FAQs: "The Building Blocks of Rock"

last updated: 10/27/25

Here are some FAQs (frequently asked questions) for "The Building Blocks of Rock" app for guitarists. Unless otherwise noted, these apply to both versions of the app (the free web app, and the paid mobile app).

Helpful links that you may want to read or watch first if you haven't already:

- Getting started guide (.pdf, from the mobile app)
- User's guide (.pdf, from the mobile app)
- Intro to the free web app (YouTube video)
- Intro to the paid mobile app (YouTube video)

Some of the info in these links may be specific to one or the other version of the app, but the general concepts are mostly the same. You can find out more about the differences between the free app and the paid app on this page, or in the "intro to the mobile app" video (link above).

What is this?

"The Building Blocks of Rock" is a visual library of hundreds of the most-used riffs and licks, shown visually, as shapes.

Why is it useful?

Many riffs and licks are found in more than one song; but because they don't have names like chords and scales do, a lot of guitarists never learn very many of them.

Why do you show riffs and licks as shapes?

Most guitarists play by ear. Playing by ear is very visual. Every guitarist knows chord shapes, for example. These riff and lick shapes are like chord and scale shapes, but with a few added symbols to show things like bent strings, barred strings, etc.

Are chord shapes included too?

Yes, including the most common chord "voicings" (different ways of playing the same chord). Like riffs and licks, the different voicings don't have names; so again, many guitarists never learn very many of them.

Who is this for?
Most guitarists. If you're a beginner, you should learn the basics first. But if you know some basic chords and scales; or if you've hit that "intermediate plateau", this can help give you new ideas.

How do I view the shapes?
The horizontal lines are strings, the vertical lines are frets. The nut is to the left, the top of the neck is to the right. See the "getting started" guide.

Do I play all the notes in the shape at the same time?
Riff and lick shapes are like scale shapes: each note is just a possibility. You might not be playing all the notes, or all the strings, at the same time.

Do I play the notes in the shape in a certain order?
No. Each note is just a possibility. See the "getting started" guide, and also the intro videos (links above, at start of this doc).

Why aren't there any tabs for the shapes?
These shapes are found in more than one song. It would have been too difficult to include tabs for each of the song examples.

What are the different categories of shapes?
Shape type (chords, riffs, scales, licks); shape "family" (CAGED); and open or moveable. 4 types * 5 families * open/moveable = 40 different categories.

What do you mean, "shape family"? What is CAGED?
Put simply, CAGED is a visual approach to the guitar neck. It relates everything back to some of those basic open chord shapes you first learned. If you know how to move basic power chords or barre chords around the neck, you know the basics of CAGED. (And if you don't know how, then just leave the CAGED slider in "E" or "A" to start with). See this section of the intro video for more info.

What's the difference between riffs and licks?
Generally, riffs are rhythm guitar, licks are lead guitar. But the line between them can be fuzzy sometimes, including how guitarists refer to them. See this section of the intro video for more info.

What's the difference between open and moveable shapes?
Open shapes use an open string, so they usually can't be moved up the neck using the exact same fingering (and even if they can, your mileage may vary).

Will clicking "moveable" show the moveable version of an open shape, and vice-versa?

No. The shapes in each category are independent of each other.

How can I tell how many shapes are in each category?

Look for "n/n" (paid app) or "n of n" (free app), where n is a number. Example: "2/16" means this is the second shape out of sixteen total in the category.

Is there any order to the shapes?

Generally, each category starts off with the most basic or common. For example, chords start with major, then minor, then 7th, etc. Riffs start with basic lower string riffs; licks start with basic bends, etc.

Why are you calling a simple bend a "lick"?

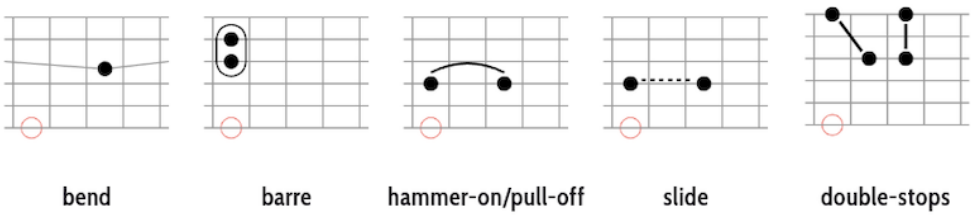
In the app, the guideline for what makes a "lick" is: anything that's not obvious from looking at a basic pentatonic scale shape. With bent strings for example, some notes in the scale are commonly bent; others hardly ever are. See this section of the intro video.

There's an infinite number of possible riff and lick shapes; how did you decide on these ones in particular?

See this section of the intro video for more info.

What do the symbols in the shapes mean?

The picture below is from the user's guide:



What are "double-stops"?

There's different definitions. One way to think of it is: sets of two notes that go together. Usually there's more than one double-stop in a shape. You play the notes in one double-stop before moving on to the next. See this video for more info.

What is the empty red circle?

