

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a brown blazer, is seated and playing an archtop hollowbody guitar. He is looking down at the instrument with a focused expression. The background is a light-colored wall with several sheets of music paper pinned to it in a crisscross pattern. The lighting is warm and soft, creating a cozy atmosphere.

GUITAR

BUYING GUIDE

FOR BEGINNING - ADVANCED PLAYERS
ACOUSTIC • NYLON STRING • STEEL STRING
ELECTRIC • ARCHTOP HOLLOWBODY • AMPLIFIERS

WHAT GUITAR SHOULD I BUY?



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Buying your first guitar is a big endeavor! Whether you've been overwhelmed by big-box guitar stores with racks and racks of similar-looking instruments or you've never previously shopped for a guitar, we'll work out the perfect beginner's instrument for the style of music you want to learn.

Guitar is one of the most popular and widely produced instruments, and prone to more variation than common band and orchestra instruments. The main categories usually get broken down into acoustic guitars that have a flat top and are meant to be played unplugged, resonating to create their own volume, and electric guitars that are plugged into an amp. We'll also be talking about archtop hollowbody guitars that occupy a sort of middle ground, and are commonly used by jazz guitarists.

There's more out there, but chances are good that one of these three categories are what you'll want to start with!

BEFORE YOU BUY

Common wisdom says it's best to try out every instrument that you can in person, but this may not be helpful if you're not sure what to look for. There's no replacement for personalized, knowledgeable help, so bring somebody experienced along to try out guitars if you can. Most acoustic guitars sound bigger and fuller to the audience than the performer, so having somebody else play the guitars for you can be helpful! They can also show you the differences between practical considerations like different string spacings, neck sizes, and body types that this guide won't go into.

It's common to hear that you have to play one kind of guitar before you can play the other—i.e. you have to learn to play acoustic guitar before getting an electric guitar. This is far from true! Generally you should play the kind of instrument that's used in the music you like! If you've been drawn to guitar through acoustic guitarists like Tommy Emmanuel, Chris Eldridge, or James Taylor then it wouldn't make much sense to buy an electric Strat and a giant amp! Similarly, if you want to play like Slash then an acoustic guitar probably won't be as inspiring as an electric Les Paul!

Try to avoid buying an instrument marketed as a travel guitar. They're not designed to play or sound ideal, so at a given price point you'll pay a premium for portability and end up with a guitar that won't give you as much room to grow.

Additionally, consider rent-to-own options from your local music store. You likely won't get a large range of options, but if you like the choices they provide then it could be an affordable, convenient way to get your first guitar!

We'll be looking specifically at guitars that can be found at or under a \$500 price point. If you can afford a more expensive instrument then you probably already know what you need!

ACOUSTIC GUITARS

Acoustic guitars, also sometimes called flat-top guitars, have two main categories named for the type of string they use: nylon-string guitars used by classical, flamenco, and bossa-nova players; and steel-string guitars used by folk, country, pop, and indie guitarists as well as many singer-songwriters. There's no right or wrong choice between the two for a beginner, but they sound different and feel different to play, and suit different styles.

One aspect of acoustic guitar construction that you'll hear a lot about is solid vs. laminate woods.

Laminate or "pressed" wood construction means that several thin veneers are glued together to make a single piece of the guitar—the top, back, or sides, and sometimes even the neck! Solid wood means that those pieces are individual pieces of wood that have been machined or carved to the correct thickness. You'll hear people say that solid wood is better, and that's true most of the time! Like everything else with musical instruments there's more to the story, but some of the guitars we'll recommend are laminate construction. Laminate instruments tend to be sturdier, and hold up to use (and abuse) better. Solid wood guitars will sound richer and let you hear differences in technique more clearly, but can be a little more finicky to maintain. A solid top is preferred, and even most budget guitars will have one now. That said, don't worry too much about this issue for your first guitar, just find one that makes you want to play!

Another design consideration is whether or not the guitar has something called a cutaway. This can be helpful for playing higher up on the fretboard, around where the body meets the neck. Traditional classical guitars don't have cutaways, and they aren't necessary, but the higher up you want to play the more useful they are!

