How To Read Three-Finger Style Banjo Tablature

By the Banjo Newsletter

What is tablature?

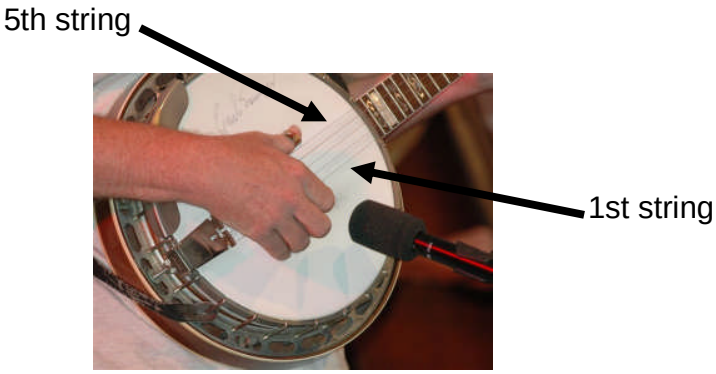
The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition defines tablature as: A system of notation using letters, symbols, or other visual cues instead of standard notation to indicate how a musical piece is to be played.

Banjo Newsletter publishes tablature for the 5-string banjo.

Before describing the banjo tablature, it is important to note how the strings on your actual banjo are numbered. The standard 5-string banjo is manufactured for a right-handed player, meaning the thumb and fingers of the right hand are used for striking the strings while the fingers of the left hand press the strings down onto the fingerboard just behind (to the left of) the frets.

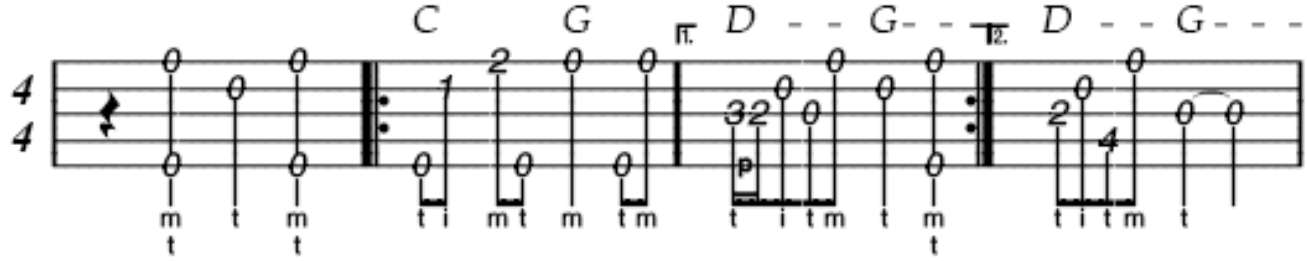
When you are standing or seated and holding a standard 5-string banjo so that your right hand is your picking hand and your left hand is your fretting hand, the strings are located as follows:

The 1st string is closest to your feet and the 5th string is closest to your chin.



Here is an example of tablature as it would appear in Banjo Newsletter – complete with numbers on the 5 strings, time values assigned to each note, right-hand fingering below the notes, chord names above the notes, repeat signs, and 2 different endings.

FAQ Breakdown, Key of G, G Tuning: gDGBD



Click to hear Example 1

This tutorial will break down the tablature step by step into its individual components.

Your most valuable tool in reading tablature is your ears. Listen to the audio samples while you look at the tablature. Just as you are hearing right now in your mind the sound of the words you are reading on this screen, so do you want to be able to hear the sound of the banjo in your mind as you read the printed tablature.

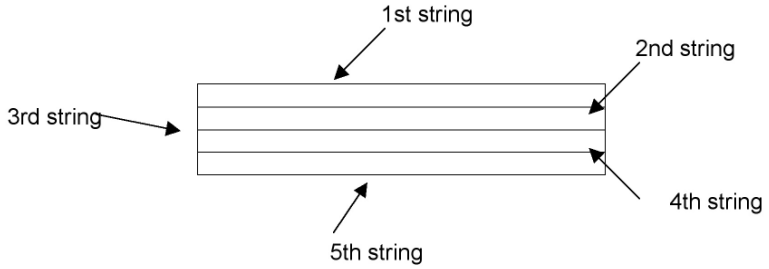
The 5-string banjo tablature system is built upon 5 horizontal lines that represent the 5 strings of the banjo.

Tablature is often referred to as “tab.” Tablature and tab are the same thing.

The visual presentation of the 5 strings, both on the printed page of the magazine and here on your computer screen is as follows:

The top line of the tab, the line which is closest to the top of the printed page and the top of your computer screen, represents the 1st string of the banjo.

