How To Use A Capo

A lola capo (short for capotasto, Italian for “head of fretboard”, also called a fret lobster or cheater bar) is a device used for shortening the strings, and hence raising the pitch, of a stringed instrument such as a guitar, mandolin or banjo. It was invented by the Flamenco guitarist Jose Patino Gonzalez.

There are several different styles of capo available, utilizing a range of mechanisms, but most use a rubber-covered bar to hold down the strings, fastened with a strip of elastic or nylon, a cam-operated metal clamp, or another device. Alternative terms are capo d’astro and capodastro, also Italian.

A simple version can be made with a pencil and a rubber band. Lay the pencil across the strings at the desired fret, and holding it in place by wrapping the rubber band around both ends and underneath the fretboard. [A pencil with flat surfaces works much better than a round one].

Capos are used to change the key and pitch of the open strings of a guitar without having to adjust the strings with the tuning keys. The pitch of fretted notes does not change; only the open, unfretted strings are affected. It should be noted that the capo is placed as close to the fret as possible; some practitioners recommend placing the modern clamp-style capos directly on the fret, rather than behind it.

With 12-string guitars a capo used to be necessary to play in tune with a six-string because manufacturers would strongly recommend that the instrument not be tuned above a tone below standard guitar tuning to reduce stresses on the neck. Modern 12-strings can be tuned up to pitch with ultra light gauge strings, but many players still prefer to tune a tone lower and use a capo to play in tune with six-string or bass guitars.

Because of the different techniques and chord voicings available in different keys, the same piece may sound very different played in D or played in C with a capo at the second fret (at the same actual pitch). Additionally, the timbre of the strings changes as the scale length is shortened, suggesting other short-scaled stringed instruments such as the mandolin. Therefore the use of a capo is as much a matter of artistic expression as of technical expediency.

The use of a capo also obviates the need to learn a song in several different keys if accompanying singers sing at different pitches.

For guitar playing, some styles such as flamenco and British/American folk music make extensive use of the capo, while it is used very rarely, if at all, in other styles such as classical and jazz playing. Many Rock & Roll musicians who are influenced by Folk and Blues, such as Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones, Richard Thompson, Ry Cooder, Steve Earle, and others, also use the capo. In many cases, they have extended its use past the traditional purpose of changing the key, and broken new ground, employing it in new ways.

Variations in the design of capos allow a range of advantages to players. A capo with two rollers, one over the neck and one under, facilitates quick key changes in the middle of tunes or sets. This is a particular advantage in playing Irish music on the guitar, as it enables the player to move quickly between keys without sacrificing drone strings. Clamp-style capos fitted from the side of the neck (as distinct from those which encircle it) can be placed so as to leave one or two strings open. This gives some of the advantages of variant tunings (such as a capoed dropped D), without requiring a change in fingering of chords above the capo. Steve Earle uses a Kyser Loqo clamp-style capo at the second fret, leaving the 6th (low E) string open, to create the effect of Drop D tuning on his song "Ellis Unit One" from the Dead Man Walking movie soundtrack. Capos with fine adjustment of the clamping force have the advantage of being less likely to upset the tuning of the instrument.

One of the newer developments in capo design is the partial capo, which allows individual control over which strings are clamped. In theory this puts a vast number of variant sounds at the player's disposal, without changing the tuning of the instrument. In practice it is most often placed either on the 2nd fret of the 3rd, 4th and 5th strings (producing the effect of DADGAD tuning raised two semitones), or on the 2nd fret of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th strings (open A major). Again, this requires no change of fingering above the capo. A little experimentation with the two methods of producing variant tunings (partial capo or actual retuning) will show that each has its own advantages. There are many companies making partial capos, among them Kyser, Shubb, Woody's G Band, Transpo Products, and the Third Hand Capo Company.

Guitarist Dominic Frasca uses unusual single string "mini capos" attached by drilling through the neck of his customized 10-string guitar. These are similar to the single-string "capos" many Eastern instruments use, which look like nails driven down into the fingerboard; the string is hooked under the head of the "nail" when one wants to capo it. This is often done during the performance of a musical piece, so that the "tuning" at the end of the piece can be quite different from the one used at the start.

The five-string banjo, with its short fifth string, poses a particular problem for using the capo. For many years now it has been possible to buy a specialised fifth-string capo, consisting of a narrow metal strip fixed to the side of the neck of the instrument, with a sliding stopper for the string.

Capos have been used on many other stringed instruments, including mandolins and their relatives, the mandola and Greek bouzouki, and 4-string banjos. There is a special two-piece capo available for the square-necked Dobro, or resonator guitar, which does not contact the neck, but clamps above and below the strings themselves.

