

Acoustic Guitar Buying Guide

A Starter's Guide to Buying an Acoustic Guitar

Shopping for an acoustic guitar can be an overwhelming experience. Because guitar makers use a wide range of woods, hardware, and design elements, there are many factors to consider. Specifically, there are four primary areas you will want to consider and/or know about before you start shopping.

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Purpose and Budget

Before you think about brand names or body styles, consider what you are going to use the guitar for, and how much money you have to spend on one.

Skill Level - Amateur or Advanced

If you are a new player who is looking for an instrument to learn on, you may not want to spend too much on a high-end acoustic guitar just yet. Thanks to modern manufacturing techniques, there is a wide selection of good, low- to mid-range acoustic guitars to choose from.

But maybe you are an experienced player who is ready to upgrade to a better guitar. In that case, it is important to know the difference between tonewoods, and how the soundboard effects resonance.

Purpose - Acoustic-Electrics Expand Your Options

Will you be playing with a band, or taking your guitar to public events such as open mic nights? If so, you may want to consider an acoustic-electric guitar.

[Acoustic-electric guitars](#) are equipped with pickups and a preamplifier allowing them to be plugged into an amplifier or sound system without distorting their rich, acoustic sound, and without limiting your mobility while you play. When not plugged in, they play and sound just like other acoustic guitars. These hybrid guitars continue to increase

in popularity with performers, and Musician's Friend offers a wide range of acoustic-electric guitars to match any budget.

Whether you're playing at home or in public, solo or with a band, just starting or upgrading - make sure you consider what you need from a guitar, and how much you have to spend, before you start shopping.

Construction and Design

Once you understand the basics about how an [acoustic guitar](#) is designed and built, you will be able to see and hear subtle differences that will help you pick the best guitar for your needs.



Neck

The neck of the guitar is joined to the guitar body and terminates at the headstock. The fretboard is mounted to the neck's top, and the back is shaped to accommodate the player's fretting hand.

Most acoustic guitars use a set neck, which means the neck is glued onto the body of the guitar. The alternative is a bolt-on neck, which is more commonly used with electric guitars. A heel provides additional support at the back of the neck, where it meets the body of the guitar.

The neck contains a metal truss rod that prevents it from bowing and twisting due to string tension and environmental factors. Adjusting the truss rod corrects intonation issues that prevent the instrument from being tuned properly. This truss rod can be

adjusted either at the headstock, or just inside the body of the guitar, at the base of the neck.

The fretboard, or fingerboard, on the top side of the neck, and is usually a separate piece of wood that is glued to the neck. Fretboards are usually constructed out of rosewood or ebony.

Thin strips of metal, called frets, are embedded in the wood at half-step increments along the 12-tone scale, to indicate where different notes are played. Most guitar fretboards have inlaid dots or symbols on the odd-numbered frets, starting with the third - excluding the 11th and 13th in favor of the 12th, or the octave.

The headstock is located on the end of the neck opposite the guitar body. It is fitted with tuning keys - also known as tuners, tuning pegs, or machine heads. These adjust the tension of each string, changing their pitches. The nut is a small strip located where the headstock meets the neck, that is grooved to guide the strings onto the fretboard. On an acoustic guitar, the nut is commonly made of plastic, but it can also be bone, graphite, or any number of other materials.

Body

The body of an acoustic guitar is composed of the top, also called the soundboard that is supported by internal bracing; the sides, and the back that together form a hollow chamber. The upper body curves are referred to as the upper bout, the usually larger lower body curves are called the lower bout, and the area between them is referred to as the waist.

The size and shape of the body influences both the sound and playability of the instrument. Finding a body shape that matches your physical and musical needs will help ensure you choose the right acoustic guitar. See [Body Styles - Comfort and Resonance](#) below for more.

The sound hole, through which sound projects, is aligned with the waist, at the base of the fretboard and is often fitted with a protective pickguard made of plastic or other materials.

The guitar's strings are mounted to the body of the guitar at the bridge. Bridge pins anchor each string. The thin strip of either bone or plastic that spaces out the strings on the bridge, is called a saddle. The bridge transmits string vibrations to the guitar's top resulting in the instrument's sound output, also referred to as projection.

Acoustic-Electric Guitar Systems

Many musicians find it helpful to be able to plug in their acoustic guitar, but how does an acoustic-electric guitar work? These guitars boast the addition of a pickup system inside the body that turns the vibrations of the soundboard into electronic signals. These signals can be weak, so most acoustic-electric guitars use a preamp to make them stronger.