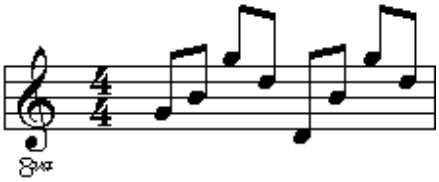
The bottom line of the tab, the line which is closest to the bottom of the printed page and the bottom of your computer screen, represents the 5th string of the banjo.



Because the horizontal lines in tablature represent the strings on the instrument, tablature for 5-string banjo just happens to have the same number of lines as modern standard musical notation which originated in European classical music, which means that unlike other instruments, banjo tab can use regular notation paper as tab paper.

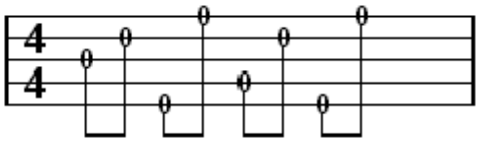
Note the similarities and differences between these two visual representations of music. Both tablature and musical notation are read from left to right.

Musical Notation:



Click to hear Example 2

Banjo Tablature:

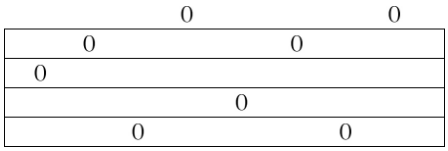


Click to hear Example 3

Musical notation uses notes. A note is a symbol placed on or between the lines of the staff to indicate the pitch and the relative duration of the tone to be produced.

Banjo tab uses numbers and letters. The numbers, starting with zero, are placed on the lines (strings) to indicate the fret at which the left-hand finger is to be placed and the relative duration of the tone to be produced. The letters, placed below the 5 lines, indicate which right-hand finger is to be used to pick the note. Letters are also used to indicate various left-hand techniques (these will be discussed later).

Special Note: Early editions of *Banjo Newsletter* present tab with the numbers <u>above</u> the lines instead of <u>on</u> the lines as in this example:



For now, learn these letter abbreviations for the right-hand picking:

T = thumb, I = index finger, M = middle finger

Important: Much of the system of standard musical notation is incorporated into the system of tablature including the use of time signature, note values, repeat signs, and the division of the piece of music into measures (also called bars).

What Key is the Tab in? What Tuning is being used?

Each tab in Banjo Newsletter is accompanied with information about the Key and the Tuning which usually looks something like this:

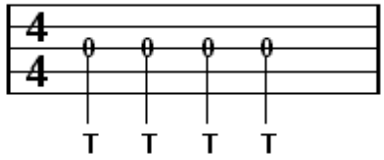
(1) Key of G, (2) G Tuning: (3) gDGBD.

(1) gives you the name of the Key.
(2) gives you the name of the Tuning being used.
(3) gives you the pitch of the notes to which the 5 strings of the banjo are tuned. The strings are listed from left to right in this order: 5-4-3-2-1. The 5th string is written in lower case while the other four strings are written in upper case letters.

Unless otherwise noted, the examples in this tutorial will be played with the banjo tuned to gDGBD.

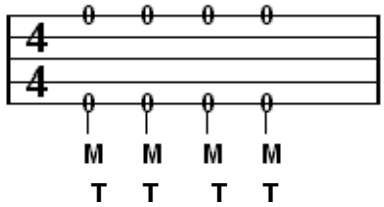
Playing Open Strings

An open string is shown in the tab with a zero. In this example, the Thumb plays the Open 3rd string four times:



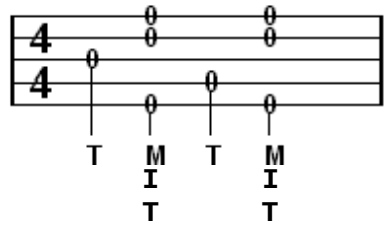
Click to hear Example 4

You can play more than one string at a time. In this example the Thumb and Middle fingers pick the 5th and 1st strings together four times:



Click to hear Example 5

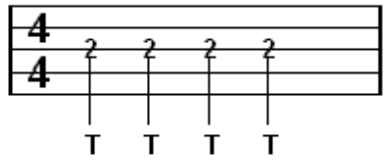
Playing 2 or 3 strings at the same time is often referred to as a pinch. Here is an example that alternates single open strings with pinches:



Click to hear Example 6

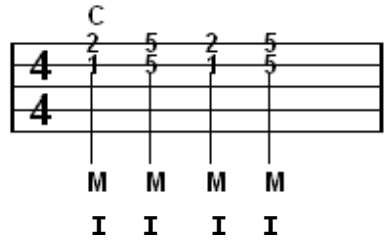
Playing Fretted Strings

The 2nd fret of the 3rd string is shown in this measure of tab. In this example, the Thumb plays the note four times:



Click to hear Example 7

You can play more than one fretted note at a time. In this example, the Index and Middle fingers play pinches on two partial C chords; the first C chord at the 1st and 2nd frets and the second C chord at the 5th fret:



Click to hear Example 8

Note Values

What do the notes look like?

