

# Triads Lesson

This triads lesson is in four parts.

- Part 1 is a brief explanation of what triads are.
- Part 2 shows how to play triads on the guitar.
- Part 3 shows how to practice triads to get them under your fingers and really get to know the fretboard.
- Part 4 shows how to use triads to practice improvisation.

This lesson will make a LOT more sense if you watch the accompanying videos, especially parts 2-4, where I demonstrate triad exercises and concepts on the guitar. Here are the links:

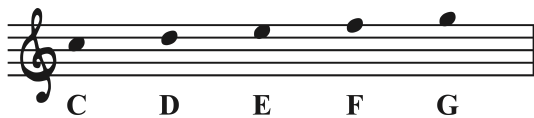
- Part 1 <https://youtu.be/GYNes8HcyGc>
- Part 2 <https://youtu.be/jlr7DaX56-s>
- Part 3 <https://youtu.be/b4YqaL1zmk4>
- Part 4 <https://youtu.be/Bg1So-cqA2I>

For a deeper dive into music theory, including triads, scales, and much more, please check out my book [Guitar Theory Modules](#) or [watch the video series](#).

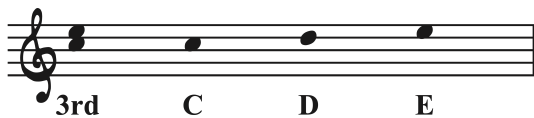
# Part 1: What Is a Triad?

[Click here](#) for the video.

A triad consists of 3 notes stacked in thirds. There are four types of triads: **major**, **minor**, **augmented**, and **diminished**.



These are the first 5 notes of a **C major scale**.

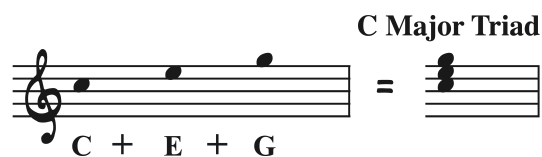


C to E is a 3<sup>rd</sup>. (C-D-E: 1-2-3)



E to G is a 3<sup>rd</sup>. (E-F-G: 1-2-3)

Stack them all up [C-E-G] and we have a **C major triad**.



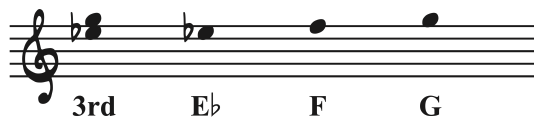
Now we have the first 5 notes of a **C minor scale**.



C to Eb is a 3<sup>rd</sup>.



Eb to G is a 3<sup>rd</sup>.



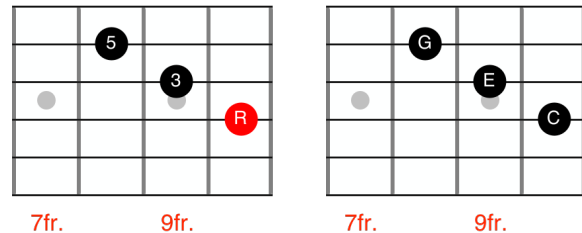
Stack them all up [C-Eb-G] and we have a **C minor triad**.



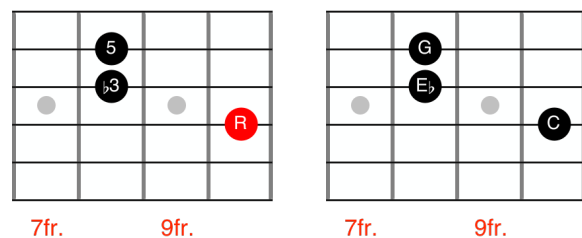
[Click here](#) for the video.

In many of the diagrams in this lesson, you'll see labels like **R-3-5** or **R-b3-5**. These refer to the parts of the triad. **R** stands for the **root** of the chord: the note upon which the chord is built.

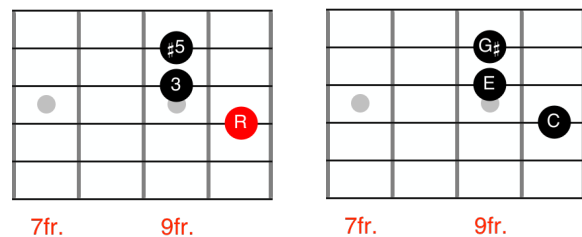
In the C major triad (C-E-G), the **root** is C, the **3<sup>rd</sup>** is E, and the **5<sup>th</sup>** is G.



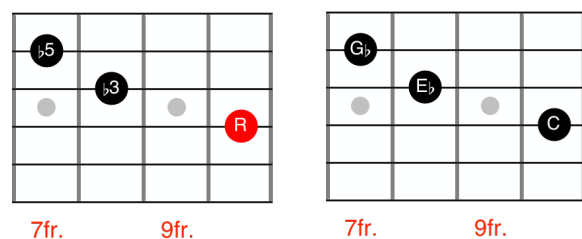
You can alter the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> by raising or lowering it. In a **minor** triad, you lower the 3<sup>rd</sup> of a major triad, so now we call it a **flat 3 (minor 3<sup>rd</sup>)**.



