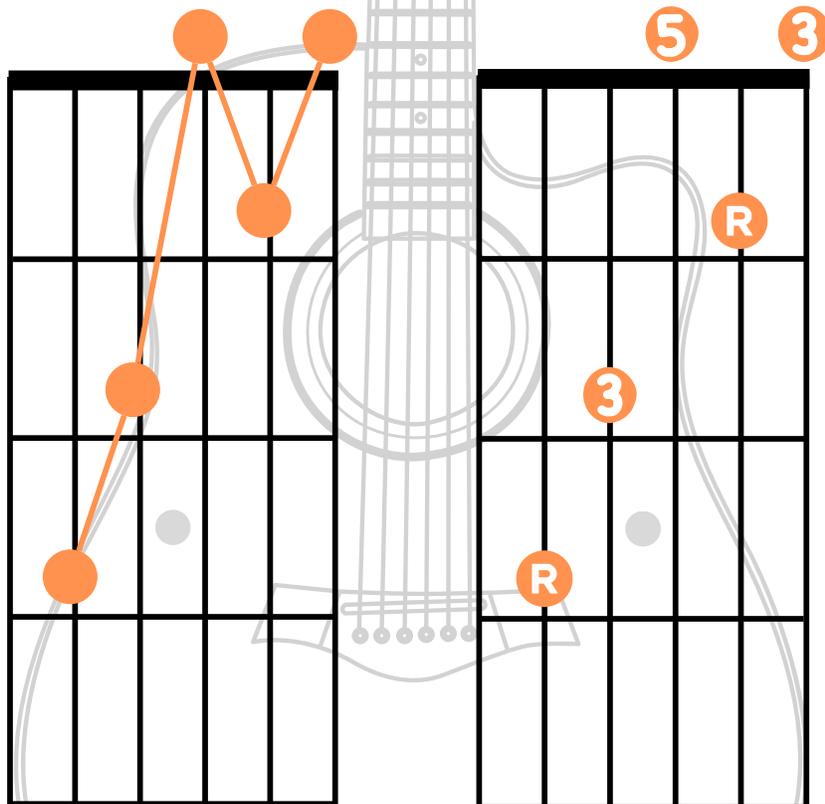


CAGED System

Fundamentals

The Shapes Explained

A visual guide to understanding chords across the fretboard and making sense of this.



Fernando Ruiz

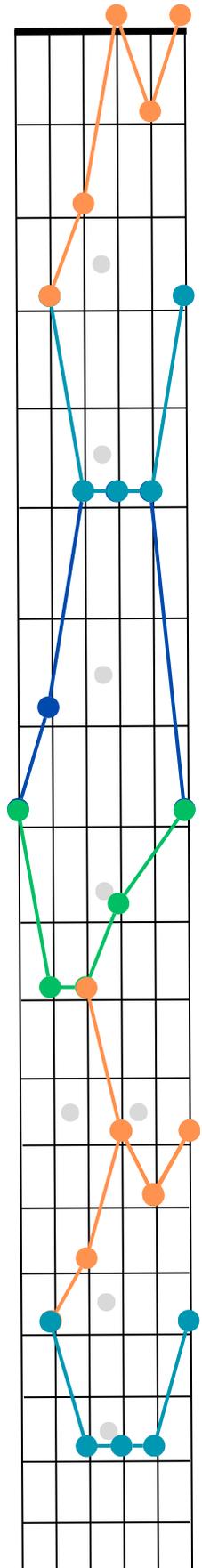


Table of Contents

- **Introduction to CAGED Fundamentals**
 - **What CAGED is and why visualization matters**
 - **Major Chord Construction**
 - **Roots, 3rds, and 5ths explained**
- **The C Shape: Filling in the Gaps**
 - **Moving beyond the basic triad**
 - **Understanding scale degrees**
- **It's All About Context**
 - **Seeing groups across the neck**
 - **How shapes connect**
- **Unlocking the C Shape**
- **Unlocking the A Shape**
- **Unlocking the G Shape**
- **Unlocking the E Shape**
- **Unlocking the D Shape**

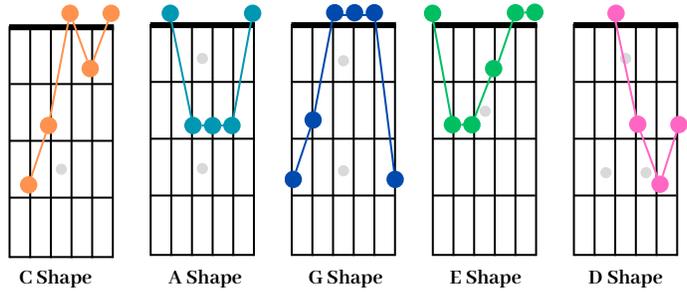
Reminder: The main goal of learning the CAGED system is to clearly visualize chord shapes and notes all across the fretboard.