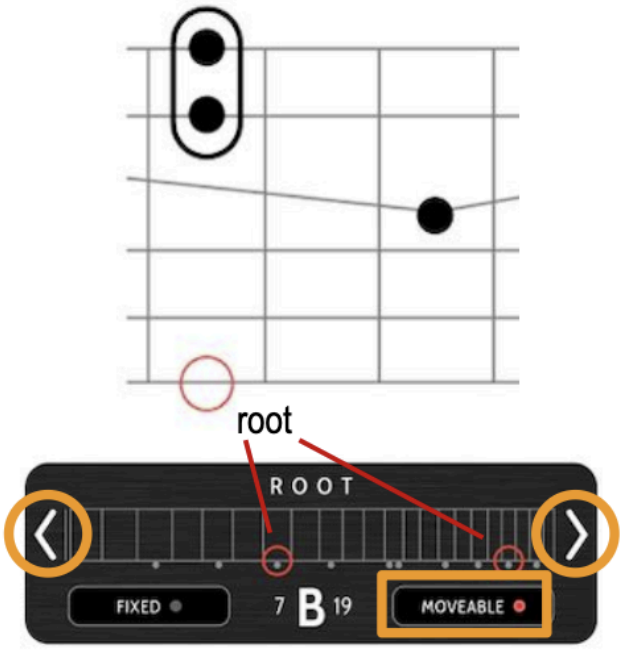
This is the "root note". It's a guidepost you can use to help you move shapes around the neck. It also determines tonality of the notes in the shape. See the user's guide for more info.

What's the little guitar neck under the shape?

This is the "root map". For moveable shapes, you can use the arrows on either side of the root map to move the root along the neck, and it will show you where to place the shape.

Huh?

Here's an example. This is a common lick. You barre the top two strings, while bending the third string:



Let's say you want to use this lick over a B chord, or in the key of B. Use the arrows to move the root to B. It shows you that on the sixth string (where the root is), a B note is at either the 7th or the 19th fret. That's where you would visualize the root. Then, looking at the shape, place your fingers to match. In this shape, the barre would be at the same fret as the root, and the bent note on third string would be two frets higher.

This "root map" just shows me where note names are on the bottom strings. I already know this.

Then you don't need to use it. It's just for reference, for guitarists who are still learning their way around the guitar neck.

Why do the shapes only show root notes on the bottom strings?

Many guitarists start off by learning the note names on the bottom two strings. The notes on the bottom strings also work well to visualize how the five shape families (CAGED) connect to each other. See the mobile app intro video for more info.

The arrows in the root map don't work for open shapes.

Yes. Open shapes are not moveable, so you can't move the root. The arrows are disabled.

Why does the root sometimes change when switching from moveable to open shapes?

Open shapes are not moveable -- the root is fixed. So when you switch from moveable to open, if the root doesn't match, it will be forced back to whatever it was. Example: the moveable shape above is from the "E" shape family. You've moved the root to "B", as shown. But if you switch back to open (a.k.a. "fixed"), the root is forced back to "E" (or whatever it previously was for those open E shapes -- some of them might have root of F or F# instead).

How do the sound examples in the mobile app work?

There's one sound example per shape. Riffs and licks are done in the style of the first song example in the list. But chords and scales are just a simple strum of the chord or playing through the notes in the scale.

What key are the sound examples played in? (what is the root?)

For riffs and licks, the root is the same as the first song example. For moveable riffs and licks, the sound examples all start with that root note being played, to establish tonality.

What about chords and scales?

Moveable chord and scale shapes are all played in the same key, to more easily compare the sound of one chord or scale to the next:

- "C" and "A" shapes are played with root = E
- "G" shapes are played with root = C
- "E" and "D" shapes are played with root = A

Why do the sounds play automatically?

This can be turned off in user preferences ("..." in the upper left corner).

Why is there sometimes a progress bar for loading sounds?

This means new sound files have been detected. See the "getting started" guide.

Some shapes in the mobile app have a "video example" in the list of song examples.

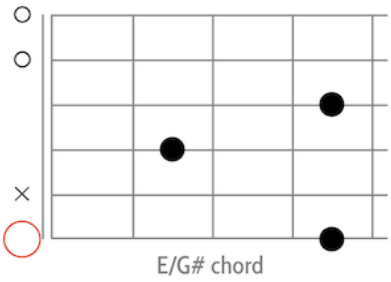
This will open a YouTube video in the Building Blocks channel. It should take you right to the location in the video where the shape is being discussed. You may have to sit through an ad first.

How many shapes have video examples?

Right now it's only about 20% of the riff, lick and chord shapes. More video examples will be added in the future.

Open shapes show "o" for open strings; but sometimes they'll show an "x" instead?

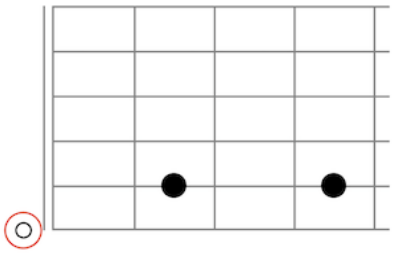
This is only for open chords. The "x" just means that the string is muted. This was done to match the way open chord symbols are often written. For example, the chord below:



Three of the strings are fretted. For the other strings, the top two strings are left open, and the fifth string is muted (by the third finger resting lightly against it as it frets the note on the sixth string).

