

Douglas Niedt, Guitarist: Official Website



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(Doug subtitled his Tech Tip as "Doug's Dirty Little Secrets" after reading someone's posted message on a guitar web forum. The writer asserted that professional virtuoso guitarists all had secrets they kept to themselves and wouldn't tell anyone else, so no one would play as well as them!)

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More Than You Ever Wanted to Know About: GUIDE FINGERS

By Douglas Niedt

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At first glance it would seem that a Tech Tip about guide fingers should be pretty simple and straightforward. In fact, Cindy Egger, one of my former students, was here in our studio recording her new CD with my son Alex engineering. I explained that I was knee-deep in writing this article. She didn't understand why it was taking so long to write the article and asked, "Don't most guitar methods cover that in one paragraph?" Well, yes they do. In most guitar methods, the concept of the guide finger is explained in just a few sentences!

But, if we do a little digging into the topic, there is actually disagreement among very good players about whether guide fingers should even be used. If a player *does* use guide fingers, there are variations and nuances in their use. In fact, when I decided to choose guide fingers as the topic of this month's article, I knew it would be more than just a few sentences. What I didn't know was that it would take me well over 20 hours to complete the entire essay including writing out the musical examples and recording the sound clips.

Guide Fingers are an Outdated Idea

Abel Carlevaro was a respected Uruguayan guitarist, composer, pedagogue, and teacher of guitar great Eduardo Fernandez. In his *School of Guitar, Exposition of Instrumental Theory*, he states that the use of guide fingers is a "false concept" and that the very idea is "outdated." This viewpoint is a 180 degree shift of thinking from other schools of thought and is certainly worth considering.

In a nutshell, Carlevaro says that *before* the shift, the fingers must "abandon" the strings. They withdraw their pressure from the string, allowing themselves to be **lifted perpendicularly** off the strings. After being lifted, they enter into a momentary state of relaxation, before being transported by the arm to their new fret. Carlevaro strongly emphasizes that the perpendicular lift off the string is nearly imperceptible to the eye.

Carlevaro's focus is to execute shifts with maximum accuracy and minimal effort. But an interesting side benefit of his shifting technique is that it eliminates string squeaks and other shifting noise, especially on the wound bass strings. When the fingers are lifted perpendicularly off the strings, friction is eliminated. Therefore, no noise is produced.

John Williams' Take on Guide Fingers and Finger Squeaks

This is not a tech tip about avoiding string noises or the mechanics of how to shift. But quickly as a sidelight and as a prelude to the rest of this tech tip, there is one very easy fix to eliminate string noises. I was speaking with John Williams after his concert in St. Louis a few years ago. He was very excited about the strings he was using: D'Addario Pro Arte Composites Lightly Polished EJ45LP-normal tension (you can order the basses separately). He explained that the basses

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were lightly polished and that he could now play things like the fast middle section of Villa-Lobos' *Prelude No. 4* without having to lift his fingers off the strings (a la Carlevaro) and that *there were no string noises*. He played a passage to show me. He said **he much preferred to leave his fingers down on the strings** to produce perfectly legato (smooth, connected) shifts. He said that in the past, when he used other strings, he would lift his fingers to eliminate the string noises. **But lifting his fingers produced an element of disjointedness between the chord changes that he never liked.**

I Like Guide Fingers

Which brings me to the use of guide fingers. I'm with Williams. Although I understand and appreciate the Carlevaro approach (and use it time to time), I like the perfectly legato shifts that can be produced with the use of guide fingers. For those of us less neuro-muscularly gifted than Eduardo Fernandez, I also welcome the security guide fingers provide. Carlevaro would argue that with practice, his method of shifting without guide fingers would produce equal or greater security. I have not yet found that to be true in my own playing. And, I think that John Williams' (the greatest technician of our time) preference for using guide fingers is very significant. The Segovia school and the Romero school of playing use guide fingers both for technical security and the seamless, legato connections they provide

There are Two Types of Guide Fingers

Simply put, when you move a left-hand finger from point "a" to point "b" while keeping it on the same string, it is called a guide finger.