In an **augmented** triad, you raise the 5<sup>th</sup> of a major triad, labeling it as **sharp 5 (augmented 5<sup>th</sup>)**.



In a **diminished** triad, you lower the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> of a major triad, labeling them as **flat 3 (minor 3<sup>rd</sup>)** and **flat 5 (diminished 5<sup>th</sup>)**.



- So a C major triad is spelled C-E-G, or R-3-5.
- A C minor triad is spelled C-E<sub>b</sub>-G, or R-b3-5.
- A C augmented triad is spelled C-E-G<sup>#</sup>, or R-3-<sup>#</sup>5.
- A C diminished triad is spelled C-E<sub>b</sub>-G<sub>b</sub>, or R-b3-b5.

[Click here](#) for the video.

- You can apply this information to **any other** triad.
- A **G major** triad consists of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> notes of a G major scale. G-A-B-C-D – **GBD – Root, 3, 5**.
- A G **minor** triad is spelled **G-Bb-D**, or **Root, b3, and 5**.
- A G **augmented** triad is spelled **G-B-D#**, or **Root, 3, and #5**.
- And a G **diminished** triad is spelled **G-Bb-Db**, or **Root, b3, and b5**.

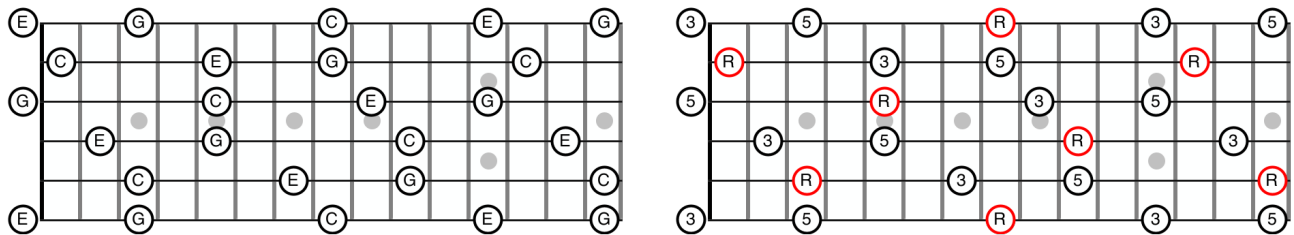
That was a VERY brief introduction to what triads are. If you want to further explore triads and other music theory concepts, please check out my book [Guitar Theory Modules](#) or check out the [Guitar Theory Modules video playlist](#).

In the next section, you'll learn how to find and play triads all over the neck.

## Part 2: Playing Triads on the Guitar

Now that you know what triads are, it's time to learn how to play them. We're going to look at major, minor, and diminished triads in root position, 1<sup>st</sup> inversion, and 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion. This information is much easier to digest if you can see it demonstrated. For that, check out the [Triads 2 video](#).

### Major Triads in Root Position

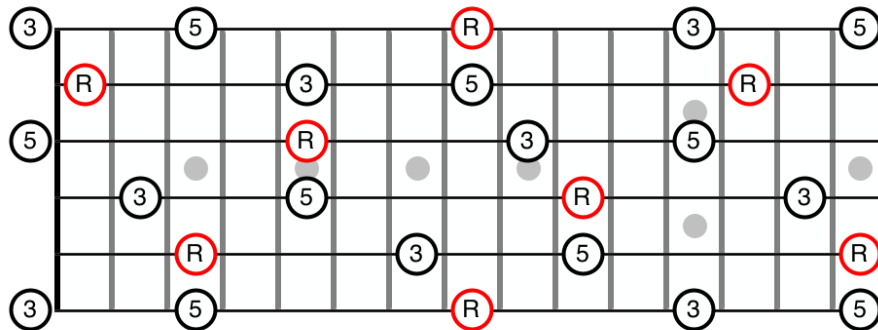


Above is a diagram of all the C-E-G notes on the neck – the notes that make up a C major triad. It's useful to think of these notes by function so we can apply this information to other triads, so the second example above has R-3-5 labels (Root, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>).

You can take any set of three adjacent strings and play a root position triad. **Root position** means you are playing the root as the lowest sounding note. For example, you can form a root position C major triad by playing the C on the 3<sup>rd</sup> string (fret 5), plus the nearby E on the 2<sup>nd</sup> string (fret 5) and the nearby G on the 1<sup>st</sup> string (fret 3). If you take some time to explore the fretboard, you'll find root position major triads on each set of three adjacent strings.

Check out the [Triads 2 video](#) for a playing demo on all string sets.