NYLON STRING ACOUSTIC GUITARS

If you want to study classical guitar or flamenco, this is the guitar for you. Nylon strings are meant to be played with bare fingers or a fingernail, and are much easier for the left-hand to fret than a steel string guitar.

These guitars won't be as bright or percussive as a steel-string guitar, and the strings may be a little harder to keep in tune. They also won't be as easy to use in styles of music that require a pick or lots of strumming. Nylon string guitars are harder to reliably amplify than steel string acoustics, and don't usually have electronics built-in to let you plug in to an amp. That said, in recent years there's been an upsurge in the manufacture of "hybrid" or "crossover" nylon-string guitars that have cutaways, built-in electronics, and some other construction elements usually associated with steel string acoustic or even electric guitars. In our under-\$500 price range some of the best options are from brands like Yamaha and Cordoba.

Small Size:

Yamaha CGS102All 1/2-Scale Classical - Natural

Budget Guitars:

Yamaha CG122MSH Classical - Natural

Cordoba C3M, Nylon String Acoustic Guitar - Satin Cedar

Electronics and Cutaway:

Yamaha NTX1 Nylon String Acoustic-Electric Guitar - Natural

Cordoba C5-CE, Nylon String Acoustic-Electric Guitar - Natural Spruce



STEEL STRING ACOUSTIC GUITARS

Steel string acoustic guitars are the punchier, brighter acoustic cousins of nylon string guitars. These are the go-to for folk musicians, country singer-songwriters, bluegrass players, and pop artists. Whether it's strumming open chords, exploring alternate tunings, using a slide, or flatpicking single note leads you'll find steel string guitars in all kinds of contexts. The strings on these can be harder for beginners to press down, but the necks are usually a little bit easier to reach around than the ones on nylon string guitars. Built-in electronics and cutaways are common, and there are numerous body shapes and sizes to choose from. The common dreadnought body style can be big and cumbersome for younger players and those with shorter arms or torsos, so smaller styles like parlor guitars and in-between concert body instruments are common. These will all sound different, but the most important thing for a beginner to keep in mind is playability.

Choose the right size for your frame! Smaller or younger players may prefer a parlor guitar, but if you have a large frame then a dreadnought or jumbo body might be ideal! One special note: Taylor makes a special small-size guitar called the Baby Taylor and a larger Big Baby Taylor. These are perfect for anyone looking for a smaller instrument, and represent an excellent value, too! In addition to Taylor, other brands to look at are Yamaha, and Ibanez.

Small Size:

Taylor Baby Taylor BT1 Walnut Acoustic Guitar - Natural Sitka Spruce

Ibanez PN19 Acoustic Guitar - Open Pore Natural Brown Burst

Standard Sizes:

Taylor Big Baby Taylor BBT - Natural

Yamaha CSF1M Compact Folk - Vintage Natural

Yamaha FS820 Concert Acoustic Guitar - Natural

Electronics and Cutaway:

Ibanez PF28ECE Acoustic-Electric Guitar - Dark Violin Sunburst

Yamaha FGX820C Dreadnought Cutaway - Natural

ELECTRIC GUITARS

Electric guitar represents different things to different people. For some it's the sound of classic rock and roll, and for others it's a vehicle for burning shred. Whatever your own goals are, remember that the guitar is only half of the equation—you'll also have to budget for an amplifier!

Most electric guitars will be comfortable for smaller or younger players, and the strings are much easier to fret than steel-string acoustic guitars, so there's usually no need to look for special small-size versions.

Two of the most iconic electric guitar manufacturers are Fender and Gibson. Both companies have produced a number of historic instruments, but Fender's well-known classic is the Stratocaster, while Gibson's is the signature instrument for jazz guitarist Les Paul, the appropriately-named Les Paul. While both Fender and Gibson have identical-looking instruments available under budget brand names (Squier and Epiphone respectively), there is a massive number of other options available, from them and countless other manufacturers! Many of them are copies or iterations of classic designs, but you'll find plenty of unique and novel guitars, too! Other brands to consider include Ibanez, G&L, and Yamaha.