The preamp is typically located on the side of the guitar that faces up while playing. It includes volume and tone controls, and sometimes a built-in tuner.

Styles and Sound

While all acoustic guitars share the same basic construction and design elements, there are important differences that affect their sound and playability. Each guitar shares those basic characteristics above, but now that you know how an acoustic guitar is designed and built, you will want to consider some of the variables that change how each guitar feels and plays. These variables include:

- Body styles
- Tops
- Neck width and length
- Nylon vs. steel strings
- Tonewood

Understanding your options in these four categories will help you make the best decision as you shop for an acoustic guitar.

Body Styles - Comfort and Resonance

There are about as many nuances to the style of an acoustic guitar body as there are companies that create them. It is important to make sure that you choose a guitar that will produce the sound you want, but also one that is comfortable for you to play whether you are sitting or standing.

The sound board is the top portion of the body of the guitar. In general, the larger the soundboard, the deeper and louder the sound. Other styles combine a large soundboard with a narrow waist to make the guitar more comfortable.

While exact measurements may vary from one guitar manufacturer to the next, some general, popular acoustic guitar body shapes include:

- Concert and Grand Concert
- Auditorium and Grand Auditorium
- Dreadnought
- Jumbo
- Travel and Mini-Acoustics

Concert and Grand Concert



Yamaha FS700S Solid Top Concert Acoustic Guitar

Concert acoustic guitars date to 1854. Their smaller size, generally about 13-1/2" at the lower bout, give them a bright sound with a punchy mid-range. The smaller size is comfortable, and makes these guitars very playable for smaller musicians.



Ibanez AC240 Artwood Grand Concert Acoustic Guitar

Grand Concert body styles are just a bit larger, generally at about 14 to 14-1/4" at the lower bout. They still boast a good mid-range, but with a stronger sound.

Auditorium and Grand Auditorium



The Taylor 314ce Sapele/Spruce has a voluminous Grand Auditorium body that produces a beautifully balanced tonal range, which Taylor's proprietary Expression System amplifies with enormous fidelity.

The auditorium style is a standard mid-sized acoustic guitar, with a lower bout that is generally the same width as a dreadnought, but with a smaller waist. Sometimes referred to as an "orchestra" body, these guitars balance volume, tone, and comfort, and have been regaining popular ground in recent decades. In 1992, Eric Clapton used an acoustic guitar of this body size, when he appeared on MTV Live to record his *Unplugged album*.

The grand auditorium's lower bout is wider than the classic dreadnought's - generally 16" - but the waist is narrower, creating a dramatic hourglass shape. These guitars have a greater range for volume and more balanced tone than smaller body styles.

Dreadnought



Martin Custom D Classic Mahogany Dreadnought Acoustic Guitar

A common acoustic body style that makes use of a very large soundboard is the dreadnought. Dreadnoughts are distinctive for their square bouts, wide waists, and 14-fret necks. The first dreadnought was developed in 1916, and it has been gaining in popularity ever since. Dreadnoughts are very popular among bluegrass guitarists due to their powerful, driving sound.

Jumbo



Yamaha L Series LJ16 Jumbo Acoustic Guitar

These big, boomy guitars are often considered the standard "cowboy" guitars. Up to 17" at the lower bout, these acoustic guitars project loudly and resonate deeply.

Travel and Mini-Acoustics

Smaller players, musicians who travel frequently, and parents shopping for children, may also want to consider travel and mini-acoustic guitars. These guitars were designed for the comfort of smaller players, and for convenience when traveling, but many guitar manufacturers have invested significant time and resources into creating smaller-scale acoustic guitars that don't compromise quality or sound.

Most [mini-acoustics](#) utilize the same familiar shape of a standard acoustic guitar, at about 3/4-scale, with 18 to 20 frets. Others, often referred to as "backpackers," have a narrow body that only fans out slightly from the width of the neck. Backpackers are designed to be durable, lightweight, and easy to pack.

Cutaways



Washburn Festival EA14A Spruce Top Acoustic Cutaway Electric Guitar

Some acoustic guitars, regardless of the body style, feature a cutaway in the upper bout to allow players to more easily reach the higher frets on the guitar neck. Phil Keaggy, a prolific and highly celebrated American guitarist, usually uses an acoustic guitar with a cutaway. If you plan to play leads on your acoustic, or are used to playing an electric guitar, you may prefer a guitar body with a cutaway.