Introduction to CAGED Fundamentals

CAGED is a system for organizing notes on the fretboard. It's a map that uses five familiar open chord shapes—C, A, G, E and D—to show how the notes and chords of any key are connected up and down the fretboard. Once you can visualize the shapes, the neck stops feeling random and starts making sense. It's not just about notes and chords: CAGED makes it easier to learn how scales, arpeggios, and chords are built. In short: if you want to break free from open chords, CAGED is for you.

Visualization

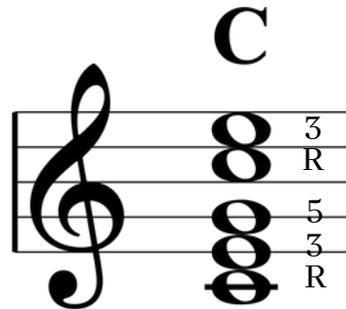
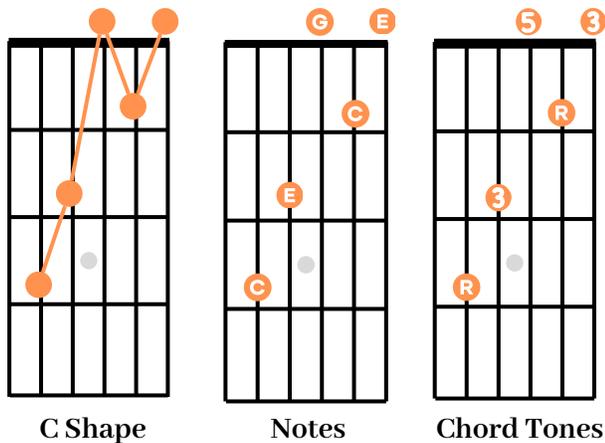
Visualization is key when learning CAGED. If you can see the patterns that emerge and understand how they connect to musical ideas, you'll gain confidence on the fretboard and avoid getting stuck in a guitar rut!



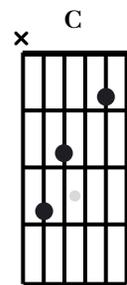
Major Chord Construction

Before we dive into CAGED shapes, let's quickly review how a major chord is built. A major chord contains three notes: the root, the major 3rd, and the perfect 5th. A three note chord is called a triad. If that's new to you, no worries — It will make sense soon; for now, just know that CAGED is based on major chord shapes, so it's helpful to understand what exactly makes a chord a major chord.

Check out the diagrams below to see how the C shape forms a C major chord in the open position. The notes are C, E, and G — making up the root, the major 3rd, and the perfect 5th.



Music Notation



Chord Diagram

Chord Tones:

Chord tones are, as the name suggests, the notes that make up a chord. The root sits at the bottom and gives the chord its name. From there, we stack notes in thirds: the 3rd is a third above the root, and the 5th is another third above the 3rd. The 3rd is considered major based on its distance from the root, and the same idea applies to the perfect 5th (more on that later). If you look at the C chord notation above, you'll see this exact stacking in action.

