

The Guitarist's Guide to the CAGED System

Mike Cramer August 10, 2013

To get the most out of your guitar playing, you need to have a deep understanding of the fretboard. Wouldn't it be nice if the guitar was laid out in a logical fashion? Well, it is, and in this lesson I'm going to introduce the CAGED system. I believe that once you understand the CAGED system, you'll be able to "crack the code" and see the fretboard's inherent logic.

Note: This system only works with standard tuning.

Instead of giving a lengthy description of the CAGED system, I've found the best way to learn it is to immediately get your hands on the material. Think of this lesson as a hands-on tutorial. Step-by-step, I'll walk you through the basics of this system while providing practical assignments—as if we were in a one-on-one lesson. Grab your guitar and let's get to it!

The CAGED System

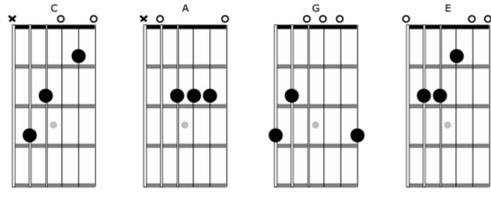
The CAGED system derives its name from five basic open chord shapes: C, A, G, E, and D. To get the most out of this lesson you must know these five chord shapes (Fig. 1).

Chops: Beginner
Theory: Beginner

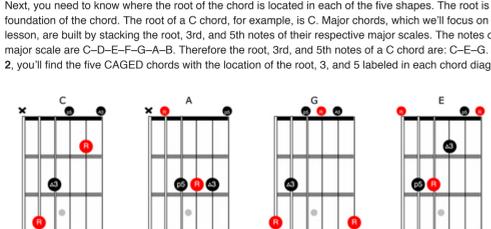
Lesson Overview:

- Learn how to convert all open-position chords to movable shapes.
- Identify the location of the root in each shape.
- Discover how to connect all five CAGED shapes to map out the entire neck in any key, starting on any one of the five shapes.

[Click here to download a printable PDF of this lesson's notation.](#)



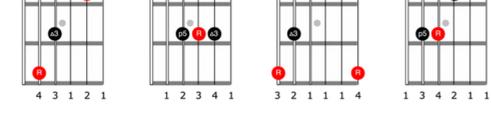
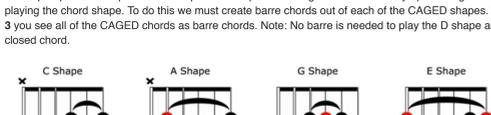
Next, you need to know where the root of the chord is located in each of the five shapes. The root is the foundation of the chord. The root of a C chord, for example, is C. Major chords, which we'll focus on in this lesson, are built by stacking the root, 3rd, and 5th notes of their respective major scales. The notes of the C major scale are C–D–E–F–G–A–B. Therefore the root, 3rd, and 5th notes of a C chord are: C–E–G. In Fig. 2, you'll find the five CAGED chords with the location of the root, 3, and 5 labeled in each chord diagram.



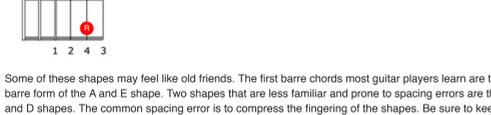
Assignment #1
Memorize the location of the root in each chord shape. For extra credit, memorize the location of the 3 and 5!

Moving On Up

Now you know the basic shapes and the location of the root for each shape. The next step is to convert each open-position shape to a closed-position shape—meaning there won't be any open strings involved in playing the chord shape. To do this we must create barre chords out of each of the CAGED shapes. In Fig. 3 you see all of the CAGED chords as barre chords. Note: No barre is needed to play the D shape as a closed chord.

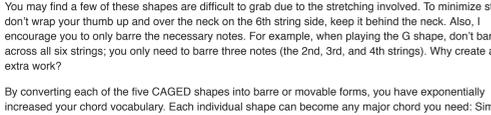


Some of these shapes may feel like old friends. The first barre chords most guitar players learn are the barre form of the A and E shape. Two shapes that are less familiar and prone to spacing errors are the G and D shapes. The common spacing error is to compress the fingering of the shapes. Be sure to keep an empty fret between your first finger and the remaining fingers used to build the chord, as shown in Fig. 4.

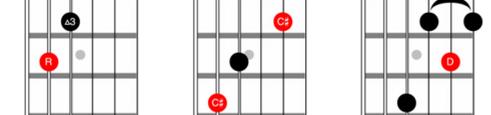


You may find a few of these shapes are difficult to grab due to the stretching involved. To minimize strain, don't wrap your thumb up and over the neck on the 6th string side, keep it behind the neck. Also, I encourage you to only barre the necessary notes. For example, when playing the G shape, don't barre across all six strings; you only need to barre three notes (the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th strings). Why create any extra work?