A quarter note has a stem and no flag.
An eighth note has a stem and 1 flag.
A sixteenth note has a stem and 2 flags.

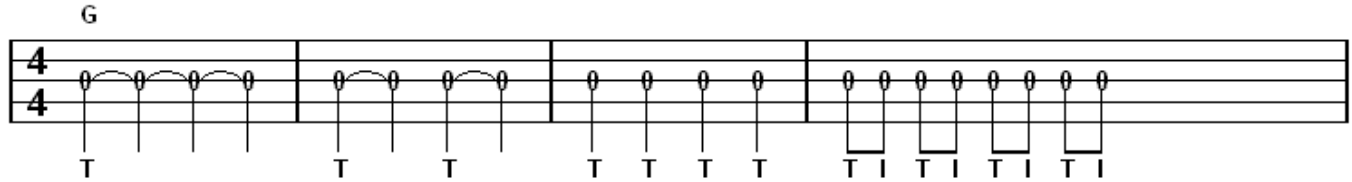
Stem: The vertical line connected to the number in the banjo tab.
Flag: The horizontal line(s) connected to the stem of the number in the banjo tab.

The question is: How long should each note last?

Remember that part of the definition of a note is “A note indicates the relative duration of the tone to be produced.”

This is an example of 4 measures with each measure containing notes of different duration.

The first measure contains 1 whole note, created by tying together 4 quarter notes.
(A “tie” is a curved line joining two or more notes together. When notes are tied together, only the first note is sounded and it is held for the duration of all the notes that are tied.)
The second measure contains 2 half notes, each created by tying together 2 quarter notes.
The third measure contains 4 quarter notes.
The fourth measure contains 8 eighth notes.



Click to hear Example 9

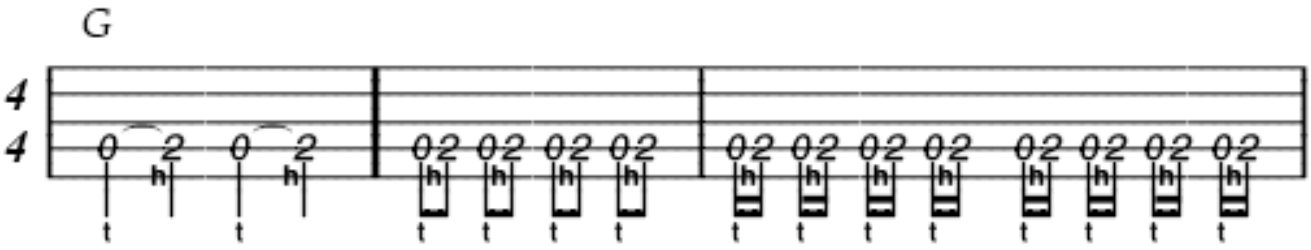
Remember the duration of the note is relative. There is no fixed length of time such as 1 second or 5 seconds that a particular note value is required to sustain. The duration of the note is directly proportional to the tempo of the piece.

Here is the same example of tab with whole note, half notes, quarter notes and eighth notes – this time played at a faster tempo than in the previous audio example.

Click to hear Example 10

The 2 most common notes created by picking the strings with the right-hand fingers are the quarter note and the eighth note. When left-hand techniques such as the slide, the hammer-on, and the pull-off are used, sixteenth notes are often created. These 3 note values – quarter, eighth and sixteenth are the time values you will see most often in 3-finger style banjo tab in Banjo Newsletter.

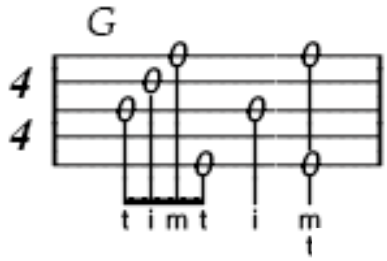
Here’s a 3-measure example that compares the relative duration of quarter, eighth and sixteenth notes. The left-hand technique being used is the hammer-on from the open 4th string to the 2nd fret of the 4th string:



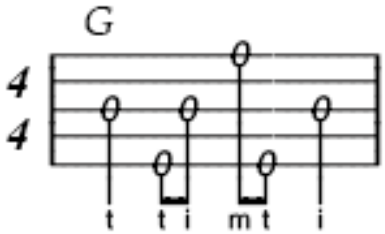
Click to hear Example 11

It is the combination of quarter, eighth and sixteenth notes within a single measure that you will find in the actual tablatures published in Banjo Newsletter.