C Shape: Filling in the Gaps

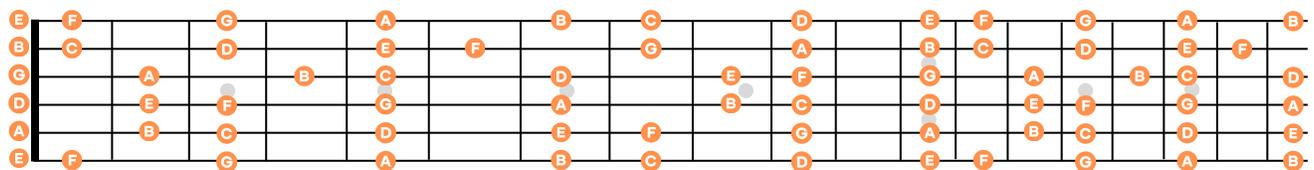
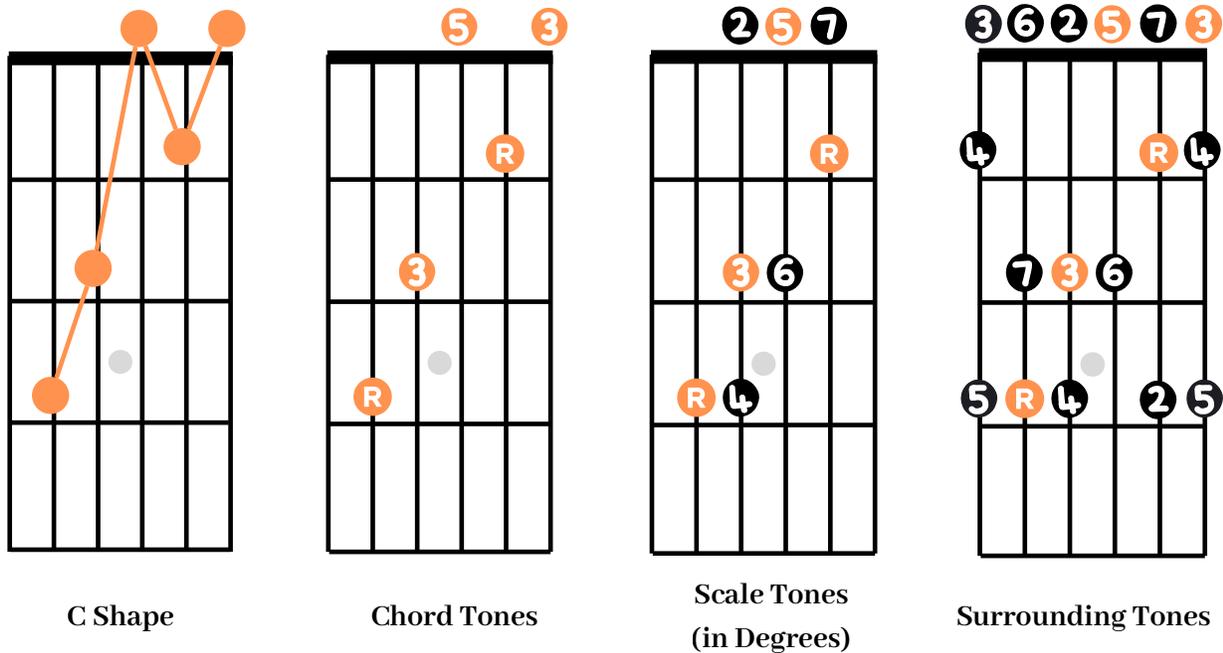
Beyond the Major Triad Chord Tones:

Chords live inside keys. Every key has seven notes, each labeled with a scale degree. We've already covered scale degree 1 (the root) and scale degrees 3 and 5 — the tones that make up our C chord. The remaining scale degrees, 2, 4, 6, and 7, also show up across the fretboard and are used to build other chords and melodies in the key. Eventually we will learn to visualize them all. Numbers are used instead of note names because it keeps the patterns movable, which is a big part of why the CAGED system works so well.

We'll start by getting comfortable seeing the roots, 3s, and 5s inside each CAGED shape. Later on, we'll fill in the remaining scale degrees so you have a full map of the Key of C across the whole neck.

Preview:

Look at the diagrams below—there are more scale notes in the key of C surrounding the C chord. Rather than memorizing every note by itself, we add context using CAGED shapes .



All of the notes in the Key of C

CAGED will help make sense of all of this!

It's all About Context

Memorizing every single note of a C chord across the whole fretboard can feel overwhelming, which is why the CAGED system leans on shapes first. Once you get comfortable seeing where the roots, 3s, and 5s land inside each shape, connecting them stops feeling like guesswork. Each shape has its own little context, and it fits right up against the next one.

Start by finding every Root (C) across the neck. After that, drop in the 3rds and 5ths to build out the full C chord-tone map. Before long you'll see small clusters of Rs, 3s, and 5s popping up across different areas of the fretboard. That's your first real glimpse that a C major chord isn't tied to a single position — it's living all over the neck in different shapes.