## Major Triads in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Inversion



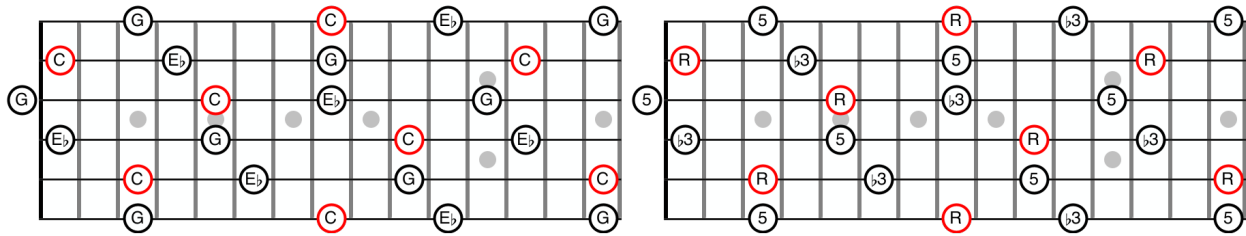
There's no rule that says you must play triads in root position. You can also play triads in 1<sup>st</sup> inversion and 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion.

**In 1<sup>st</sup> inversion, you play the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the chord as the lowest sounding note.** To play a 1<sup>st</sup> inversion C major triad on three adjacent strings, you could play the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the chord (E) on the 3<sup>rd</sup> string (fret 9), the 5<sup>th</sup> of the chord (G) on the 2<sup>nd</sup> string (fret 8), and the root of the chord (C) on the 1<sup>st</sup> string (fret 8). If you take some time to explore the fretboard, you'll find 1<sup>st</sup> inversion major triads on each set of three adjacent strings, and these patterns apply to ALL major chords, not just C chords.

**In 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion, you play the 5<sup>th</sup> of the chord as the lowest sounding note.** To play a 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion C major triad on three adjacent strings, you could play the 5<sup>th</sup> of the chord (G) on the 6<sup>th</sup> string (fret 3), the root of the chord (C) on the 5<sup>th</sup> string (fret 3), and the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the chord (E) on the 4<sup>th</sup> string (fret 2). Exploring the fretboard, you'll find 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion major triads on each set of three adjacent strings. Again, these patterns apply to ALL major chords.

Check out the [Triads 2 video](#) for a playing demo on all string sets.

## Minor Triads: Root Position, 1<sup>st</sup> Inversion, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Inversion



Above is a map of all the C-Eb-G notes on the fretboard, so now we're looking at the notes that form a C minor triad. As with the major triads, it's helpful to label these notes by their function so you can apply these patterns to other triads. In the diagram on the right, the labels are R (root), b3 (flat 3<sup>rd</sup>/minor 3<sup>rd</sup>), and 5 (5<sup>th</sup>).

Just as with major triads, you can play minor triads on any set of three adjacent strings in root position (root as lowest sounding note), 1<sup>st</sup> inversion (3<sup>rd</sup> as lowest sounding note), or 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion (5<sup>th</sup> as lowest sounding note).

### Examples:

You could play a **root position** C minor triad with the root on the 3<sup>rd</sup> string (fret 5), the 3<sup>rd</sup> on the 2<sup>nd</sup> string (fret 4), and the 5<sup>th</sup> on the 1<sup>st</sup> string (fret 3).

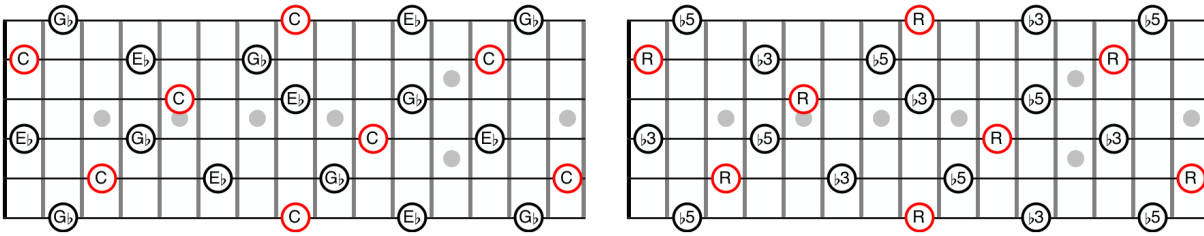
You could play a **1<sup>st</sup> inversion** C minor triad with the 3<sup>rd</sup> on the 5<sup>th</sup> string (fret 6), the 5<sup>th</sup> on the 4<sup>th</sup> string (fret 5), and the root on the 3<sup>rd</sup> string (fret 5).

And you could play a **2<sup>nd</sup> inversion** C minor triad with the 5<sup>th</sup> on the 4<sup>th</sup> string (fret 5), the root on the 3<sup>rd</sup> string (fret 5), and the 3<sup>rd</sup> on the 2<sup>nd</sup> string (fret 4).

Check out the [Triads 2 video](#) for a playing demo on all string sets.