Tops - Solid vs. Laminate



The solid Sitka Spruce top on the big dreadnought body of the [Taylor 310ce Sapele/Spruce Cutaway Acoustic-Electric](#) balances the sapele's warmth with the crisp, articulate character of this prized spruce species.

The top of the guitar has the greatest impact on the tone quality of the instrument. The sound generated by the guitar's strings is transmitted by the bridge to the top where it is amplified. As discussed below under Tonewoods, the wood used for the top strongly influences the tonal characteristics of the guitar. The sound generated by the guitar's strings is transmitted by the bridge to the top where it is amplified. As discussed below under Tonewoods, the wood used for the top strongly influences the tonal characteristics of the guitar. That is why, as mentioned above, the larger the soundboard, the larger the sound.

Acoustic guitar tops are made of either solid wood, or laminate. A solid top is usually made of two, single-ply pieces of wood with their grains matched down the middle of the guitar top. A laminate top is made of several layers of wood - usually a more high-grade one on top, and several generic ones beneath - pressed together.

Laminate does not vibrate as well as solid wood does, so it does not produce as rich a sound or as great a volume. It is, however, an excellent option for beginners, to save money on a first acoustic guitar.

Neck Width and Length

The thickness and width of guitar necks vary, depending on the size of the guitar body. It will not affect the sound of the guitar, but it will affect your comfort with the instrument.

Acoustic necks are usually listed as 12- or 14-fret necks. This number refers to the number of frets above the guitar body, not the total number of frets. On a 12-fret neck, the 13th and 14th frets will be on the body, and, thus, harder to reach than on a 14-fret neck, where they are extended beyond the guitar body. If you have small hands, look for an acoustic guitar with a smaller diameter neck.

Nylon vs. Steel Strings

It is a common misconception that a new guitar player should start with nylon strings, because they are easier on fingers or easier to play. But nylon strings and steel strings are not interchangeable on the same guitar, so it's not a matter of progressing from one kind of string to another with experience. What should really drive your decision is what kind of music you want to play.

Nylon strings produce a softer, mellow tone. They are often used in classical and flamenco-style guitar playing, as well as some folk music. [Classical guitars](#) have a wider neck to provide more space between the strings, and shorter fretboard, than acoustic guitars that use steel strings.

Steel strings are more common, and are usually used by rock, country and pop musicians. Steel string acoustic guitars create a louder, brighter tone that is commonly associated with that classic acoustic guitar sound.

Tonewoods

As you shop, you will notice a variety of woods specified on different parts of acoustic guitars. Being able to identify the sound you want from your guitar will help you choose. Here is an overview of some common woods, how they are used, and their tonal characteristics they are known for:

Cedar » Cedar is a soft wood that produces a bright tone. It has a quick response that favors a light playing technique, and is a common top wood for classical or flamenco guitars. It is also used for sides and backs.

Cocobolo » Cocobolo is a tropical, Mexican hardwood used for sides and backs. It is fast, responsive and produces a bright sound.

Ebony » Ebony is strong with a slick feel, which makes it great fretboard material.

Granadillo » Granadillo is a scarce wood, considered a type of rosewood, though it is denser. It is traditionally used for marimba bars, and when used for the sides and backs of acoustic guitars, produces a similar clear, ringing tone.

Koa » Koa is a Hawaiian wood with a distinct golden color that emphasizes mid-range tones. It is used for all parts of an acoustic guitar body, but is generally found on more expensive guitars due to its scarcity.

Mahogany » Mahogany is a dense wood, which gives it a slower response rate. When used as a top wood, mahogany produces a strong sound that emphasizes high-end tones, and is often associated with country or blues playing.

It is more often used for sides and backs to add snap, boost mid-range tones, and reduces boominess in some styles. It is also frequently used in necks and bridges.

Maple » Maple is usually used for sides and backs, because its low response rate and internal damping doesn't add coloration to the natural tone of the top wood. It produces a "dry" sound that emphasizes high-end tones. Its lower resonance makes it great for live settings, especially with a band, because it can still be heard through a mix of instruments with less feedback.

Ovangkol » Ovangkol is a sustainable African wood similar to rosewood. It is usually used for back and sides, because its warm tone emphasizes mid-tones and produces a well-rounded sound. Ovangkol's tone offers the warmth of rosewood with the sparkling midrange of mahogany or koa.

