

Right Hand Technique

The most important aspect of clawhammer banjo is the physical relationship between the movement of the right forearm and thumb. Tackling this early is essential when trying to establish good technique.

Let's begin!

Relax your right hand with the thumb positioned over the head near the neck.

Lightly tap the banjo head with the fingernails and thumb of your right hand. Pretend you are tapping on a drum making sure most of the motion originates from the forearm as it rocks back and forth across the edge of the banjo rim. Keep your wrist relaxed and make sure you feel some movement in your elbow. Notice the motion of the hand is now "in and out" in relation to the strings instead of "up and down".

Using this same motion, throw the thumb in toward the head letting it come to rest against the fifth string. If the thumb and wrist are relaxed, you should now feel the weight of the hand as it is supported by the fifth string.

Still using the same motion as in our "tapping" exercise, move the arm away from the head letting the thumb slide off the fifth string. The resulting sound should be soft with a rich tone and not loud and harsh.

Here it is written out in tablature with some helpful hints. Make sure the motion of the forearm is in a horizontal plane (in and out) and not vertical (up and down):

Thumb comes to rest against string

Thumb sounds string as the hand moves away from strings

The diagram shows a five-line musical staff representing the strings of a banjo. The fifth string (bottom line) is the focus. The notation consists of a sequence of notes: a quarter note on the fifth string (marked with an 'x' below it), followed by a quarter rest (marked with a '0' below it), then a quarter note on the fifth string (marked with an 'x' below it), another quarter rest (marked with a '0' below it), and so on, for a total of four notes and four rests. An arrow points from the text "Thumb comes to rest against string" to the first note. Another arrow points from the text "Thumb sounds string as the hand moves away from strings" to the first rest.

Let's try the same idea on the second string:

The diagram shows a five-line musical staff representing the strings of a banjo. The second string (second line from the bottom) is the focus. The notation consists of a sequence of notes: a quarter note on the second string (marked with an 'x' below it), followed by a quarter rest (marked with a '0' below it), then a quarter note on the second string (marked with an 'x' below it), another quarter rest (marked with a '0' below it), and so on, for a total of four notes and four rests.

Keeping a steady rhythm, let's practice this technique on the second through the fifth strings and back again:

The diagram shows a five-line musical staff representing the strings of a banjo. The notation consists of a sequence of notes: a quarter note on the fifth string (marked with an 'x' below it), followed by a quarter rest (marked with a '0' below it), then a quarter note on the fourth string (marked with an 'x' below it), another quarter rest (marked with a '0' below it), then a quarter note on the third string (marked with an 'x' below it), another quarter rest (marked with a '0' below it), then a quarter note on the second string (marked with an 'x' below it), another quarter rest (marked with a '0' below it), then a quarter note on the first string (marked with an 'x' below it), another quarter rest (marked with a '0' below it), then a quarter note on the second string (marked with an 'x' below it), another quarter rest (marked with a '0' below it), then a quarter note on the third string (marked with an 'x' below it), another quarter rest (marked with a '0' below it), then a quarter note on the fourth string (marked with an 'x' below it), another quarter rest (marked with a '0' below it), then a quarter note on the fifth string (marked with an 'x' below it), and finally a quarter rest (marked with a '0' below it).

*By the way, this idea of playing the thumb without a fingernail strike before it is know as a "skip". At one time it was considered an intermediate technique until we wised up to the fact that it helps the beginning student quickly develop the proper motion of the right forearm and hand!

Once you are comfortable with the preceding exercises, it is time to figure out what to do with the other fingers of the right hand. Before we do, I'd like to spend a little time discussing your options as to which finger of the right hand to use and the various approaches for striking a string.

If you are familiar with clawhammer technique at all, you may have already noticed that the choice of right hand fingers varies from player to player. Some prefer using the index fingernail to strike the strings, others the middle. Some (such as Mark Johnson and myself) use both! The majority of those who play with both fingers tend to use the middle finger on the first string and the index on strings two through four but occasionally let the middle finger migrate over to the other strings. Don't worry too much about which finger (or fingers) to use as at this point you should be experimenting with all of the options!

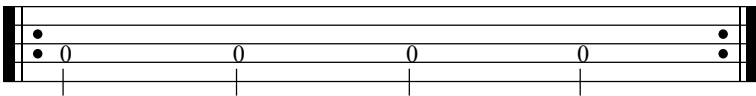
There are three different approaches to striking a string with your nail. I'd like to discuss each and give my personal opinions on why I recommend them or not. Keep in mind that this is a hotly debated issue among clawhammer players and these are just my own recommendations derived from closely observing my students for the last 25 years.

1. Some players light "tag" (but don't play) the fifth string each time a nail strikes a string. I don't recommend this as "tagging" the fifth string quickly becomes a habit (muscle memory) and requires a conscious decision to NOT tag the fifth when the thumb is needed on another string. This becomes even more apparent when students reach that point where they begin experimenting around with arranging their own versions of tunes/songs.
2. There are other banjoists who support the finger by placing the thumb against it as it strikes a string. This is sometimes referred to as "bracing" or "backing" with the thumb. I don't recommend this either and for the same reason I don't like "tagging"; it becomes a habit and requires a conscious decision on your part to disengage the thumb from the finger when the thumb is needed elsewhere.
3. The last technique is achieved by not involving the thumb at all when striking a string and is the one I recommend. It is usually referred to as "floating". You simply let your thumb hang in it's normal position when at rest. Don't worry about any incidental contact with the striking finger as this is normal, just don't apply any pressure with the thumb (bracing).