## Diminished Triads and Inversions



This is a map of all the C-Eb-Gb notes on the fretboard, so now we're looking at the notes that form a C diminished triad. Again, it's helpful to label these notes by their function so you can apply these patterns to other triads. In the diagram on the right, the labels are R (root), b3 (flat 3<sup>rd</sup>/minor 3<sup>rd</sup>), and b5 (flat 5<sup>th</sup>/diminished 5<sup>th</sup>).

And, not surprisingly by now, you can play diminished triads on any set of three adjacent strings in root position (root as lowest sounding note), 1<sup>st</sup> inversion (3<sup>rd</sup> as lowest sounding note), or 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion (5<sup>th</sup> as lowest sounding note).

### Examples:

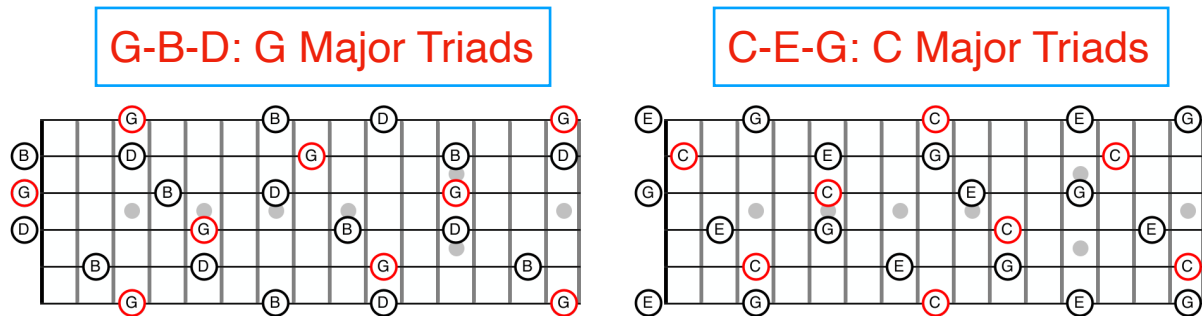
You could play a **root position** C diminished triad with the root on the 3<sup>rd</sup> string (fret 5), the 3<sup>rd</sup> on the 2<sup>nd</sup> string (fret 4), and the 5<sup>th</sup> on the 1<sup>st</sup> string (fret 2).

You could play a **1<sup>st</sup> inversion** C diminished triad with the 3<sup>rd</sup> on the 5<sup>th</sup> string (fret 6), the 5<sup>th</sup> on the 4<sup>th</sup> string (fret 4), and the root on the 3<sup>rd</sup> string (fret 5).

And you could play a **2<sup>nd</sup> inversion** C diminished triad with the 5<sup>th</sup> on the 4<sup>th</sup> string (fret 4), the root on the 3<sup>rd</sup> string (fret 5), and the 3<sup>rd</sup> on the 2<sup>nd</sup> string (fret 4).

Check out the [Triads 2 video](#) for a playing demo on all string sets.

## Learning the Fretboard



To put these triad patterns to use, you need to learn the fretboard. If you need help in that area, visit my [free downloads page](#) and scroll down to find the free “Learn the Fretboard” PDF.

Let's say you want to figure out how to play **G major triads**. First, you need to be able to find all the G notes so you can find the root notes. Compared to the C major triads above, the root notes have shifted from C to G, but **the triad patterns are all the same relative to the root note**.

For example, to play a C major triad with the root on the 4<sup>th</sup> string, you would play your root note (C) at the 10<sup>th</sup> fret and play the nearby E and G notes on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> strings.

To play a G major triad with the root on the same string (4<sup>th</sup>), you would play your root note (G) at the 5<sup>th</sup> fret and play the nearby B and D notes on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> strings in the same diagonal pattern as the C major triad with the root on the same string. **This information applies to all triads and inversions.** Check out the [Triads 2 video](#) for a playing demo.

This is a lot of information to digest! In the next section, you'll learn some exercises to help get these triads under your fingers.

## Part 3: Triad Playing Exercises

In this section, you'll learn two triad exercises to help get triads under your fingers. This type of work takes time and patience, but if you spend 5-10 minutes a day with these exercises, you'll gain a deeper understanding of the fretboard and will eventually be able to put triads to practical use.

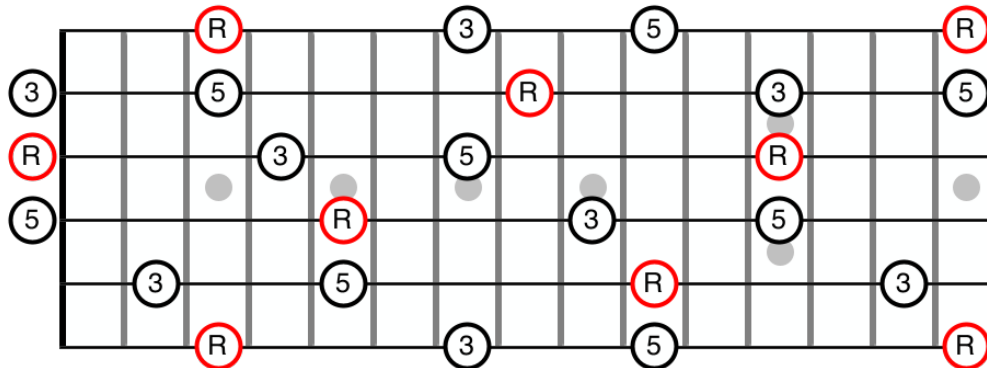
For help learning the fretboard, visit my [free downloads page](#) and scroll down to find the free "Learn the Fretboard" PDF.