But there are two basic types of guide fingers:

- One is where you keep the finger tightly pressing the string onto the frets with no letup as you move from one fret to the next. Perhaps we could call it the "full-pressure guide finger."
- The other is where your finger stays on the string, but with very light pressure, so that the string doesn't touch the frets as you move from one fret to the next. When the finger reaches its destination, it then presses the string fully onto the fret. We could call this the "released-pressure guide finger."

Guide fingers provide us with two major benefits:

1. Security
2. Seamlessly connected notes during shifts.

During a shift, there is a temporary loss of contact between the fingers and strings. Usually, shifts need to be made very quickly to connect the notes. The fast movement of the left hand and arm, combined with no tactile contact, results in tremendous uncertainty and lack of stability for the playing mechanism. In *The Art of Classical Guitar Playing* Charles Duncan tells us that the use of one or more guide fingers during shifts provides a "mental and kinesthetic point of reference" for the hand. Having one or more guide fingers on a string or strings during a shift provides needed security at that precarious moment. The continuous contact of the finger with the string provides a way to connect notes in a very legato fashion, with or without the use of glissando.

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Here are some simple shifts where the guide finger stays tightly on the string as it moves quickly from fret to fret--the "full-pressure guide finger." There is absolutely no release of pressure on the string as the guide finger moves to its destination:

Example #1

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains four measures of music, each separated by a double bar line. Each measure shows a shift of the guide finger. In the first measure, the guide finger (finger 3) starts at fret 0 and moves to fret 1. In the second measure, it starts at fret 0 and moves to fret 2. In the third measure, it starts at fret 1 and moves to fret 3. In the fourth measure, it starts at fret 1 and moves to fret 4. Each shift is indicated by a dashed line above the staff and an arrow pointing to the string. The label "Full-Pressure Guide Finger" is placed below each shift.

🔊 [Listen as I play each example.](#) (A separate window will open that you can minimize in order to still see the written musical example as you listen.)

When executed well, the use of the full-pressure guide finger produces an inaudible shift, with the notes perfectly connected.

Even on long shifts, if you want the sound to be absolutely legato, you do not release any pressure off the string:

Example #2

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains four measures of music, each separated by a double bar line. Each measure shows a shift of the guide finger. In the first measure, the guide finger (finger 3) starts at fret 0 and moves to fret 1. In the second measure, it starts at fret 1 and moves to fret 2. In the third measure, it starts at fret 2 and moves to fret 3. In the fourth measure, it starts at fret 3 and moves to fret 4. Each shift is indicated by a dashed line above the staff and an arrow pointing to the string. The label "Full-Pressure Guide Finger" is placed below each shift.

🔊 [Listen as I play each example.](#)

If you listen very carefully to the shifts in example #2, you may hear my guide finger whoosh across the frets. Let me play a shift for you, intentionally producing a louder whoosh.

🔊 [A loud "Whoosh"](#)

The harder I press the string when I shift, the more fret noise will be produced. To eliminate or reduce the fret noise *and* retain the benefits of the guide finger, still maintain constant pressure on the string, pressing it continually onto the fretboard, but use slightly less pressure.

There is also another solution to reducing the whoosh noise on long shifts while still using a guide finger. As you are about to shift, release the pressure on the string so the finger stays on the string but the string is *not* pressed onto the fretboard--the "released-pressure guide finger." Shift to the new fret and on arrival, press firmly to play the note. The release of pressure greatly reduces the amount of friction so less noise is produced.

🔊 [Listen to the difference](#) on a long shift between pressing firmly on the string so that the string

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is on the fretboard continually (full-pressure guide finger), and releasing the pressure so the string is not pressed onto the fretboard during the shift (released-pressure guide finger).

Incidentally, the common problem of unintentional glissando is not a result of using guide fingers, but of improper shifting technique. To shift using a guide finger, without producing glissando, requires practice. The crucial requirement is that *both hands must be absolutely synchronized in their movements*.