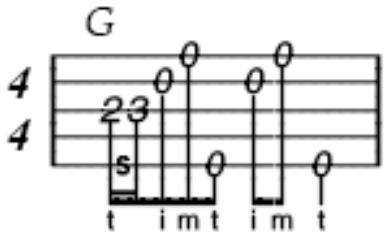
Here are 4 examples:



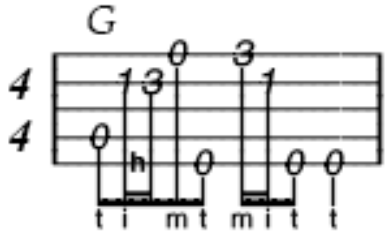
Click to hear Example 12



Click to hear Example 13



Click to hear Example 14



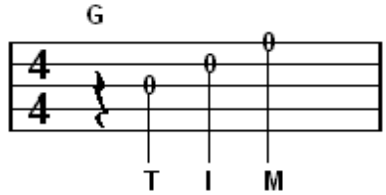
Click to hear Example 15

Rests

A rest is an interval of silence in a piece of music. Each rest symbol corresponds with a particular note value.

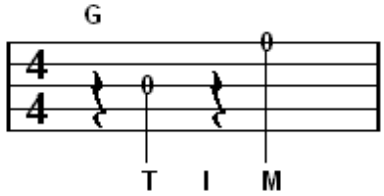
The most common rests you will see in banjo tablature are the quarter rest and the eighth rest.

This example shows a measure that starts with a quarter rest followed by 3 quarter notes. Listen to the count on the audio example to hear that the banjo does not play on the number 1, but it does play on numbers 2, 3 and 4:



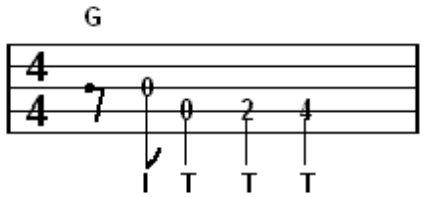
Click to hear Example 16

In this example, the open 2nd string shown in the previous tab is replaced with a rest. Listen to the count and you will note that the banjo does not play on counts 1 and 3, but it does play on counts 2 and 4:



Click to hear Example 17

This example shows an eighth note rest at the intro to a tune. Listen to the count. In order to clearly mark this quick rest, the word “and” is inserted between the number 1 and the number 2. Listen closely. The banjo does not play on count 1. Instead, the banjo starts to play on the word “and” just before the number 2:

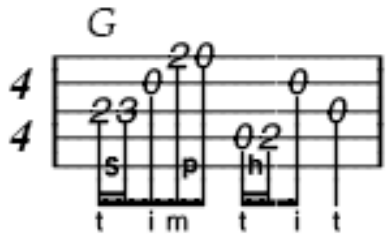


Click to hear Example 18

Left Hand Techniques

s = slide
h = hammer-on
p = pull-off

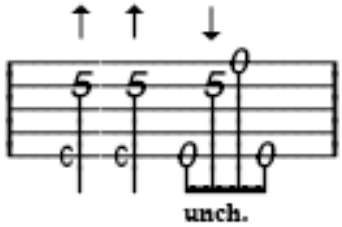
In the Banjo Newsletter tablature, left-hand techniques are printed on the bottom line of the tab, above and between the right-hand fingering. The following example demonstrates a slide, a pull-off and a hammer-on in the same measure:



Click to hear Example 19

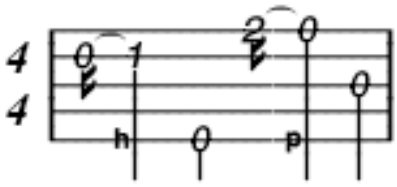
Chokes

A choke is a bent string. By pressing your fretting finger against the string, away from you, you raise the pitch of the note. To “unchoke” is to play a choked string and release it.