C **A** **G** **E** **D** **C** Roots **R, 3s, & 5s** **Recognize Shapes** **Contextualize**

Why it Works:
You're probably already comfortable with the E and A shapes since those are the barre chords most of us use all the time. CAGED just takes that same idea and applies it to the G and D shapes as well.

In the open position, every one of these shapes forms a major chord, which is why the system works. The roots may change, but the 3rds are always major 3rds, and the 5ths are always perfect 5ths.

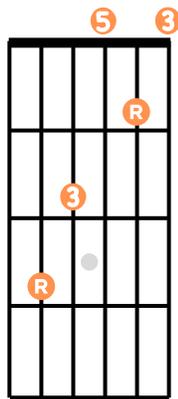
Look at the CAGED shapes on the far right and notice how they line up right next to each other — that sequence (CAGED) is the map you will learn to visualize.

Let's get started!

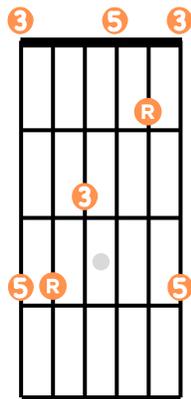
Unlocking the C Shape:

Meet the C shape — the first stop on our CAGED tour. In the open position this shape gives us a C major chord (usually just called “C”). C major contains three notes — C (root), E (3rd), and G (5th) — but the diagram shows more than three notes because the guitar repeats notes across strings (warning! this fact will be repeated over and over); when you inspect the shape you’ll only find roots, 3rds, and 5ths.

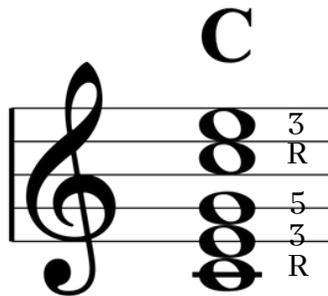
Strum and listen — That is the sound of a Root, major 3rd and perfect 5th.



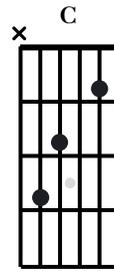
Chord Tones



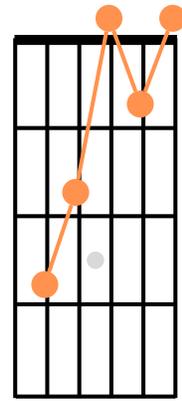
More Chord Tones



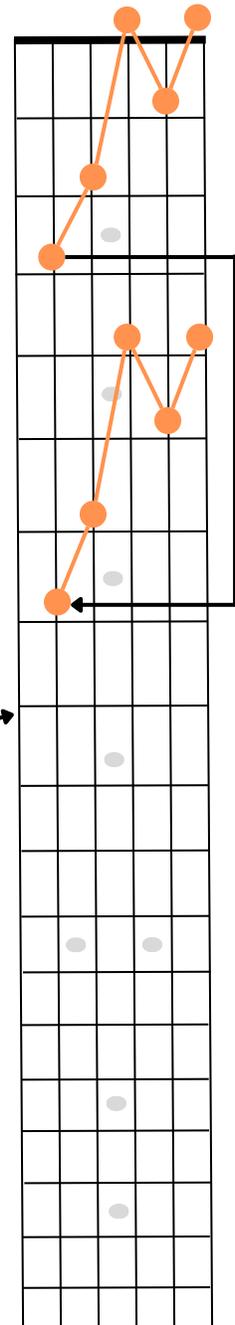
Notation



Chord Diagram



C Shape



Chord Construction

- The chord is made up of a R (root), 3, and 5.
- You also get extra chord tones because of repeated notes on the fretboard (here they are on the 6th and 1st strings).
- Check the notation and you’ll see the stacked-thirds pattern that all chords share.