🔴 [Listen to these good and bad shifts.](#) Glissando is produced when the left hand moves first and the right hand plucks second. To play without a glissando, *the right-hand finger must touch the string at the same moment the left hand begins its shift*.

Yet another digression--people often use the words glissando and portamento interchangeably or even incorrectly (Carlevaro or his translator incorrectly uses the term portamento). A portamento can be thought of as a "slide" of infinite pitches while a glissando consists of individual notes being sounded out however quickly the glissando is executed. Therefore, a violin produces portamento when the player moves his bow on the string and slides his finger smoothly up or down the fingerboard. The guitar, piano, and pitched mallet instruments are not capable of producing portamento. The piano sounds each individual note as the player glides a finger across the keys. A similar thing happens when a guitarist plucks a note and then slides the finger up or down the string. The finger "defines" each individual chromatic pitch as it slides up or down the fretboard. That is a glissando, not a portamento.

The Use of Guide Fingers to Intentionally Produce Glissando

Sometimes we use guide fingers intentionally to produce desired glissando effects. Villa-Lobos liked the sound of glissando on the guitar and many guitarists play this passage from *Prelude No. 3* with pronounced glissando:



🔴 [Listen to me play it with the guide fingers maintaining firm pressure on the strings](#) during each shift, producing distinct glissando. (The first finger is lifted totally off the string at each shift to avoid squeaks.)

Now listen while I still use the guide fingers, but 🔴 [release the pressure on the strings](#) between each chord. My guide fingers are still on the strings at all times, but they are not pressing the strings onto the fretboard as I shift. (The first finger is lifted totally off the string at each shift to avoid squeaks.)

Of course it is totally up to the performer to choose which effect to use. One could actually play the passage "dry" the first time through and "wet" on the da capo.

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The "Released-Pressure Guide Finger"

The use of the "released-pressure guide finger" comes in handy to clean up chord changes in arpeggio passages. Here's a passage from Dionisio Aguado's well-known *Estudio in A minor*:



I know this can be fingered other ways. But bear with me. Just so you understand the concept, let's work with this fingering. Depending on how you use the first finger as a guide finger, there are three possible outcomes:

Example #5

The first method of execution produces a "ghost" note. The full-pressure guide finger shifts from the 1st to the 2nd fret on the 2nd beat but only the open G is plucked. As a result of that "bare" slide of the 1st finger, a C# is heard on top of the open G. The C# isn't plucked, but is heard as the result of the 1st finger slide on the second beat of the measure. 🎧 [Listen to it](#). Not good!

The second method of execution eliminates the "ghost" note. This is done by maintaining pressure on the guide finger, but waiting to shift until the sixth 16th-note of the measure, i.e. shifting on the C#. It definitely sounds cleaner than the first method. But the harmony changes on the second beat from an A minor chord to an A7 chord. I don't want to hear the C natural (which is not part of an A7 chord) ringing at the change of harmony. Plus, it is kind of hard to make the finger shift on the sixth 16th note of the measure. Because the harmony changes on the 1st or second beat of every measure, it is more natural for the hand to shift precisely on the beats. 🎧 [Listen to how this method "smudges" the harmonic clarity](#).

The third method is the best solution. You shift precisely on the second beat, you hear a clean change of harmony, and there are no extraneous noises. 🎧 [Listen to this version](#).

You perspicacious players out there are probably screaming, "But Doug, but Doug; what about right-hand planting?" Yes, one could plant "i" and "m" on the second and first strings as the thumb plucks the open G on the second beat. Because the plant mutes the first and second strings, the plant would actually make all three guide finger techniques sound identical. But possibly in this example and definitely in other instances, *we may prefer the sound of the upper strings ringing through the changes* rather than being cut off at the plant. We cannot use planting when we want the upper strings to ring. In such cases, we need to carefully choose which type of guide finger to use for optimal results.