It's much easier to show how to play these exercises than it is to describe them, so I recommend checking out the [Triads 3 video](#) for a clear demonstration.

In this document and in the video, I play all exercises using **G major** and **G minor triads** only, but you should apply these exercises to **all triads**.

Also, the diagrams are all labeled by function (R-3-5) to help you think in terms of triad patterns rather than individual notes.

## Horizontal Block Chord Exercise (G Major Triads)



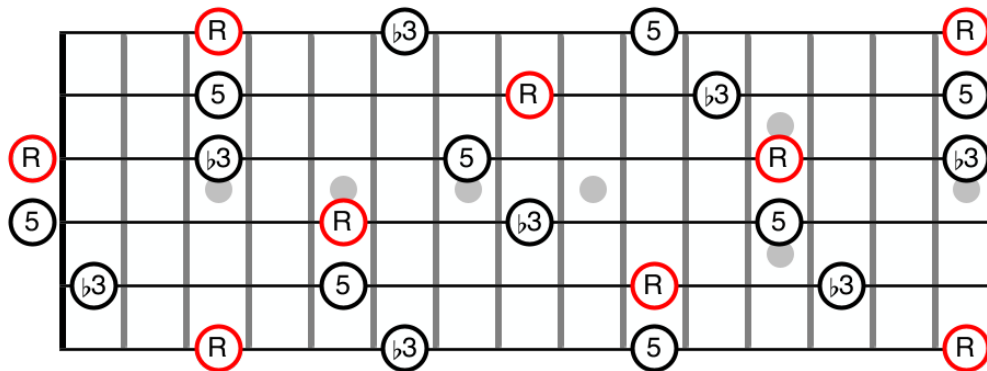
- Start by playing a G major triad on strings 4-5-6 in the lowest position possible. In this case, that'll be a root position G major triad with the root on string 6, fret 3. For other chords, the lowest possible triad might be in 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion.
- **Make sure to play a root, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> in every string set.** Don't double any notes.
- Next, stay on strings 4-5-6 and move up to the next inversion. For the G triad, that'll be starting with the 3<sup>rd</sup> on the 6<sup>th</sup> string.
- Continue moving horizontally on the same set of strings as high as your guitar allows.
- Then work your way back to the starting point.

Once you've worked your way up and down strings 4-5-6, go through the same process on all sets of adjacent strings:

- 3-4-5
- 2-3-4
- 1-2-3

A (moving) picture is worth a thousand words, so I again recommend checking out the [Triads 3 video](#) for a demonstration.

## Horizontal Block Chord Exercise (G Minor Triads)



Now we'll do the same exercise with G minor triads.

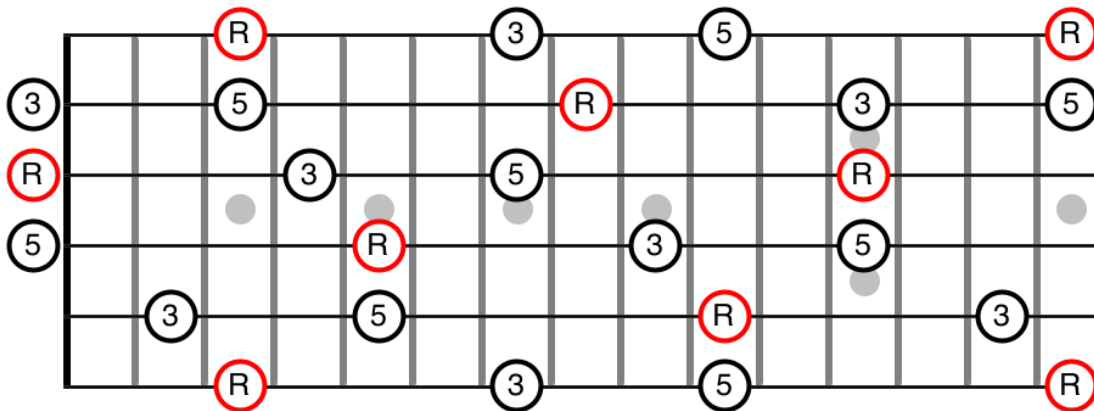
- Start by playing a G minor triad on strings 4-5-6 in the lowest position possible. In this case, that'll be a root position G minor triad with the root on string 6, fret 3. For other chords, the lowest possible triad might be in 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion.
- **Make sure to play a root, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> in every string set.** Don't double any notes.
- Next, stay on strings 4-5-6 and move up to the next inversion. For the G minor triad, that'll be starting with the 3<sup>rd</sup> on the 6<sup>th</sup> string.
- Continue moving horizontally on the same set of strings as high as your guitar allows.
- Then work your way back to the starting point.