The Classics:

Squier Classic Vibe '50s Telecaster - Butterscotch Blonde

Epiphone SG Standard Electric Guitar - Cherry

Squier Classic Vibe '70s Stratocaster - Natural

Yamaha PAC112VM Pacifica Electric Guitar - Grey

The Not-As-Classic:

Ibanez RGA42FM - Dragon Eye Burst Flat

Squier Paranormal Super-Sonic Electric Guitar - Ice Blue Metallic



AMPLIFIERS

This is every bit as large a subject as finding a new guitar, and if you're playing an electric guitar in the previous category then the amplifier is just about half the instrument! We won't go into too much detail here, but the types of amps that we're recommending are good beginners' amps that will let you get sounds in a number of styles and genres.

If you're looking for a more specific amp, consider asking local musicians whose sound you like, or finding specific information on amps suitable for the style of music you like to play. Tube amps use pre-transistor valve technology for amplification and are an important part of most classic guitar sounds, but require more maintenance and upkeep than solid-state transistor amps and digital modeling amplifiers. Just keep in mind that if your tube amps starts sounding funny it might be time to get the tubes replaced or maintained!

Modeling Amps:

Boss Katana-50 MkII 1 x 12-inch 50-watt Combo Amp

Fender Champion 50XL 1x12" 50-watt Combo Amp

Fender Mustang LT 50 1x12" 50-watt Combo Amp

Tube Amps:

Fender Pro Junior IV 1x10" 15-watt Tube Combo Amp

Blackstar Studio 10 KT-88 1x12" 10-watt Tube Combo Amp

Great for Jazz:

Boss Katana-50 MkII 1 x 12-inch 50-watt Combo Amp

Roland JC-22 Jazz Chorus 30-watt 2x6.5" Stereo Combo Amp

HOLLOWBODY GUITARS

Hollowbody guitars (you may hear them called "archtops" because the top is...well, arched) are commonly used by jazz guitarists, but they're not limited to one genre! These predate electric "solidbody" guitars, and in fact the first electric guitars were hollowbody archtops.

Guitarist Charlie Christian was the first genre-defining player to amplify a hollowbody, and his sound is one that modern guitarists still try to emulate or use as a launch point. Hollowbody guitars sit in the middle between steel-string acoustics and electric guitars, but have a more pointed and midrange-focused sound. There are many beautiful examples of acoustic hollowbody archtops, but they tend to be expensive and not beginner-friendly, so we'll be looking at electric hollowbody guitars here. They still tend to be more expensive than comparable solidbody and acoustic guitars, so consider buying used if you can bring an experienced player with you to help decide on the guitar. Another consideration is the semihollow guitar. We won't be looking at any here, but they occupy the middle ground between hollowbody guitars and solidbody electric guitars, and may be worth considering as well. Brands to look at include Ibanez and Epiphone, and D'Angelico.

Jazz Machines:

Ibanez Artcore AF75 Hollowbody Electric Guitar - Transparent Red Sunburst
Gretsch G2420 Streamliner - Aged Brooklyn Burst
D'Angelico Premier EXL-1 "Open Box" Hollowbody Guitar - Black

SERIOUS BUDGET TALK

What if you needed to get a guitar between \$100 - \$150 and don't want to end up with total junk? A number of the extreme budget guitars out there are essentially toys. A first guitar doesn't have to be great sounding, but it has to be playable and able to hold tune. First Act, Esteban and Daisy Rock type guitars usually compromise on one or both of those things.

In this price range, it's best to consider a used instrument because you can absolutely get a real instrument affordably that way! The only downside is that there's a little more discernment involved, which might mean getting help from a guitar-playing friend or family member.

Rent-to-own or a financing plan that offers exchange options would also be a good way to go, especially a 0% financing plan that allows for a 14 or 30 day exchange. There are more options along those lines if you are willing to open a credit card through a retailer.

That said, something like this could be an option too:

Epiphone DR-100 Acoustic Guitar



Need more help? Reach out to us at melissa@kalamazoomusicschool.com or at 269-350-4311.