Travis Picking: The Alternating Thumb

The thumb plays every beat on two bass strings, in turn; the fingers fill the gaps. Next after Handouts 494 and 497.

1 · THE THUMB KEEPS THE BEAT

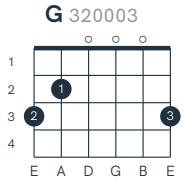
	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
thumb	p str. 6		p str. 4		p str. 6		p str. 4	
fingers		m		a		m		a

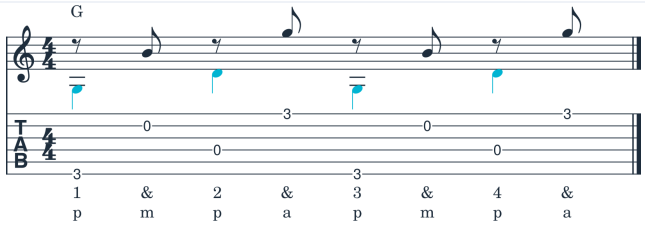
Count **1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &**. The thumb **p** plays every beat and swaps bass strings each time: the root, then another chord tone. A finger plucks each **&**. The style is named after the guitarist Merle Travis.

Fingers as in Handout 494: **i** string 3, **m** string 2, **a** string 1. Many players fill with i and m only.

2 · THREE PATTERNS, ONE BAR EACH

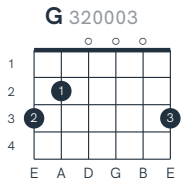
Standard tuning, no capo. Staff notes are written an octave higher than they sound; thumb notes are cyan with stems down. In the tab the top line is string 1 and "6/3" means string 6, fret 3. Under the tab: the count, then the plucking finger.

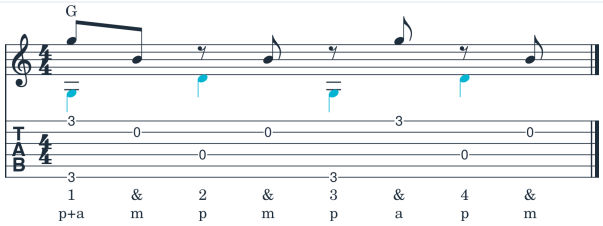




A Alternating thumb

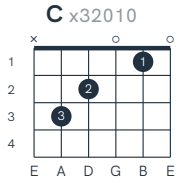
Thumb: **6/3** G2 ↔ **4/0** D3
Fingers: **m** 2/0, **a** 1/3
Fingers m and a take turns on the &s.

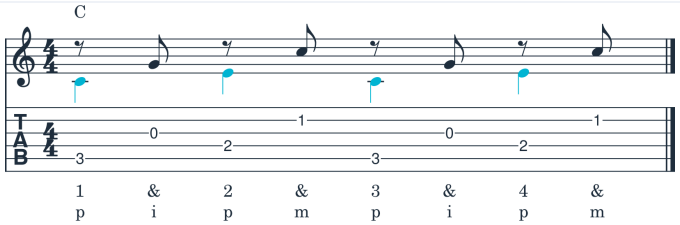




B Pinch on beat 1

Thumb: **6/3** G2 ↔ **4/0** D3
Fingers: **m** 2/0, **a** 1/3
Beat 1: **p** and **a** pluck together (a *pinch*). Then the &s: m, m, a, m.





C Over C

Thumb: **5/3** C3 ↔ **4/2** E3
Fingers: **i** 3/0, **m** 2/1
Same rhythm over C, with i and m. The thumb moves to strings 5 and 4.

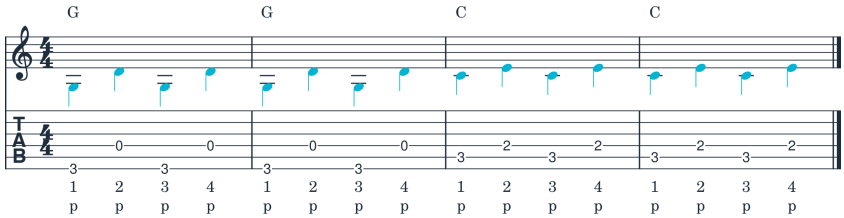
CHORD	ROOT	ALTERNATE	THE ALTERNATE IS
G	G2 · 6/3	D3 · 4/0	**D** = the 5th
C	C3 · 5/3	E3 · 4/2	**E** = the 3rd

Handout 497 alternates C with the 5th below the root (G2, string 6 fret 3). Here the thumb stays inside the C shape and takes the 3rd. Both choices are common.

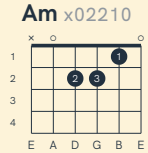
Chord boxes: nut at the top, string 6 at the left; × = not played, ○ = open, dot numbers = fretting fingers (1 = index). Common fingerings; others exist.

3 · THUMB FIRST

Play only the thumb for 4 bars at **quarter = 60**, until every beat is even. Then add the &s: pattern A over G, pattern C over C. Hold each chord for the whole bar (let it ring) and change on beat 1.



Try it



Over **Am** the thumb alternates string 5 open and string 4 fret 2. Bass notes: _____ and _____.
Fills: **m** on string 2, fret ____ **a** on string 1, fret ____ · In pattern B, which two fingers play together on beat 1? ____ and ____

Check: A2 and E3 (E is the 5th of Am); m: string 2 fret 1 (C); a: string 1 open (E). Pattern B: p and a. · More practice: Exercises 205 and 208.

Listen: scan or visit tissimo.co/worksheets/guitar-travis-picking-alternating-thumb
Patterns A, B and C (each twice), the thumb line and the full 4 bars, at quarter = 60 after one bar of clicks, every note held. Piano pitch model at sounding pitch: audio cannot show which finger plucks.

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