Move the C Shape: (see the diagram on the right)

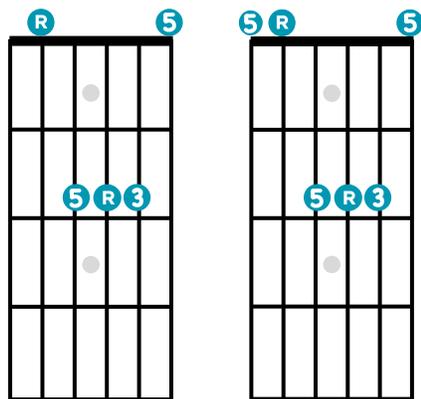
- Move the C shape up the neck and the open strings no longer match the new key—normally a capo would fix that. In the CAGED system your index finger acts like a movable capo (a barre) while your other fingers keep the C fingering, turning the shape into a fully movable chord: same shape, new root and new name,
- The C shape has its root on the 5th string.
- When you move the root to the 7th fret, the whole shape moves as well.
- You now must adjust your fingers and use the index as a “barre”.
- The note on the 7th fret of string 5 is an E, therefore the shape is now an E major chord.
- Play and hear for yourself - the same bright sounding chord appears!

It’s the same chord structure — you’re just relocating it.

Unlocking the A Shape:

Meet the A shape — the next stop on the CAGED tour. In the open position, this shape gives you an A major chord. An A major is built from three notes: A (root), C# (3rd), and E (5th). Just like the C shape, the diagram shows more than three dots because the fretboard repeats the same notes in multiple places.

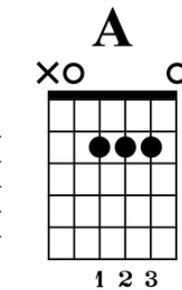
Give it a strum and listen — you're hearing that bright, solid major-chord sound again.



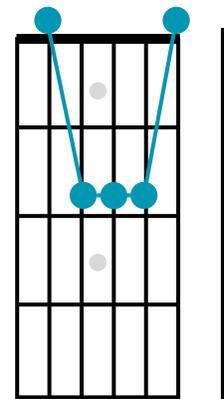
Chord Tones More Chord Tones



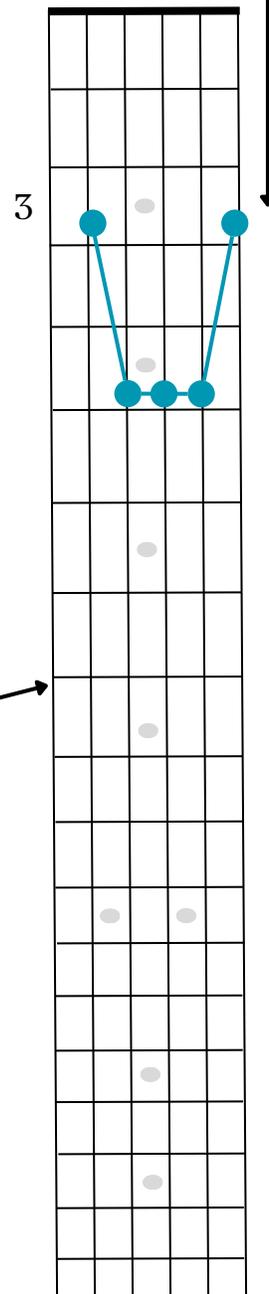
Notation



Chord Diagram



A Shape



Chord Construction

- The chord is made up of a R (root), 3, and 5.
- You also get extra chord tones because of repeated notes on the fretboard (here it's just an extra 5).
- Check the notation and you'll see the same stacked-thirds pattern you saw in the C shape.

Move the A Shape: (see the diagram on the right)

When you take the open A shape and move it up the neck, you're turning it into a barre chord. Your index finger becomes the "new nut," replacing the open strings.

- The open A shape has its root on the 5th string (A).
- When you slide the whole shape up to the 3rd fret, that 5th-string root moves with it.
- The note on the 5th string at the 3rd fret is C.
- Since the shape keeps the same intervals (root, 3rd, 5th), the whole chord shifts over a new root.
- So the A shape at the 3rd fret becomes a C major chord.

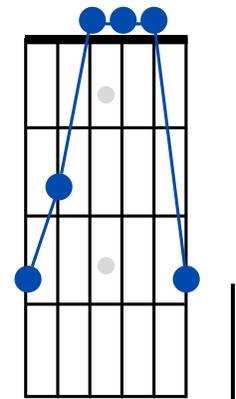
It's the same chord structure — you're just relocating it.

