

Mandolin — Workbook

This workbook turns the Mandolin course into daily practice you can actually do with the instrument in your hands. Each section matches a course module and mixes hands-on exercises, fill-in worksheets, and checklists that build clean double-course tone, driving chop chords, smooth tremolo, and real fiddle tunes from the first session. Work through it with your mandolin, a clip-on tuner, a metronome or drum loop, and a recording of the tune you are learning, and use the editable templates to track tuning, practice time, your chord changes, and the tunes you are building.

Setting Up and Holding the Mandolin

Confirm your action, seated hold, pick grip, and GDAE unison tuning so every later session starts from a clean, relaxed, in-tune setup.

Exercise: Tune All Eight Strings to Unison

Clip on your tuner, set the reference to A 440, and tune every string up to pitch, never down. Tune one string of each course first, then bring its partner up to a pure unison by ear.

- Tuning one string at a time, does each read its target dead centre: G3, D4, A4, E5, reached by tuning up to pitch?
- On each course, pick both strings together; do you hear a pulsing wah-wah beat, and can you make it disappear into a pure unison?
- Pick two adjacent courses together, for example the D and A; do they sound a clean, ringing perfect fifth?
- Does the harmonic at the twelfth fret match the fretted note at the twelfth fret, confirming the floating bridge has not drifted?

Worksheet: My Mandolin Specifications

Fill in the details of your specific instrument and setup. Keep this on hand for string changes, resetting your strap to the same height, and noting any setup work the instrument still needs.

Make and model

Body style (A-style / F-style)

Action at the 12th fret (mm) — aim for 1.5 to 2 mm

Current string brand and gauge (e.g. D'Addario J74 medium / J73 light)

Date strings last changed

Pick brand, shape, and thickness (1.0 to 1.5 mm)

Strap height mark / setting

Tuner or app I use

Setup still needed (nut / action / bridge position)

Exercise: Pick Grip and Open-Course Tone Check

Form your pick grip with a stiff pick, about 3 to 5 mm of tip showing. Anchor the forearm on the body and play slow alternating strokes on each open course, driving from a relaxed wrist.

- Is the pick held between the thumb pad and the side of the curled index, firm but not clamped?
- On each open course, does the pick strike both strings nearly flat so they sound as one clean note, not a doubled flam?
- Is the motion coming from a relaxed wrist rotation rather than the whole arm or a stiff jab?
- After two minutes of playing, does your forearm feel relaxed, or is it aching from a death grip?

Checklist: Setup and Posture Check

- Mandolin set up with low, even action (roughly 1.5 to 2 mm at the 12th fret)
- Strap on so the instrument stays put and the hands are free even when seated
- Body resting on the right thigh, face nearly vertical, neck angled slightly up
- Both shoulders down and level, spine tall, not hunched over to watch the hands
- Left thumb on the side or back of the neck, not wrapped over the top
- Pick is stiff (1.0 to 1.5 mm) with only 3 to 5 mm of tip showing
- All four courses tuned up to pitch and in pure unison

Double-Course Picking and Clean Tone

Lock in even alternate picking that sounds both strings of a course as one, smooth course crossings, and the clean left-hand fretting that kills buzz and flam.

Exercise: Alternating Pick Evenness Drill

Set a metronome to 60 bpm and play one stroke per click on a single open course, strictly alternating down then up, using rest strokes on the lower courses. Record one take to check evenness.

- Are you truly alternating down, up, down, up, never two of the same stroke in a row?
- Does the upstroke match the downstroke in volume and tone, or is the upstroke weaker?
- On the lower courses, does each downstroke follow through and come to rest against the next string?
- On playback, is your timing even, or do you hear rushing or uneven gaps between strokes?

Exercise: Course-Crossing Without the Arm

Play two alternating strokes on the D course then two on the A course, keeping the forearm anchored and the change coming from a small wrist movement. Then cross all four courses in both directions.

- Is the change between courses a small wrist pivot rather than lifting the whole arm?
- Does the beat stay steady through the crossing, with no hitch when you change course?
- Can you cross from G up to E and back down smoothly without losing the alternation?

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- Is each course still being struck flat so both strings sound as one clean note?
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Worksheet: Tab Reading Log

Pick a short, simple piece of mandolin tab and translate it before you play. Fill in how the tab maps to the fingerboard, then pair it with audio for the rhythm.

Tune name and where I found the tab (Mandolin Cafe / Ultimate Guitar / Songsterr)

Which line is which course (bottom to top: G, D, A, E)

Hardest two-bar phrase written out as course + fret (e.g. A course fret 2, then D course open)

Recording I am using for the rhythm

Tempo I can currently play it cleanly (BPM)

Checklist: Tone Fault Finder

- Buzzing note: press more firmly and move the finger closer to the fret wire
- Dead, muffled note: curl the fingertip so it does not lean on the next course, and press harder
- Doubled, sloppy flam: flatten the pick to the strings so both are struck together
- One string of a course rings and the other does not: retune that course to unison
- Whole chord buzzes: curl the fingers onto their tips, just behind the frets
- Thin, weak note: check the pick is catching both strings, not glancing off one

Chords and the Bluegrass Chop

Move from beginner two-finger chords to the movable closed shape, and build the percussive chop that drives bluegrass backup on beats two and four.