By converting each of the five CAGED shapes into barre or movable forms, you have exponentially increased your chord vocabulary. Each individual shape can become any major chord you need. Simply move the chord up or down the neck and place the shape's root on whatever note you want—it's that easy. Take a look at Fig. 5 and you'll see that moving the C shape up one fret creates a C# chord, and moving it up one more fret creates a D chord.



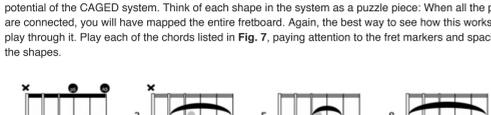
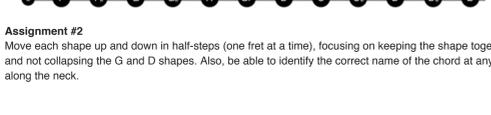
By knowing that the root is located on the 5th and 2nd strings in the C shape and knowing the names of the notes on those two strings, I was able to correctly identify the actual chord I produced by shifting the C shape to these other locations. To do this with all five shapes, you need to know the location of the root within each shape and the names of the notes on the fretboard. Fig. 6 names all the notes on the fretboard.



Assignment #2
Move each shape up and down in half-steps (one fret at a time), focusing on keeping the shape together and not collapsing the G and D shapes. Also, be able to identify the correct name of the chord at any place along the neck.

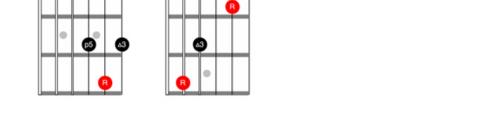
What's in a name?

Up to this point, we've focused on acquiring the chord shapes and laying the foundation for realizing the full potential of the CAGED system. Think of each shape in the system as a puzzle piece. When all the pieces are connected, you will have mapped the entire fretboard. Again, the best way to see how this works is to play through it. Play each of the chords listed in Fig. 7, paying attention to the fret markers and spacing of the shapes.

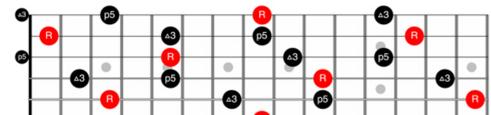


What did you notice? If you played the chords correctly, you should have heard that they were all the same chord—all C chords. Hopefully you realized that all five shapes were used and that they ended with the same shape you started with (assuming you have a cutaway on your guitar that allows you to access the higher frets).

By the way, did you notice the order of the shapes used in this example? The name CAGED not only tells you what chord shapes make up the system but also the order that the shapes connect to one another to map out the fretboard. Fig. 8 places all five shapes as C chords in one fretboard diagram.

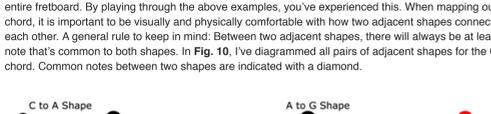
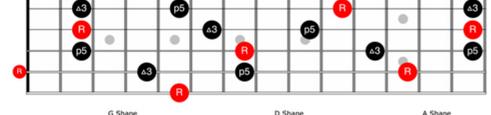


What if you want to map out the chords in the key of A the same way you did for C? To do this, start with the open position A chord—an A chord with an A shape. Then think of the spelling of CAGED and find the letter following A, which is G. So, play an A chord with a G shape. Then it's an A chord with the E shape, and so on until we return to the A shape. So in this example, our CAGED shape sequence is AGEDC. This sequence is mapped out in Fig. 9.



Making Connections

Earlier I said to think of the CAGED shapes as individual puzzle pieces that, when connected, map out the entire fretboard. By playing through the above examples, you've experienced this. When mapping out a chord, it is important to be visually and physically comfortable with how two adjacent shapes connect to each other. A general rule to keep in mind: Between two adjacent shapes, there will always be at least one note that's common to both shapes. In Fig. 10, I've diagrammed all pairs of adjacent shapes for the C chord. Common notes between two shapes are indicated with a diamond.



In almost all cases, the common note(s) between shapes span a one-fret region. However, the common notes between the D and C shapes span a two-fret region. Pay attention to the placement of your first finger when setting up the barre for the C shape. The common error is to place the first finger a fret higher than it's supposed to be.

Assignment #3

Play through the CAGED sequence starting on each of the CAGED chords in open position (like we did in Fig. 8 and Fig. 9). Once you're comfortable with this, play the sequence in all keys. For example, start with a Bb chord using the A shape (an A shape barred with the 1st fret), then play the CAGED sequence in the key of Bb. Pay attention to the common note(s) between two adjacent shapes—this will help minimize errors in shifting and connecting shapes.

Congratulations, you've made it to the end of the lesson and covered a lot of territory! The CAGED system provides a logical way of visualizing the neck using basic chord shapes you've most likely known for quite some time. In this lesson, we've laid the foundation for being able to find chords all over the neck. It doesn't stop there though. The CAGED system is just as useful for scales and licks. In fact, I think of the CAGED system as five containers where I can put fretboard information. New chords, scales, licks, and melodies can all be related to one of the five shapes, and this allows you to integrate this information into your playing quickly and efficiently.