Once you've worked your way up and down strings 4-5-6, go through the same process on all sets of adjacent strings:

- 3-4-5
- 2-3-4
- 1-2-3

Check out the [Triads 3 video](#) for a demonstration.

## Vertical Block Chord Exercise (G Major Triads)

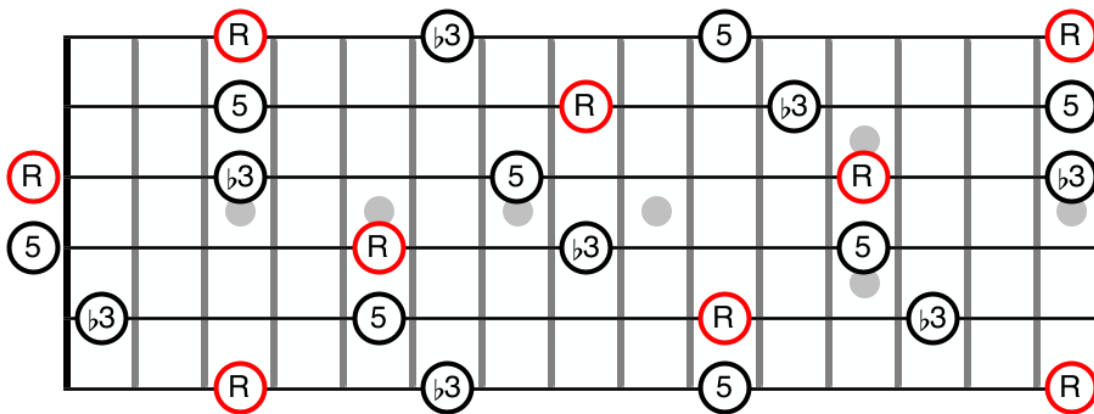


We return to G major triads, but this time, we'll practice them vertically – from string set to string set.

- As before, start by playing a G major triad on strings 4-5-6 in the lowest position possible. In this case, that'll be a root position G major triad with the root on string 6, fret 3.
- Next, move to strings 3-4-5 and play a 1<sup>st</sup> inversion triad.
- **Again, make sure to include a root, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> in each set.**
- Next, move to strings 2-3-4 and play a 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion triad.
- That's as far as you can go at this end of the guitar, so work your way back down to your starting point.
- From your starting point, move along strings 4-5-6 to play a G major triad in 1<sup>st</sup> inversion.
- Now you will be able to play all three sets of adjacent strings. Move from string set to string set, playing 1<sup>st</sup> inversion, then 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion, root position, and 1<sup>st</sup> inversion again on strings 1-2-3.
- Work your way back down to your starting point.
- Continue moving up the fretboard high as your guitar allows, playing from inversion to inversion, **always including a root, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> in each set.**

Check out the [Triads 3 video](#) for a demonstration.

## Vertical Block Chord Exercise (G Minor Triads)



Now we'll practice G minor triads vertically.

- As before, start by playing a G minor triad on strings 4-5-6 in the lowest position possible. In this case, that'll be a root position G minor triad with the root on string 6, fret 3.
- Next, move to strings 3-4-5 and play a 1<sup>st</sup> inversion triad.
- **Again, make sure to include a root, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> in each set.**
- That's as far as you can go at this end of the guitar, so work your way back down to your starting point.
- From your starting point, move along strings 4-5-6 to play a G minor triad in 1<sup>st</sup> inversion.
- Now you will be able to play all three sets of adjacent strings. Move from string set to string set, playing 1<sup>st</sup> inversion, then 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion, root position, and 1<sup>st</sup> inversion again on strings 1-2-3.
- Work your way back down to your starting point.
- Continue moving up the fretboard as high as your guitar allows, playing from inversion to inversion, **always including a root, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> in each set.**

Check out the [Triads 3 video](#) for a demonstration.

## Part 4: Using Triads as Improv Practice

The first three sections of this lesson explained triads and how to play them. Once you are comfortable with the horizontal and vertical triad exercises, you can start to use triads to enhance your improvisation.

When you first begin improvising, you'll get a lot of advice about which scales to learn and which modes to play. Scales and modes are important, but **arpeggios and target notes** are often overlooked.

**Target notes are the notes that belong in a chord.** Your improvisation can sound more coherent if you are able to hit target notes on the strong beats, and outlining (or arpeggiating) triads can really help you find those target notes.

As you'll see in these exercises, you can use scales to connect target notes.

These exercises are planned out, so you can't call them improvisation. However, if you work on triad arpeggios like this, you will dramatically improve your fretboard knowledge and be able to keep your bearings more easily when improvising.

