

The 1-4-5 Shortcut for Mandolin Using Closed Chords

This discussion assumes that you are already familiar with closed chords on the mandolin. I'll be explaining how you can use two closed chord shapes in different combinations to easily play 1-4-5 tunes.

You may have heard musicians talking about 1-4-5 tunes. This simply means that a 1-4-5 tune has only three particular chords in it. Thousands of commonly played songs and tunes are 1-4-5 tunes. Many people play only 1-4-5 tunes and have a lifetime of fun doing it.

In a nutshell, 1-4-5 chords are three chords, the 1-chord, the 4-chord and the 5-chord. Which letter names they have depends on the key you are in. If you are in the key of G, the 1-chord is the G-chord. Count up on your fingers 1-2-3-4 starting with G, and you get G-A-B-C. So the 4-chord is C. Count one higher to find the 5-chord. It is D. So the 1-4-5 chords in the key of G are G-C-D. At the end of this lesson there is a table listing all the 1-4-5 chords in all the keys.

Exercise 1: What are the 1-4-5 chords for the key of C? The key of D? The key of E? You can use the table to figure it out. Try also to figure it out without the table.

On the mandolin, we can use the closed A-shape chord and the closed D-shape chord very easily to play those three 1-4-5 chords. They are near each other on the fingerboard, and switching between them is straightforward. There are two combinations of these chords to learn.

Once you get comfortable with the chord shapes and the way you can easily get from the 1-chord to the 4-chord and the 5-chord, you may find that you can change chords confidently without having to figure out analytically which chords the 1-4-5 chords are.

Combination 1

In the key of A, the chords we'll need for a 1-4-5 tune are A, D, and E. Use the A-shape to play the A chord. Use the D-shape to play the D and E chords. When you can switch between these chords smoothly, you can play chords for thousands of songs in the key of A.

Exercise 2: Play the following chord sequence 20 times. Play each chord 4 times each, with the goal of making the chord changes smooth and in time. A-D-E-A

Exercise 3: Play the following chord sequence 20 times. Play each chord 4 times each, with the goal of making the chord changes smooth and in time. These These chords are all played in reference to the note A (the 5th fret of the 1st string), because you are in the key of A. The first chord is the A chord.

A-E-D-A

A-D-A-E-A

A-E-A-D-A

The 1-4-5 Shortcut for Mandolin Using Closed Chords

This combination of chord shapes and the frets they are on (relative to each other) is what I call combination #1. In summary, you use the A-shape for the 1-chord, and the D-shape for the 4- and 5-chords.

Now, if we were in the key of B, we could easily use combination #1 to play the chords we need for a 1-4-5 tune.. We'd use the A-shape to play the B chord, and the D-shape to play the E and F# chords that we need. Notice that these chords are all exactly 2 frets higher than they were in the key of A. In other words, B is two frets higher than A; E is two frets higher than D, and F# is two frets higher than E.

Exercise 4: Play the following chord sequence 20 times. Play each chord 4 times each, with the goal of making the chord changes smooth and in time. B-E-F#-B

Exercise 5: Play the following chord sequences 20 times each:

B-F#-E-B

B-E-B-F#-B

B-F#-B-E-B

Exercise 6: Try playing combination #1 chords starting with the C-chord. What are the 1-4-5 chords in the key of C? You should be starting one fret higher up the fingerboard than in Exercise 4.

We could continue to use combination #1 for the keys of D, E, and F, but it's not practical for all of them. Do you see what will happen? For each successive key, we'd move higher and higher up the neck. For the key of D, the 1-chord will be on fret 7 and the 5-chord on fret 9. Try it. This works ok, though it's getting a bit high in pitch. For the keys of E and F, we'll be way up on the fingerboard. It will be a little awkward to play and high in pitch. But there's an alternative – combination #2.

Combination 2

For combination #2, we'll use the D-shape for the 1-chord, and the A-shape for the 4- and 5-chords.

In the key of D, the 1-4-5 chords are D, G, and A. Use the D-shape to play the D chord. Use the A-shape to play the G and A chords. Note that using the A-shape for the G chord means that your index finger is on the nut, so the G and D strings are open. Your ring finger is on fret 2, and your pinky is on fret 3.

Exercise 7: Play the following chord sequence 20 times. Play each chord 4 times each, with the goal of making the chord changes smooth and in time.

D-G-A-D

The 1-4-5 Shortcut for Mandolin Using Closed Chords

Exercise 8: Play the following chord sequence 20 times. Play each chord 4 times each, with the goal of making the chord changes smooth and in time. These chords are all played in reference to the note D (the 5th fret of the 2nd string), because you are in the key of D. The first chord is the D chord.

D-A-G-A
D-G-D-A-D
D-A-D-G-D

Now, if we were in the key of E, we could easily use combination #2 to play the chords we need. We'd use the D-shape to play the E chord, and the A-shape to play the A and B chords that we need. Notice that these chords are all exactly 2 frets higher than they were in the key of D.

Exercise 9: play the following chord sequences 20 times.

E-A-B-A
E-B-A-E
E-A-E-B-E
E-B-E-A-E

Below is a table you can use to figure out which chords are the 1-4-5 chords for a given key. You will see very few tunes in the keys which I've grayed out. You don't have to memorize these; they're just here for reference. You can always figure them out by counting up the scale, or comparing them to a key with which you are already familiar.

The table also shows which chord combination can be used for each key.

		Chords number			Chord Combination to use	
		1	4	5	#1	#2
Key	A	A	D	E	yes	no
	Bb	Bb	Eb	F	yes	no
	B	B	E	F#	yes	no
	C	C	F	G	yes	yes
	C#	C#	F#	G#	yes	yes
	D	D	G	A	yes	yes
	Eb	Eb	Ab	B	maybe	yes
	E	E	A	B	maybe	yes
	F	F	Bb	C	no	yes
	F#	F#	B	C#	no	yes
	G	G	C	D	yes	maybe
Ab	Ab	Db	Eb	yes	maybe	