Rosewood » The diminishing supply of Brazilian Rosewood has led to Indian Rosewood replacing it in most markets. While the two look different, the tonal quality is virtually the same. One of the most popular and traditional woods used on acoustic guitars, rosewood has been prized for its rich, complex overtones that remain distinct even during

bass-heavy passages. It's cutting attack and ringing tones make for highly articulate sound and plenty of projection. Rosewood is also a popular choice for fingerboards and bridges.

Sapele » Sapele is another highly sustainable African wood, used for sides and backs to add midrange and additional resonance. Tonally similar to mahogany, it offers a little more treble boost.

Spruce » Spruce is a standard for acoustic guitar tops. It is lightweight but strong, and provides good resonance without compromising clarity. There are many species of spruce used in guitar tops including Sitka, Engelmann, Adirondack, and European spruce. They each have subtly distinct tonal characteristics and colors.

Walnut » Walnut is an alternative to mahogany in bodies, emphasizing midrange tones and enhancing the projection of the top wood's tone. It has a similar density and stiffness to koa, with similarly bright high-end tones. Its low-end tones start deeper, but fill out after being played-in.

Acoustic Guitar Variants

As you consider different acoustic guitars, you will likely come across two main variations to the traditional acoustic guitar. One has extra strings, and the other employs a dramatically different body shape and materials.

The 12-String Acoustic Guitar



Martin X Series D12X1AE Custom Acoustic-Electric Guitar

Twelve-string guitars are a standard variation made by several different guitar manufacturers. They are commonly used by players who specialize in folk and blues music. Arlo Guthrie and John Denver are just two of many famous American folk artists who commonly used 12-string acoustic guitars.

[12-string acoustic guitars](#) have six string courses, each with two strings that are tuned to produce a chiming, chorus effect. Usually, the string pairs in the bass courses are tuned an octave apart while all treble strings are tuned in unison. Some guitarists prefer tuning

the the second string in the third course (G) in unison while others opt to tune it an octave higher for bell-like ringing tones.



Taylor 150e Spruce/Sapele Dreadnought 12-String Acoustic-Electric Guitar

The Ovation Balladeer



Ovation Standard Balladeer 1861 AX Acoustic-Electric Guitar

In 1969, one guitar brand, [Ovation](#), released a new acoustic guitar model with a very different body shape. The Balladeer uses a rounded, bowl-shaped back, instead of the traditional flat back, that is made of a special type of fiberglass called Lyrachord. Lyrachord is strong, has good reflective properties, and resists changes in temperature and humidity. Today, Ovation offers many models with various bowl depths, top woods, and acoustic-electric models with numerous pickup/preamp configurations.

John Lennon used an Ovation acoustic guitar for many of the studio recordings that were released posthumously on his 2004 Acoustic album. He is seen with the guitar on the album's cover.

Don't Forget Personal Preference

Finally, amidst all the considerations about tops and shapes and tones, don't underestimate the importance of choosing a guitar that you like. Choose one that feels comfortable, whether you are sitting or standing. Make sure you pick a guitar that responds to the way that you play, and don't settle on a "good" guitar if you don't like the way it sounds to you ears.

Be prepared with defined expectations, a sense of how you plan to use your guitar, and a basic understanding of how acoustic guitars work, as well as how different woods and components affect their sound. But regardless of the features or the price tag, the guitar that fits your style will be the one you will enjoy for years to come.

Glossary

Abalone: Abalone is the hard, internal lining of the giant sea snail's shell that is used for decorative and ornamental purposes on acoustic guitars, such as fretboard and headstock inlays.

Action: The distance between the frets and the strings of an acoustic guitar

Attack: The initial sound a note makes when struck, between silence and when the note reaches maximum volume

Binding: Strips of wood, plastic, or other material used both to strengthen and enhance the look of an acoustic guitar's body, neck, and/or headstock

Bolt-on neck: A guitar neck that is attached to the body with bolts

Bookmatching: The process of matching two pieces of wood for an acoustic guitar's back or top is called bookmatching. Normally, a single piece of wood is butterfly-cut down the middle, and the two pieces are joined down the center of the instrument.

Bout: The curved areas above and below the narrow waist of an acoustic guitar are known as bouts. The curves above the waist are called the upper bout and those below are called the lower bout.

Bracing: This internal wooden support structure inside an acoustic guitar gives the instrument integrity. Well-designed top bracing maximizes the ability of the top to vibrate.