This lesson assumes you understand the triad lessons up to this point, and that you know the fretboard. If you need help in that area, visit my [free downloads page](#) and scroll down to find the free "Learn the Fretboard" PDF.

And watch the [Triads 4](#) video for a demonstration.

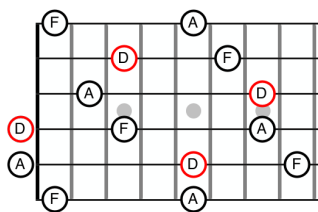


## Outlining Triads from the Root (Hitting the Target Notes)

We'll use this D minor progression for all our examples, but you can apply the exercises to other chord progressions.

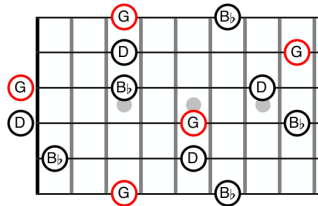


For this exercise, outline each triad, playing root to 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup>. **As you do this, play each triad in the same area of the fretboard.**



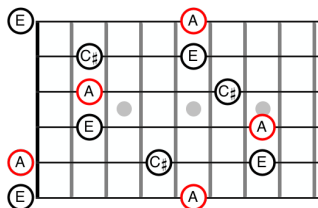
Play the D minor triad arpeggio like this:

- D on string 5, fret 5
- F on string 5, fret 8
- A on string 4, fret 7



Play the G minor triad arpeggio like this:

- G on string 4, fret 5
- Bb on string 4, fret 8
- D on string 3, fret 7



Play the A major triad arpeggio like this:

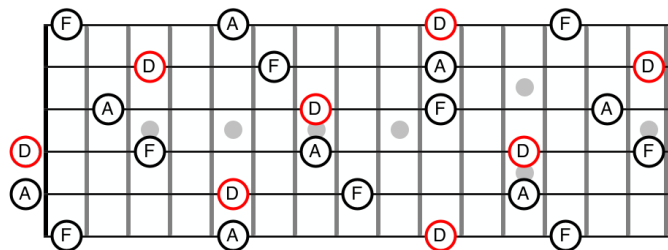
- A on string 4, fret 7
- C# on string 3, fret 6
- E on string 2, fret 5

Watch the [Triads 4](#) video for a demonstration.

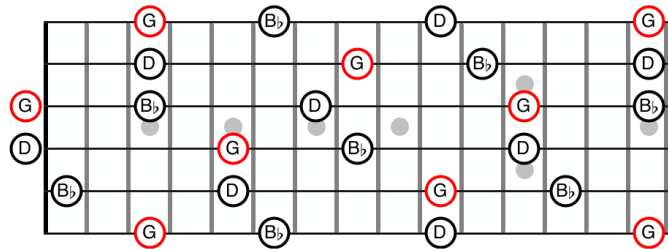
Once you learn how to outline a set of triads in one area of the fretboard, try arpeggiating the same triads in **other** areas of the fretboard, taking them up or down an octave as needed. Learning how to play the same thing in different areas of the fretboard will really help you learn the neck and open up your improvisation.

To start outlining triads in different parts of the fretboard, decide where you want to play the first triad in the progression, and then figure out how to play the other triads in the same area.

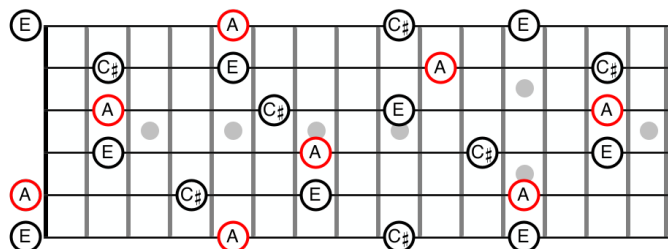
D Minor Triad Notes



G Minor Triad Notes



A Major Triad Notes

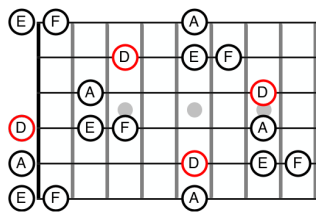


If you need help learning the fretboard, visit my [free downloads page](#) and scroll down to find the free “Learn the Fretboard” PDF.

## Connecting Target Notes with Scale Tones

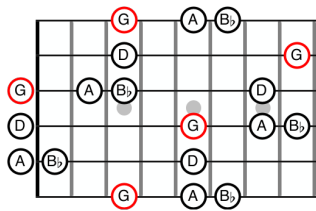
Once you are comfortable arpeggiating the triads in a chord progression, you can connect these target notes with scale tones. In this example, we are connecting the root and 3<sup>rd</sup> of each triad with a note from the key of D minor. Each connecting note comes from the D harmonic minor scale or the D melodic minor scale.

[Click here](#) if you need help learning scales, and watch the [Triads 4](#) video for a demonstration of this exercise.