Exercise: G to C to D Change Loop

Form the simple two-finger G, C, and D shapes and loop the progression with a metronome at a slow tempo, two strums per chord, prioritising a clean change over speed.

- Does every course in each chord ring clean with no buzz before you start changing?
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- Can you switch G to C and back without a long gap, even if slowly at first?
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- Looping G to C to D to G, does the change land on the downbeat of each new chord?
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- Played along with a slow song in G, do your changes line up with the music?
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Exercise: Chop on Two and Four

Form the four-finger closed chord shape (no open strings). Strike a firm downstroke, then relax the left hand a split second later to kill the ring. Place the chop only on beats 2 and 4 against a metronome at 80 bpm.

- When you let it ring, is the closed shape clean on all four courses with no open strings?
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- Does the percussive cut come from the left hand relaxing to mute, with the pick still moving?
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- Counting 1-2-3-4, does the chop land tightly on 2 and 4 with clear silence between?
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- Can you slide the same shape up two frets (G to A) and chop the new chord without re-learning it?
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Worksheet: Backup Progression Planner

Choose a simple three-chord song and map its changes bar by bar so you can chop the backup. Use the one-four-five pattern for the key.

Song and key (G, A, or D)

The one, four, and five chords in this key (e.g. G: G, C, D)

Chord for each bar, written out in order

Where the song moves to the four chord, and to the five chord

Which fret I place the movable closed shape at for each chord

Checklist: Backup Readiness Check

- I can play clean two-finger G, C, D, and A chords
- I can play the movable four-finger closed shape with no open strings
- My chop is short and percussive, muted by the left hand, like a snare hit
- I place the chop tightly on beats 2 and 4 over a metronome
- I can slide the closed shape to chop any chord in a three-chord song
- I can follow the one-four-five changes and switch on the downbeat

Scales, Tremolo, and Your First Tunes

Build the G and A major scales as movable shapes, develop an even tremolo, and put it all together to play recognizable fiddle tunes in time.

Exercise: Movable Major Scale Builder

Play the one-octave G major scale slowly with strict alternate picking, one stroke per note, using a one-finger-per-fret closed shape. Then slide the same shape up to play A major.

- Are you using strict down-up alternation, one pick stroke per note, ascending and descending?
 - Is the scale fingered as a closed, one-finger-per-fret shape so it can move to any key?
 - When you slide the G shape up to play A major, does the spacing and fingering stay identical?
 - Do the open courses ring in tune as you cross to them, confirming your tuning and timing?
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Exercise: Tremolo Evenness Ladder

With a metronome at 60 bpm, play four even strokes per click on the open A course, then six, then eight, keeping the wrist loose. Then sustain one fretted note with continuous tremolo for four full beats.

- Is your wrist loose and relaxed, producing a fluid shimmer rather than a stiff rattle?
 - Are the down and up strokes matched in volume so there are no lumps or gaps?
 - Climbing four to six to eight strokes per click, does the tremolo stay even, or does it tighten up?
 - Sustaining one note for four beats, does it sound continuous, and can you move to the next note with no gap?
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Worksheet: Fiddle Tune Learning Sheet

Pick one tune from the beginner canon and work it up using the step-by-step method. Fill in each stage as you complete it.

Tune name and key (e.g. Boil Them Cabbage Down, G)

Recording I am learning it from

Hardest phrase, written as course + fret

Slowest tempo I can play it cleanly all the way through (BPM)

Target performance tempo (BPM)

Where, if anywhere, I will add tremolo to sustain a long note

Checklist: First-Tune Readiness Check

- I can play the one-octave G major and A major scales cleanly with alternate picking
- I can sustain a single note with an even, relaxed tremolo for several beats
- I have listened to my chosen tune enough to hum the melody
- I can play the whole tune slowly with clean notes and no buzz
- I can play it in time with a metronome at a steady tempo
- I can play the tune three times in a row without a mistake before speeding up

Your Action Plan

1. Week 1: Learn the parts and the GDAE course order, set your seated hold and pick grip, and tune all eight strings up to pitch and into pure unison.
2. Week 2: Drill clean alternate picking on the open courses, one stroke per click at 60 bpm, matching the upstroke to the downstroke and using rest strokes on the low courses.
3. Week 3: Practise smooth course crossings from the wrist and start reading simple tab, pairing every tab with a recording for the rhythm.
4. Week 4: Run the single-note clarity drill up each course to kill buzz, fretting on the fingertips just behind the fret.
5. Week 5: Learn the simple two-finger G, C, D, and A chords and loop the G to C to D change until it is automatic.
6. Week 6: Build the movable four-finger closed shape and start the chop, placing a tight muted stab on beats 2 and 4 at 80 bpm.
7. Week 7: Back up a simple three-chord song in G, chopping on 2 and 4 and changing shape on the downbeat of each chord.
8. Week 8: Learn the one-octave G major scale as a movable closed shape, then slide it up to play A major, with strict alternate picking.
9. Week 9: Build tremolo from four to six to eight even strokes per beat with a loose wrist, then sustain single notes smoothly.
10. Week 10: Work up Boil Them Cabbage Down to a steady tempo, then add a second tune such as Old Joe Clark or Soldier's Joy.