Bridge: On most acoustic guitars, the bridge is a piece of wood placed below the soundhole. It is used to anchor the strings and transfer their vibrations to the soundboard.

Bridge pins: Bridge pins fit into the holes on the bridge, where the strings go in, to anchor them in place. Most often made of plastic; some are made of ebony.

Capo: A capo is a device used to raise the overall pitch of an acoustic guitar. A capo attaches to the neck at a chosen fret and bars all of the strings. It allows guitarists to play songs in different keys without changing chord structures.

Cutaway: A guitar body style with a contoured upper bout that allows the player to reach the upper frets of the guitar more easily

Decay: The level of volume loss from a note's maximum volume to silence

Dovetail: A type of interlocking joint used in guitar-making, most often to attach the neck to the body

Dreadnought: This is a large-body acoustic guitar originally designed by the Martin guitar company in the early 20th century, named after the large dreadnought battleships of the day.

Figuring: The pattern of a piece of wood's natural grain.

Fingerboard (aka Fretboard): The playing surface of a guitar neck is called a fingerboard, or fretboard. Typically a thin piece of wood that is glued onto the neck, it has thin metal strips called frets placed at intervals that divide the neck into half-step increments.

Finish: The final coating applied to acoustic guitar woods is called the finish. Flame and quilt are two examples of figuring.

Flame: A characteristic of a wood's appearance that appears to shimmer and move as light strikes it from different angles - see figuring

Frets: Thin metal strips placed at intervals on the fretboard to divide it into half-step increments

Fret markers: Fretboard inlays on an acoustic guitar that serve as a visual reference of the player's position

Gig bag: A lightweight, soft, padded case used as a more convenient, temporary way to transport an acoustic guitar than a hardshell case

Headstock: The uppermost portion of a guitar neck, where the tuning keys are placed

Heel: The lowest point of the neck, where it widens to attach to the body

Inlay: Designs on the fretboard, headstock, or body of an acoustic guitar for purely aesthetic purposes are called inlays. Typically the inlay design is carved into the wood, then filled with one of many materials such as mother-of-pearl, metal, abalone, or plastic.

Intonation: Intonation is the relationship of tones on different parts of the fretboard. The note of each string on the 12th fret should match the note of the 12th fret harmonic on the same string. If not, the guitar's intonation should be adjusted.

Laminated: As opposed to a solid piece of wood used in acoustic guitar-making, a laminated surface is created by gluing several thin plies of wood together.

Luthier: A woodworker who specializes in making stringed instruments

Marbling: Often used to describe the natural patterns and color variations of ebony

Mother-of-pearl: The inside lining of certain mollusks' shells that is typically used for inlays and other decorative enhancements

Moustache bridge: A bridge whose shape is reminiscent of a handlebar moustache

Neck joint: The point where an acoustic guitar's neck joins the body

Nut: Located at the top of the fretboard, the nut serves to evenly space the strings as they approach the tuners and transfer vibrations to the neck of the guitar.

Pearloid: A synthetic alternative to mother-of-pearl

Pick (aka plectrum): A thin piece of (typically) plastic used to strike the strings of an acoustic guitar

Pickguard: A thin plate located below the soundhole that protects the guitar's top from scratches that may occur as a result of picking or strumming the strings

Pickup: An electronic device that senses the vibrations of the strings and converts it to an electrical signal for amplification

Piezo pickup: A piezo pickup is a crystalline structure that senses changes in compression and converts them to an electrical signal. Often placed under an acoustic guitar's saddle, the piezo senses the changes in compression when the strings vibrate. This is the most common pickup used in acoustic-electric guitars.

Quilted: A visual characteristic of certain tone woods that give it a wavy or folded appearance

Rosette: A decorative inlay around the soundhole of an acoustic guitar

Saddle (aka bridge nut): Like the nut, the saddle spaces the strings at the bridge and, along with the bridge, transfers the vibration of the strings to the top.

Scale length: The total length of the vibrating portion of a string

Set neck: An acoustic guitar neck that is glued to the body

Soundboard (aka top): The piece of wood on the front of an acoustic guitar that is largely responsible for an acoustic guitar's tone and projection

Soundhole: The hole in an acoustic guitar's top that aids in projecting the instrument's sound

Truss rod: A truss rod is a thin, internal rod that runs the length of the neck. It is used to adjust the curve of the neck depending on the tension of the strings being used.

Waist: The narrowest portion of an acoustic guitar's body