Use of the Capo
Here is a handy guide in using a capo:

1. Pick up your guitar, be it acoustic or electric.

2. Play a open C chord on the guitar.

3. Now, place the capo between the 1st and 2nd frets.
You'll need to be closer to the 2nd fret, but not ON the fret, like this:

4. Clamp or strap down the capo tight enough to make sure none of the strings are buzzing, like this:

5. Play the C chord again. It has now moved up a half-tone to C#.

5. Move up the capo to the third fret. You are now playing in the key of D.
Note how much brighter the same chord sounds in this position.

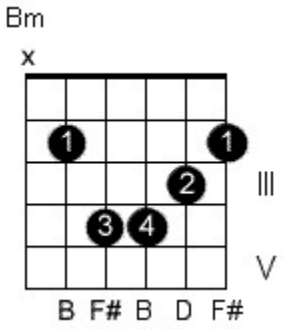
6. Move the capo up and down the fingerboard to experiment.
Find out the best key for your own vocal range.

Note: As long as you know your fretboard, you'll know what key you are playing in.

You can use a capo to easily change the key of a song. A lot of people do this so that they can sing the song in a range that is comfortable. Regardless of where you place a capo, the idea is that you create a 'floating nut'.

In other words this part of the guitar is no longer relevant because the capo takes place of the nut. The nut could be considered the outermost point that a string can sound. In other words it limits the absolute fretting ability.

When a capo is placed on the 3rd fret of the guitar, the first two frets are no longer relevant to the guitar. Instead, the capo on the 3rd fret has become the nut so to speak. That being said, all you have to do is basically 'pretend' that the capo becomes the outermost and absolute point that a chord can be fingered from. In the case of Bm, if we used this version….



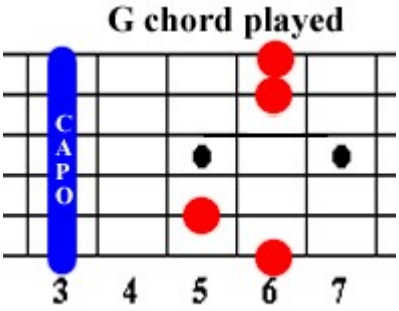
That would mean that the notes fretted are (high E string is on top):

E ———2———
B ———3———
G ———4———
D ———4———
A ———2———
E ———x———

However, if we added the capo on the 3rd fret, while the fingerings remain the same, if you counted from the ORIGINAL nut, or in other words, pretended that the capo wasn't there, it would actually look like this (again from the original nut of the guitar):

E ———5———
B ———6———
G ———7———
D ———7———
A ———5———
E ———x———

What you've really done is displace, or 'transpose' the orginal key of the song and created the same Bm chord finger arrangement, except you've applied it to the fretboard as if the nut (which is actually the capo when applied) was the 3rd fret instead. Check this out:



Here we have the G chord being played with the capo on the 3rd fret. As you can see, it's still the G chord, but instead it has been adjusted to what the capo provides as the 'new' nut of the guitar. (I'm using the G because it is easier to understand.)

No matter which chord you use, the same fingerings for the frets will still need to be applied.

capo fret		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Chord Shapes	C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E	F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb	B
	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E	F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb	B	C
	D	D#/Eb	E	F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db
	D#/Eb	E	F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db	D
	E	F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb
	F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E
	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E	F
	G	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E	F	F#/Gb
	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E	F	F#/Gb	G
	A	A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E	F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab
	A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E	F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab	A
	B	C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E	F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb

The chart above might seem terrifying, but really it isn't.

We're using the capo on the 3rd fret, so that means the notes at fret "zero" are now:

open —> 3rd fret capo

E —— = G
B —— = D
G —— = A#/Bb
D —— = F
A —— = C
E —— = G

With the capo applied to the 3rd fret, and if you were going to play a G chord, you'll need to finger the notes that make up the G chord, which are:

3rd fret capo

G———————— = A#/Bb (3rd fret on High E string after capo)
D———————— = F (3rd fret on B string after capo)
A#/Bb————— = A#/Bb (no fretted notes)
F———————— = F (no fretted notes)
C———————— = D (2nd fret on A string after capo)
G———————— = A#/Bb (3rd fret on Low E string after capo)

The key has now changed to A#/Bb instead of G due to the capo being placed on the third fret. While that may seem confusing, all you REALLY need to know is that you must adjust the chords being fretted when using a capo. Basically pretend that the capo has become the nut of the guitar, and you'll have no worries.