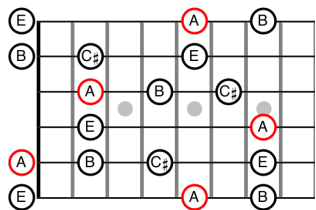
Play the D minor like this:

- D on string 5, fret 5
- E on string 5, fret 7
- F on string 5, fret 8
- A on string 4, fret 7



Play the G minor like this:

- G on string 4, fret 5
- A on string 4, fret 7
- Bb on string 4, fret 8
- D on string 3, fret 7

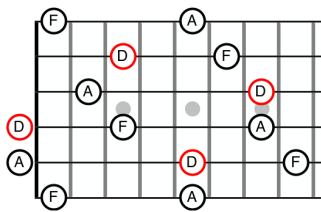


Play the A major like this:

- A on string 4, fret 7
- B on string 3, fret 4
- C# on string 3, fret 6
- E on string 2, fret 5

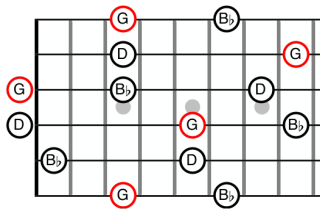
## Outlining Triads from the 3rd (Hitting the Target Notes)

It's easiest to start triad arpeggios from the root, but you can start them on any note in the chord. In this example, we are playing the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and then the root.



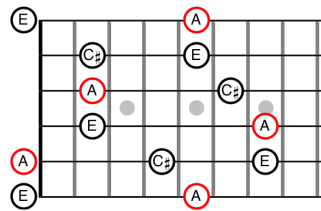
Play the D minor triad arpeggio like this:

- F on string 5, fret 8
- A on string 4, fret 7
- D on string 5, fret 5



Play the G minor triad arpeggio like this:

- B $\flat$  on string 4, fret 8
- D on string 3, fret 7
- G on string 4, fret 5



Play the A major triad arpeggio like this:

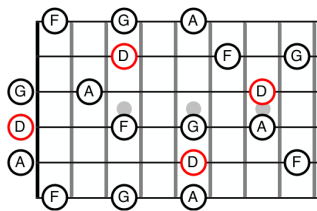
- C $\sharp$  on string 3, fret 6
- E on string 2, fret 5
- A on string 4, fret 7

If you need help learning the fretboard, visit my [free downloads page](#) and scroll down to find the free “Learn the Fretboard” PDF.

Watch the [Triads 4](#) video for a demonstration of this exercise.

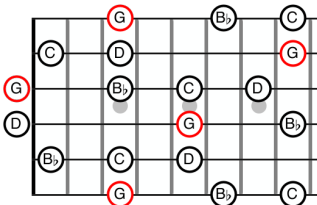
## Connecting Target Notes with Scale Tones (Starting on the 3<sup>rd</sup>)

As before, you can connect these target notes with scale tones. We are now connecting the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of each triad with a note from the key of D minor. [Click here](#) if you need help learning scales, and watch the [Triads 4](#) video for a demonstration of this exercise.



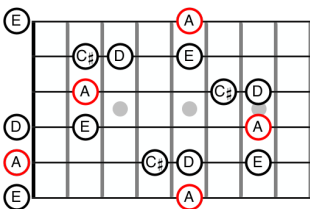
Play the D minor like this:

- F on string 5, fret 8
- G on string 4, fret 5
- A on string 4, fret 7
- D on string 5, fret 5



Play the G minor like this:

- B $\flat$  on string 4, fret 8
- C on string 3, fret 5
- D on string 3, fret 7
- G on string 4, fret 5



Play the A major like this:

- C $\sharp$  on string 3, fret 6
- D on string 3, fret 7
- E on string 2, fret 5
- A on string 4, fret 7

## Wrapping It Up

There are endless combinations chord progressions, inversions, and connecting notes. When you practice exercises like this, you'll first have to spend a lot of time figuring out where you can play your target notes. It gets easier over time. If you keep at it, you'll eventually be able to do this without having to think about it much, and in the meantime, you'll deepen your fretboard knowledge immensely.

As mentioned earlier, these types of exercises aren't exactly improvisation, but they will provide a framework for you.

While this lesson is all about triads, it's important to know your scales as well so you can learn to connect your target notes.

For further exploration, check out these links:

- [My YouTube Channel](#)
- [Triads 1](#)
- [Triads 2](#)
- [Triads 3](#)
- [Triads 4](#)
- [Guitar Theory Modules](#)
- [Learn the Fretboard PDF](#) (link takes you to my Free Downloads page)
- [First Three Guitar Scales](#)
- [Three Ways to Play a Chromatic Scale](#)
- [Five Ways to Play a Major Scale](#)
- [Five Ways to Play a Minor Pentatonic Scale](#)
- [Five Ways to Play a Blues Scale](#)
- [Five Ways to Play a Minor Scale](#)
- [Five Ways to Play a Harmonic Minor Scale](#)
- [Five Ways to Play a Melodic Minor Scale](#)