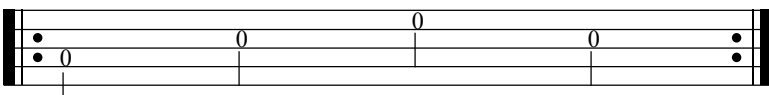
Don't assume you can identify which technique accomplished banjoists are using as you watch them play. It's easy to confuse "floating" with "bracing" as many great players tend to keep their thumb close to, but not touching, their striking finger.

Once you've had a chance to digest and experiment around with all this information, it's time to introduce the "strike". We use the term "strike" (as opposed to "pick" or "pluck") as it better reflects what the fingernail does as it sounds a string.

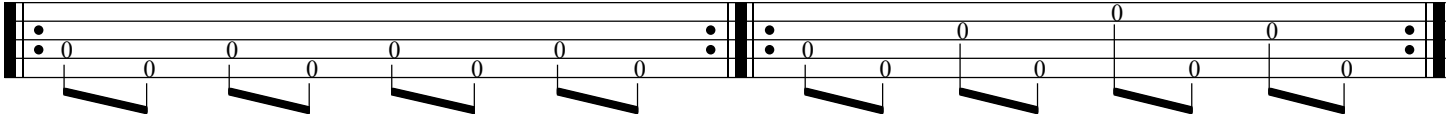
Using the same "in and out" motion we've been using in our previous exercises (I cannot overemphasize the importance of this), strike the fourth string with your fingernail making sure to keep the finger relaxed. The finger should "give" just enough to let the nail slide through the string and not hit the head of the banjo. Repeat this a few times:



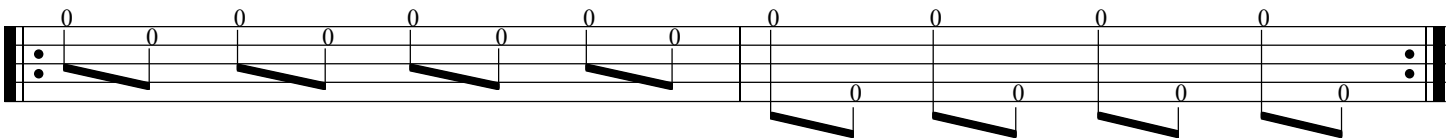
Now try striking some other strings:



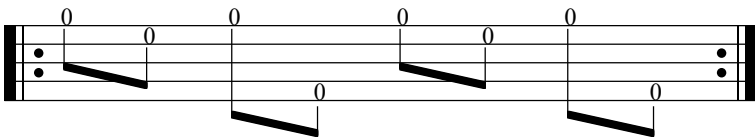
Once you are comfortable with quarter note strikes, try adding in some fifth string drone notes. Remember that the thumb comes to rest on the fifth string at the same time as the nail strike (on beat) but it doesn't "sound" the fifth until the hand moves away from the strings (off beat):



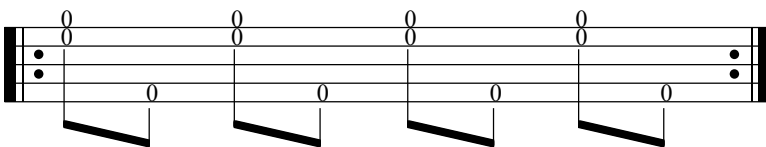
Try a similar exercise that starts out with the thumb coming to rest against the second string instead of the fifth:



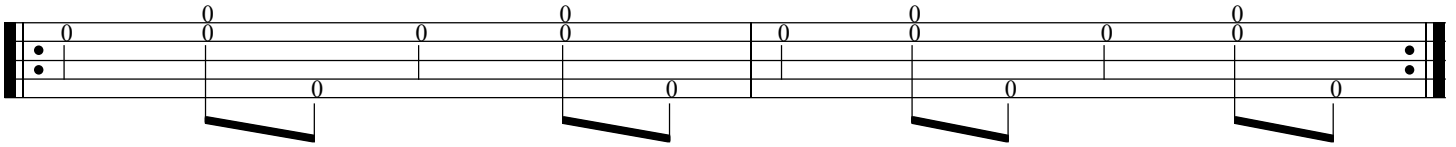
Now for something a little more challenging. This is the most common pattern in what we refer to as "double thumbing" or "drop thumbing" :



The Brush-Thumb. As you bring the thumb into the fifth string, brush the first two strings with a nail (or nails) of the right hand (I use the middle and ring fingers). This is usually written out as a three string brush to make it easily identifiable, but the number of strings you brush will vary. Keep your hand in a relaxed "claw" shape widening the gap between the thumb and fingers as you hit the strings. The hand opens up a bit but the fingers should not.



The "Bump-Ditty". Strike the first string with the back of either the index or middle fingernail and follow with a "brush-thumb" as previously described. This is commonly referred to as a "bump ditty" or "bum-ditty" to describe the rhythm that is produced by this pattern.



The Basic Strum (alternating bass). Alternate the fingernail strikes between the third and fourth strings. Use your ear to tell you which string to begin with (third or fourth) based on what chord you are playing!