What about other open shape types (riffs, licks, scales)?

An open string symbol is shown if the open string is played as part of the shape. Otherwise, nothing is shown. For example, in the riff below, only the bottom two strings are played. The other strings are not played, so there's no open string symbols (neither "o", nor "x"):



In open chords, where is the F chord? The tabs only show C,A,G,E,D.

F chords at the first fret are usually played without open strings, so just use a moveable chord and set the root to F. If an F chord does have an open string, like an Fmaj7 chord, you can find those at the end of the "E" open chords. Same thing for some B chords that use open strings, like the B7 chord: these are at the end of the "A" open chords.

What does the "/" mean in some of the moveable chord names?

This indicates the chord is an "inversion": the lowest note in the chord is not the root. Click or tap the chord shape to view it in color, which shows pitch.

How do I play a __ chord?

For moveable chords, find the chord type or shape you want to play, then move the root to match. For example, if you want to play a Dm7 chord, move root to "D", then scroll chord shapes looking for those with name = "minor 7th". Try moving the CAGED slider between the five different letters, looking for m7th chords within each. This will show you different positions along the neck where you can play that Dm7 chord. If you want to play an open chord instead, just select "open", move the CAGED slider to "D", then scroll the chord shapes.

I see some chords in a chord book that I can't find in the app.

The app only shows the most common chord shapes used in classic rock. It doesn't show every possible chord shape. It also doesn't show common chords used in other genres, like jazz.

Why do you only show a limited number of scale shapes?

The app is focused on riff, lick and chord shapes. Once you learn the basics of scales, they're of limited use in giving you new ideas on guitar, or increasing your "vocabulary" (things you know how to do on guitar besides strumming chords or picking out scales).

Ok, but what scales do you show?

Both free and paid versions of the app show the basic pentatonic "box shapes" in all five positions (CAGED), both major and minor pentatonic. The paid app shows some

additional scale shapes, including major and minor scales, as well as some popular variants (Dorian and Mixolydian modes).

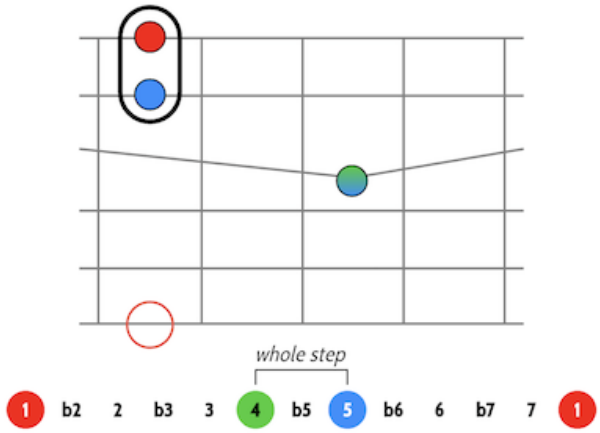
Scales shapes just have a simple description, and no song examples.
Correct. Adding song examples would have been too difficult to do; and as far as lengthy descriptions, there's lots of other web pages and videos that will tell you more than you ever wanted to know about scales.

Some of the scale shapes don't include all the notes on all the strings.
When playing scale shapes, it's important to focus on tonality, i.e. to keep the sound of the root note in your head. Whenever possible, the scale shapes start and end on the root note; or if not, at least the third, or the fifth.

What does it mean when shapes display in color?
Color is used to represent pitch: the interval (distance) of each note in the shape from the root. The text legend underneath the shape shows all possible intervals, up to an octave. The intervals in the current shape are highlighted in color.

How is color mode activated?
Click or tap any shape to toggle this mode on and off.

For shapes with bent strings, how can I tell how far to bend?
Color mode will show the distance (how far to bend). Example:



The notes in this shape are the root ("1"), fourth, and fifth. The note on the third string is bent from the fourth up to the fifth, a distance of a whole step (two frets).

Can left-handed players use the app?

The paid mobile app has an option to flip all shapes to left-handed view. It's in the "..." menu, in the top left corner of the app. Unfortunately, at this time there is no such option in the free web app.

Does the app work if I'm offline?

The paid mobile app caches the shapes and sounds; so once you've bought and installed the app, it works even if you're offline, or in airplane mode. The free web app however does not; it's just a web page, so the normal laws of physics and the internet apply.

Are the shapes ever updated?

Yes, there will be ongoing updates to shapes, including shape descriptions, song examples, sounds (mobile app only), and of course the shapes themselves (adding completely new shapes). This will all happen transparently, on the back end -- you won't need to download a new version of the app. One slight exception is sounds in the mobile app: each time the mobile app launches, it checks for updated sounds on the back end, and if detected, will download the new sounds. It won't happen very often, and if it does, it shouldn't take more than a minute or two with a broadband connection.

Why does the GuitarViz web site look so crappy?

Coming soon (in 2026): a new web site!

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