

Alternate Picking Technique

One of the most common problems faced by flatpickers is mastering alternate picking. Alternate picking is a versatile technique that makes it easy to get strong tone and attack consistently.

NOTES ON-THE-BEAT:

The first step is to analyze a phrase rhythmically. The first two bars of Old Joe Clark are made up of quarter notes that fall on beats 1, 2, 3, and 4. Since all of the notes in this excerpt fall on beats 1, 2, 3 or 4, they will ALL be played with downstrokes:

PICK:

COUNT: 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 1 + 2 + 3

T
A
B

RULE #1: NOTES PLAYED ON THE BEAT ARE PLAYED WITH A DOWNSTROKE.

NOTES OFF-THE-BEAT:

In this phrase, the quarter-note melody has been embellished with a series of running eighth notes. Notice that beats 1, 2, 3 and 4 are still played with downstrokes -- but now that we also have notes occurring on the eighth note beats between those beats (i.e. 1-and, 2-and, 3-and & 4-and), we'll play those off-beat notes with an upstroke:

PICK:

COUNT: 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 1 + 2 + 3

T
A
B

RULE #2: NOTES PLAYED OFF THE BEAT ARE PLAYED WITH AN UPSTROKE.

MIXED QUARTER & EIGHTH NOTE RHYTHMS:

Rhythms that mix quarter notes with eighth notes will adhere to Rules #1 and #2. It is common to have two downstrokes or upstrokes in a row, when both are played on consecutive beats or consecutive off-beats:

PICK:

COUNT: 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 1 + 2 + 3

T
A
B

SLIDES, PULLS & HAMMERS:

In alternate picking, slides, pulls and hammers do not influence our choice of up- and downstrokes. A slide or hammer may substitute for a pick stroke, but will not change the way surrounding notes are picked -- they will still be picked down or up, according to whether they fall on the beat or off-beat:

PICK:

COUNT: 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 1 + 2 + 3

T
A
B

SUMMARY: Alternate Picking requires the right hand to memorize the kinesthetic feeling of playing DOWN on the beat and UP on the off-beat. Beats 1, 2, 3 and 4 are always played with downstrokes, while the off-the-beat notes between are played with upstrokes. Exceptions to the alternate picking approach may result from crosspicking or rest strokes -- but it's important to first internalize alternate picking before learning these exceptions to the rule.