Unlocking the G Shape:

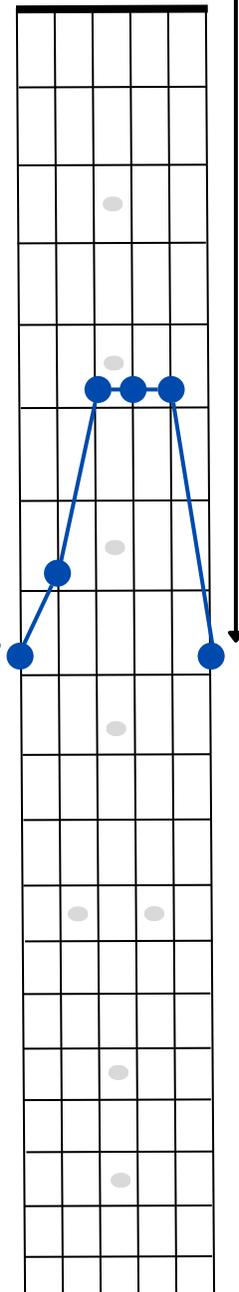
Meet the G shape — the next stop on the CAGED tour. In the open position, this shape gives you a G major chord. A G major is built from three notes: G (root), B (3rd), and D (5th). Just like the other shapes, the diagram shows more dots than the basic three tones because the fretboard repeats notes across multiple strings.

Strum it and listen — that big, open, ringing sound is classic major-chord territory.

Chord Tones More Chord Tones Notation Chord Diagram



G Shape



Chord Construction

- The chord is made from the root, 3, and 5.
- You'll see extra chord tones because of repeated notes (in this shape you get multiple roots, 3rds, and 5ths).
- The notation still shows that familiar stacked-thirds structure you've seen in the other shapes.

Move the G Shape: (see the diagram on the right)

Move the open G shape up the neck. Your index finger becomes the “new nut,” making the G shape movable.

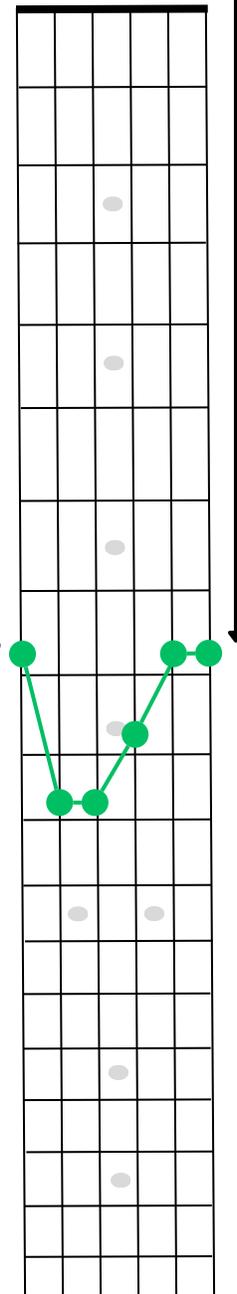
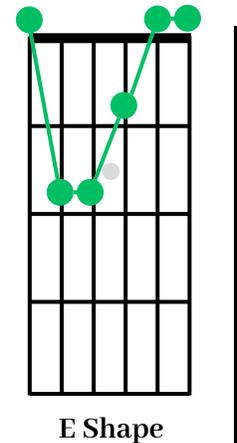
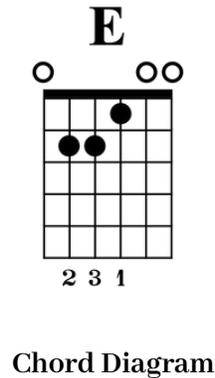
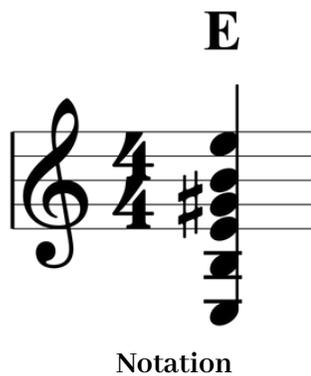
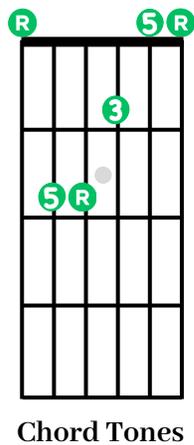
- This shape is not often used, but it does help with visualization.
- The open G shape has its main root on the 6th string (G).
- When you slide the entire shape to the 8th fret, that 6th-string root travels with it.
- The note on the 6th string at the 8th fret is C, which means moving the shape to the 8th fret give you a C chord.
- If you move the shape farther up the neck, the chord name changes according to whatever note sits under that 6th-string root.