Grace Notes

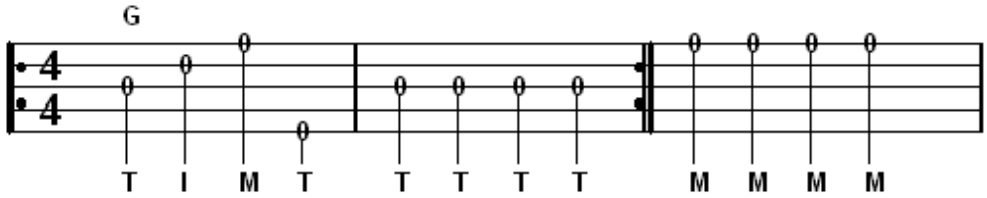
A grace note is a very quick note that has no time value of its own, but is instead attached to another note that does have a time value. In the following example, the 2nd string in picked open and then hammered on at the 1st fret as quickly as possible, so that both notes effectively occur right on beat 1. On beat 3, the 1st string is played at the 2nd fret and then immediately pulled off to the open position so that once again, both notes appear to happen right on the beat. This measure would simply be counted “1 2 3 4” even though two notes are being played on beats 1 and 3.



Click to hear Example 20

Repeat Signs

A repeat sign indicates a section of the tablature which is to be repeated. In this example, you are instructed to play measure 1 and measure 2 and then return to the start of measure 1 to play those same two measures a second time before moving on to measure 3. Notice that the repeat signs face each other, bracketing the section that is to be repeated:

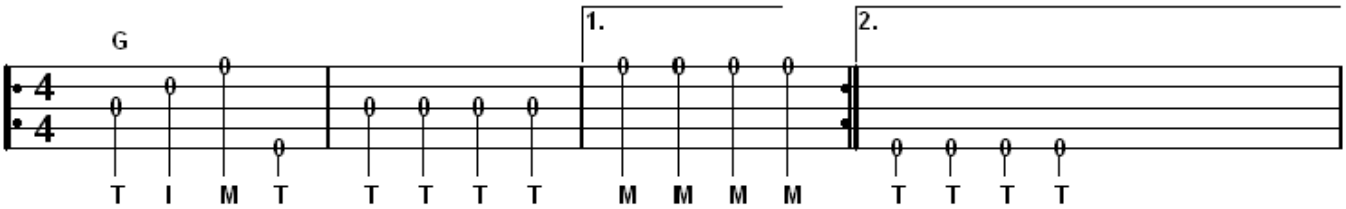


Click to hear Example 21

First and Second Endings

When the second time through a repeated section has a different ending from the first time, numbers and brackets are used to indicate “First Ending” and “Second Ending.”

In this example, the repeat signs and First and Second Endings indicate you should play the tab as follows: play measures 1 and 2 and then play the First Ending which is measure 3. The Repeat Sign then tells you to go back and play measures 1 and 2 again, this time going directly to the Second Ending after measure 2, therefore skipping measure 3. Follow along with the audio example.



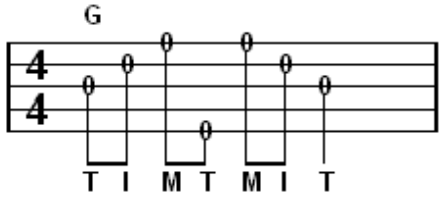
Click to hear Example 22

Playing in Different Keys: Using a Capo but Thinking in the Key of G

The chords symbols in BNL are written above the tablature as if no capo were in use. This way, G licks are always labeled “G”; C licks labeled “C”, etc. While this leaves the player to transpose the chords when playing in the capoed key, experience has shown that this approach is actually simpler and more efficient than trying to label the chords in the capoed position.

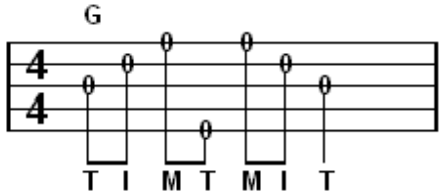
The following two examples of banjo tablature both have the G chord symbol written above the numbers on the strings. The first example has the *sound* of a real G chord because the banjo is played without using a capo. The second example is played using a capo at the 2nd fret, so the *sound* is that of an A chord when you play the open strings.

Key of G, G Tuning: gDGBD, no capo



Click to hear Example 23

Key of A, capo 2nd fret, G Tuning: gDGBD



Click to hear Example 24

In the second example (Key of A) you really are playing an A chord when you play the open strings because the new zero fret is where the capo is located. By placing the capo at the 2nd fret, you have effectively created a new zero fret – you've cut yourself off from the real 1st and 2nd frets on your banjo.

It should also be noted that the key indication is a characteristic of the music, while the tuning indication is a description of the physical state of the banjo, with regard to tuning. In other words, while in G tuning (gDGBD), the music played could be in the Key of C, the Key of D, or any other particular key. Some keys work better in certain tunings than others, but in theory, a song in any key can be played using any tuning.