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Planting and Guide Fingers Can Work Together to Mutual Advantage

In Matteo Carcassi's *Study #3*, we can use both the planting technique and guide fingers to mutual advantage:

Example #6

The image shows two musical staves in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a time signature of 8/8. The top staff is labeled 'Example #6'. It features a sequence of chords: C major (0 2 3), D major (2 3 4), E major (2 3 4), F# major (2 3 4), G major (2 3 4), A major (2 3 4), B major (2 3 4), and C major (0 2 3). Annotations include '2 is Full-Pressure Guide Finger' pointing to the second string in the D major chord, and 'Plant i m a' pointing to the first three strings in the C major chord. The bottom staff shows a similar sequence: C major (0 2 3), D major (2 3 4), E major (2 3 4), F# major (2 3 4), G major (2 3 4), A major (2 3 4), B major (2 3 4), and C major (0 2 3). Annotations include '1 and 2 are both Full-Pressure Guide Fingers' pointing to the first and second strings in the D major chord, and 'Plant i m a' pointing to the first three strings in the C major chord.

In this piece, I plant at every change of harmony, which is usually the 1st beat of each measure. Planting produces a clean separation between harmonic changes which I find desirable here (although it also sounds very good without planting).

In measure 1 to measure 2 we can keep the second finger down as we shift from the second string C# to the D. Because I will plant "i", "m", and "a" on the first three strings as I play the sixth string G# in measure 2, I can keep the guide finger down tightly on the second string for security and stability as I make the chord change. The plant will eliminate the unwanted glissando from the 2nd string C# to D.

🔊 [Listen to me play it without planting.](#) You hear a messy glissando. 🔊 [Now listen with planting.](#) The glissando is eliminated.

This technique also works for the chord change from measure 3 to measure 4. We want to keep the 1st and 2nd fingers down tightly on the second and third strings as we shift. If we don't plant "i", "m", and "a" on the first three strings, 🔊 [we hear lots of glissando.](#) With the plant, 🔊 [the unwanted glissandi on the two strings are eliminated.](#)

The combined use of guide fingers and planting also allows us to use a very secure left-hand fingering for measures 17 through 20 of the same piece:

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Example #7

Plant
i m a

2 is Full-Pressure
Guide Finger

Plant
i m a

Plant
i m a

2 is Full-Pressure
Guide Finger

Plant
i m a

The second finger is our guide finger on the 3rd string. It can remain firmly pressing on the string, guiding the hand from chord to chord with no unwanted glissandi as long as the right hand plants on the first beat of each measure.

Know When to Use 'Em. Know When to Lose 'Em.

In Francisco Tarrega's *Lagrima*, we have a problem in the opening measure:

Example #8

Full-Pressure Guide Finger Produces Legato, Smoothly Connected Melody

Full-Pressure Guide Finger Produces Legato, Smoothly Connected Melody

Full-Pressure Guide Finger Produces Ugly Squeak

Lift 2nd finger off string. Squeak is eliminated

Full-Pressure Guide Finger

Released-Pressure Guide Finger Produces No Glissando

Gliss.

4

From the 2nd to 3rd beat, if we use both the second and fourth fingers as full-pressure guide fingers, we get a squeak from the 4th string. [Listen to it.](#) I don't want to release the pressure off both strings. Although the squeak would be eliminated, I wouldn't get that absolute, connected legato sound from the A to the B melody notes on the first string. The solution is to keep the pressure down on the 4th finger to connect the A to the B, but release the 2nd finger off the 4th

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at the second 8th-note to play the A. 🎸 [Now it sounds clean.](#)

A common mistake in playing Fernando Sor's *Study No. 2* (Segovia Edition) is to use the 2nd finger as a full-pressure guide finger to execute the chord change from measure 2 to measure 3 and then again from measure 3 to measure 4:

Example #14

Full-Pressure Guide Finger
Full-Pressure Guide Finger
Sloppy Glissando
"Ghost Note" (not plucked)
Sloppy Glissando
"Ghost Note" (not plucked)

🎸 [It sounds pretty messy.](#) The proper execution is not to use the finger as a guide at all! Lift it perpendicularly off the string to prevent any glissando or string squeak:

Example #15

Lift 2nd Finger
Place 2nd Finger
Lift 2nd Finger
Place 2nd Finger

🎸 [Now it sounds clean and clear.](#)

Step Up Your Security Level--Pre-Plant a Guide Finger

A technique I frequently use is to pre-plant a finger on a string to use as a guide finger. A good example is found toward the end of Fernando Sor's *Study No. 5* (Segovia Edition):

Example #16

Plant 2nd finger on 1st string, 6th fret
Use This Pre-Planted 2nd Finger as Guide to G

On the third beat of the 2nd measure above, I plant my 2nd finger on the 1st string at the 6th fret (A#). Then I use that 2nd finger as my guide finger to give me extra security for the shift to the G on the first beat of the next measure.

In Matteo Carcassi's *Study #3* is another precarious shift toward the end of the piece:

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Example #17

Plant 2nd Finger On 1st String, 8th Fret

Use This Pre-Planted 2nd Finger As Guide to F

As it stands, we have no guide fingers at all. But on the 4th beat of the first measure, we can pre-plant the 2nd finger on the first string 8th fret (C). On the downbeat of the next measure, we can use that pre-planted 2nd finger to guide us down to the first-fret F natural. As before, planting "i", "m", and "a" on the treble strings at the shift will eliminate any unwanted glissando. The technique turns an "iffy" shift into a very stable and relatively effortless shift. Whenever you encounter a shift or chord change that has no obvious guide fingers, ask yourself what finger is free at that moment. Look at your hand and see if there is a finger that is not currently holding down a note. Ask yourself if that finger can be planted on a string that isn't ringing to serve as a guide finger.

Bars Also Make Nice Guide "Fingers"

In the well-known *Romanza* or *Romance de Amor* or *Romance*, is a difficult shift toward the end of the E major section:

Example #18

Potential Problem Notes

Most guitarists simply "jump off the cliff" hoping their 4th finger lands securely enough on the first string 9th fret to hold that C# clearly while stretching to reach down to place the 1st and 2nd fingers at the 5th and 6th frets. Often they miss the C# altogether. Or they "lose" the C# as they stretch down to try to reach the other two notes. Or, they succeed in playing a clear 1st-string C# and keep it ringing, only to buzz one or both of the other two notes.

What works really well is to use the half-bar at the 9th fret as a guide finger:

Example #19

Half-Bar is the Guide Finger

Do NOT Place 2 On This Beat

NOW, Place 2 HERE on 3rd String C#

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Keeping the half-bar at the 9th fret down tightly on the strings, slide it to the 5th fret as your 4th finger lands on the 9th fret C#. However, do NOT look at the bar or the 5th fret. Keep your eyes focused on the 9th fret. Train the bar to find its own way to the 5th fret. Also, the bar and 4th finger must reach their destinations simultaneously. Don't add the 2nd finger to the 3rd-string C# at the 6th fret until you have to pluck it. Do NOT try to place it on the 1st beat.

Here is a good exercise to practice first before trying the actual arpeggio:



I know the second chord is ugly. But this is the actual chord change you must make at the moment of the shift in the song. Remember, the 2nd finger is added *later* to the 3rd-string C#.

A fairly simple use of the bar as a guide finger occurs in Matteo Carcassi's *Study #3* from measure 4 to measure 5:



The half bar at the 5th fret slides down to the 2nd fret on the downbeat of the second measure of the example. As mentioned previously, planting of the right-hand fingers on the treble strings eliminates any glissando effect. In this instance, the bar can be held with firm pressure during the shift or the pressure can be released or reduced and then reapplied at the 2nd fret.