Same structure, same intervals — you're just relocating the shape to build new major chords.

Unlocking the E Shape:

Meet the E shape — one of the most familiar shapes in the CAGED system. In the open position, it gives you an E major chord built from E (root), G# (3rd), and B (5th). Once again the diagram shows more dots than three notes because the fretboard repeats those tones across multiple strings.

Strum it and listen — You guessed it. Major chord sound once again!



Chord Construction

- Just like all the other shapes it has a R (root), 3, and 5.
- This chord has no other chord tones besides the ones in the shape.
- The notation still shows that same stacked-thirds structure as the other shapes

Move the E Shape: (see the diagram on the right)

When you move the open E shape up the neck, you're turning it into the most used movable shape in the CAGED system. This time your index fingers stretches across all of the strings.

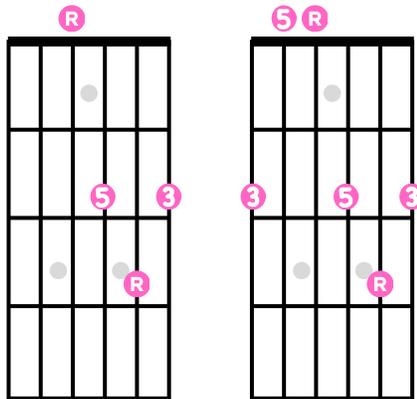
- The E shape's main root is on the 6th string (E).
- Slide the whole shape up to the 8th fret, and that 6th-string root moves with it.
- The note on the 6th string at the 8th fret is C.
- Since the intervals stay the same (root, 3rd, 5th), the whole shape becomes a C major chord at the 8th fret in an E shape.

Same structure, new root, new chord.

Unlocking the D Shape:

Meet the D shape — the final stop on the CAGED tour. In the open position, this shape gives you a D major chord built from D (root), F# (3rd), and A (5th). Finally this shape also has more than just those three tones as well.

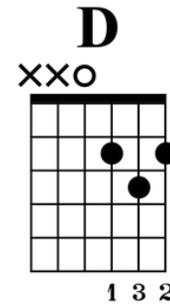
Strum it and listen — This one sounds a little brighter than the other shapes since it doesn't use the lower strings, but don't worry — it's still very much a major chord.



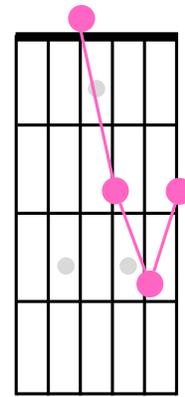
Chord Tones More Chord Tones



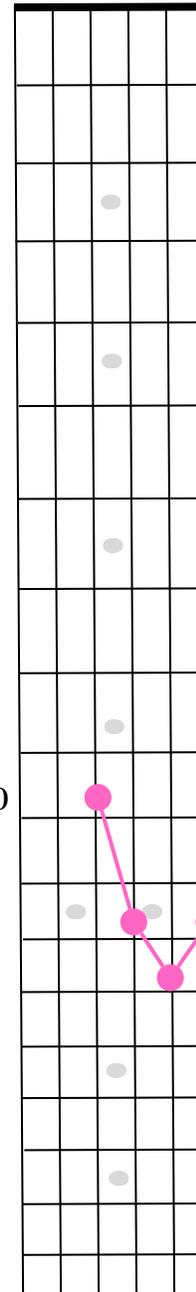
Notation



Chord Diagram



D Shape



Chord Construction

- Built with a R (root), 3, and 5.
- Extra chord tones come from repeated notes on the lower strings.
- The notation still shows that same stacked-thirds structure you've seen in the other shapes.

Move the D Shape: (see the diagram on the right)

When you move the open D shape up the neck, it becomes a movable form.

Your index finger steps in as the new nut.

- The D shape's main root sits on the 4th string (D).
- Slide the whole shape up until that 4th-string root lands on the 10th fret.
- At the 10th fret, the 4th-string note is C.
- Since the intervals stay the same (root, 3rd, 5th), the D shape at the 10th fret becomes a C major chord.

Same shape, same structure — you're just placing it over a new root.

Key Take Aways

- Same rules & concepts apply to all shapes.
- Some shapes are more commonly used than others.
- The goal is **VISUALIZATION!**