Hinge Bars Also Make Great Guide Fingers

Full bars are seldom used as guide fingers. Moving a bar up or down the neck with either full or reduced pressure creates a lot of friction or drag. Freedom of movement is impaired. There are also major problems with bass string squeaks. Let the hinge bar come to your rescue. Let's look again at *Romanza*, this time at the beginning of the E major section:

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Example #22

Make Hinge Bar by Lifting *Tip Only* of 1st Finger. Use as Guide Finger to 7th Fret

Shift to 7th Fret and then Place Tip of 1st Finger Back Down On the Strings

In going from the 2nd measure to the 3rd measure, we have to shift the bar from the 2nd fret to the 7th fret. Do NOT keep the bar flat on the fretboard. Instead, as you shift, lift only the tip joint of the bar off the bass strings while still holding the first string with the inner part of the bar finger. Slide this hinge bar along the edge of the fretboard to the 7th fret. As you reach the 7th fret, place the tip of the bar back onto the bass strings. At no time does the inner part of the bar finger leave the first string or the edge of the fretboard. There should be constant, secure contact. The hinge bar allows complete mobility, speed of movement, and is very stable.

Use 'Em All

With a little thought, guide fingers can be used very creatively to make passages more musical AND secure to play. Going back once again to Carcassi's *Study #3* we have a passage from Part II shown here with a very common fingering:

Example #23

Conventional Fingering

Area of instability

Using the half bar as a guide finger to shift from the 2nd fret to the 7th fret works well. But the change from the 7th fret half bar to the 9th fret full bar is not perfectly smooth and slightly unstable technically. Here is a rather creative way of playing this passage that I have just thought of as I am writing this article:

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Example #24

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The music is in 3/4 time. It consists of three measures. Measure 1 starts with a second finger (II) on the 3rd fret. Measure 2 shows a transition from the 5th fret to the 7th fret using a 4th finger as a guide, then a full-pressure 4th finger guide to the 8th fret, and finally a hinge bar (VI) at the 6th fret. Measure 3 shows a full bar chord (IX) with a 2nd finger as a guide on the 3rd string. Annotations include: 'Released-Pressure Guide Finger' pointing to the 4th finger in measure 2; 'Full-Pressure Guide Finger' pointing to the 4th finger in measure 2; '(Hinge Bar) VI' pointing to the 6th fret in measure 2; and 'IX' pointing to the full bar chord in measure 3. A text box explains: 'On this beat, pre-plant a hinge-bar at the 6th fret. It will be your guide finger to the full bar at the 9th fret in the next measure.' Another note says '2 is a Guide Finger on 3rd String'.

As you move from measure 1 to measure 2, use the 4th finger as a released-pressure guide finger from the 5th to the 7th fret on the 1st string. Because you are planting with the right hand, you could use a full-pressure guide finger. But I think that slightly releasing the finger pressure gives you more mobility to shift to the position required by the following chord which has the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th fingers all at the 7th fret.

Shifting on the 4th beat of the second measure from the B to the B# uses a full-pressure 4th finger guide. Then, the piece de resistance, as the 4th finger slides to B# at the 8th fret, pre-plant a hinge bar at the 6th fret. The 2nd finger AND the hinge bar are now your guide fingers to take you to the C# major full-bar chord on the downbeat of the third measure. If you get a bit of string noise, try releasing some pressure off the hinge bar and the 2nd finger when you shift. The melody is smoothly connected AND the change to the full bar chord is now secure and stable. Wow! It's always exciting to come up with ingenious fingering solutions like that.

What Does All This Mean?

To conclude, although the Carlevaro school sees the use of guide fingers as a false concept, I am not quite prepared to abandon their use. I think it is significant that John Williams, the rest of the Segovia school, and the Romero school use guide fingers. I feel like I'm in good company!

For maximum effectiveness, use both types: full-pressure and released-pressure. Know when to use them and when not to.

When used correctly, guide fingers are of tremendous benefit:

- They provide seamless, musical connections between notes.
- They can clean up a chord change or shift, or add expressive glissando effects.
- They provide security and stability to difficult shifts.
- The pre-planting of a finger to use as a guide is extremely valuable in precarious shifts that would otherwise have no guide fingers.
- Bars and hinge bars can also be used very effectively as guide "fingers."

The integrated use of all these nuances and techniques of guide fingers will raise your playing to a new level of musicality and technical security.

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