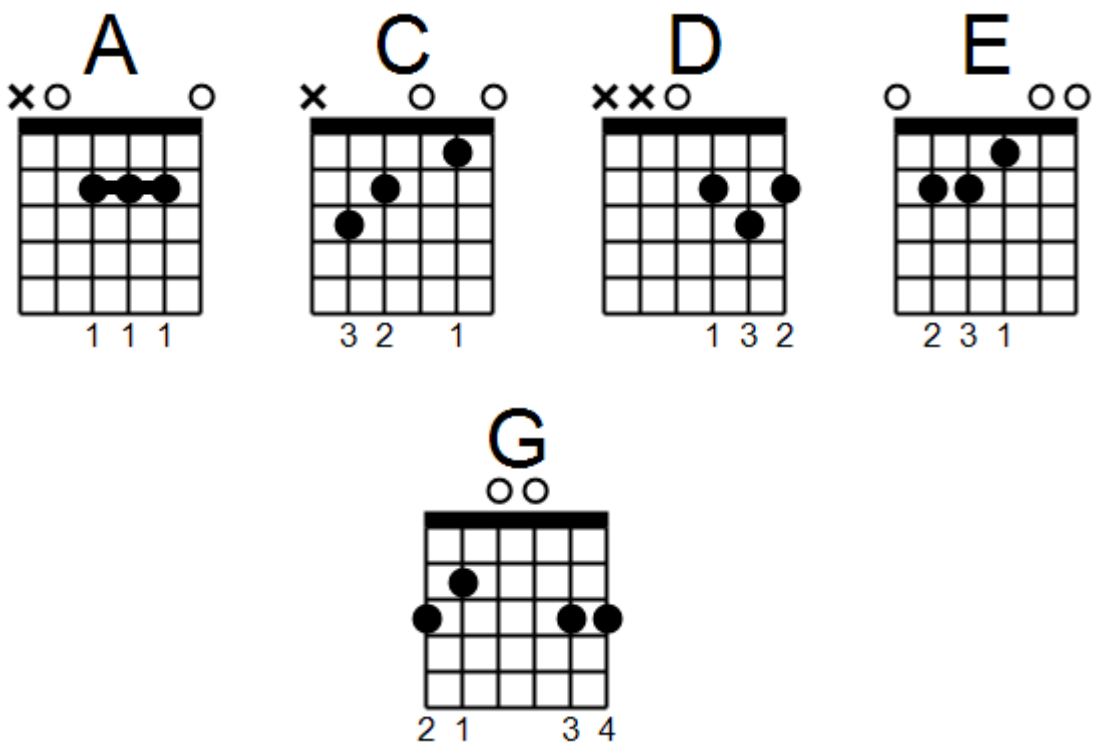
Open Major and Minor Chords

The first obstacle of dexterity presented to the beginner guitarist is commonly the open chord. An open chord is a chord which incorporates open strings, i.e. strings which don't require your fretting hand's intervention in order to achieve a desired pitch, be it E, A, D, G, B, or E. We're going to keep things simple and stick to the first three frets for now, but don't worry; a lot can be done with just those three frets!

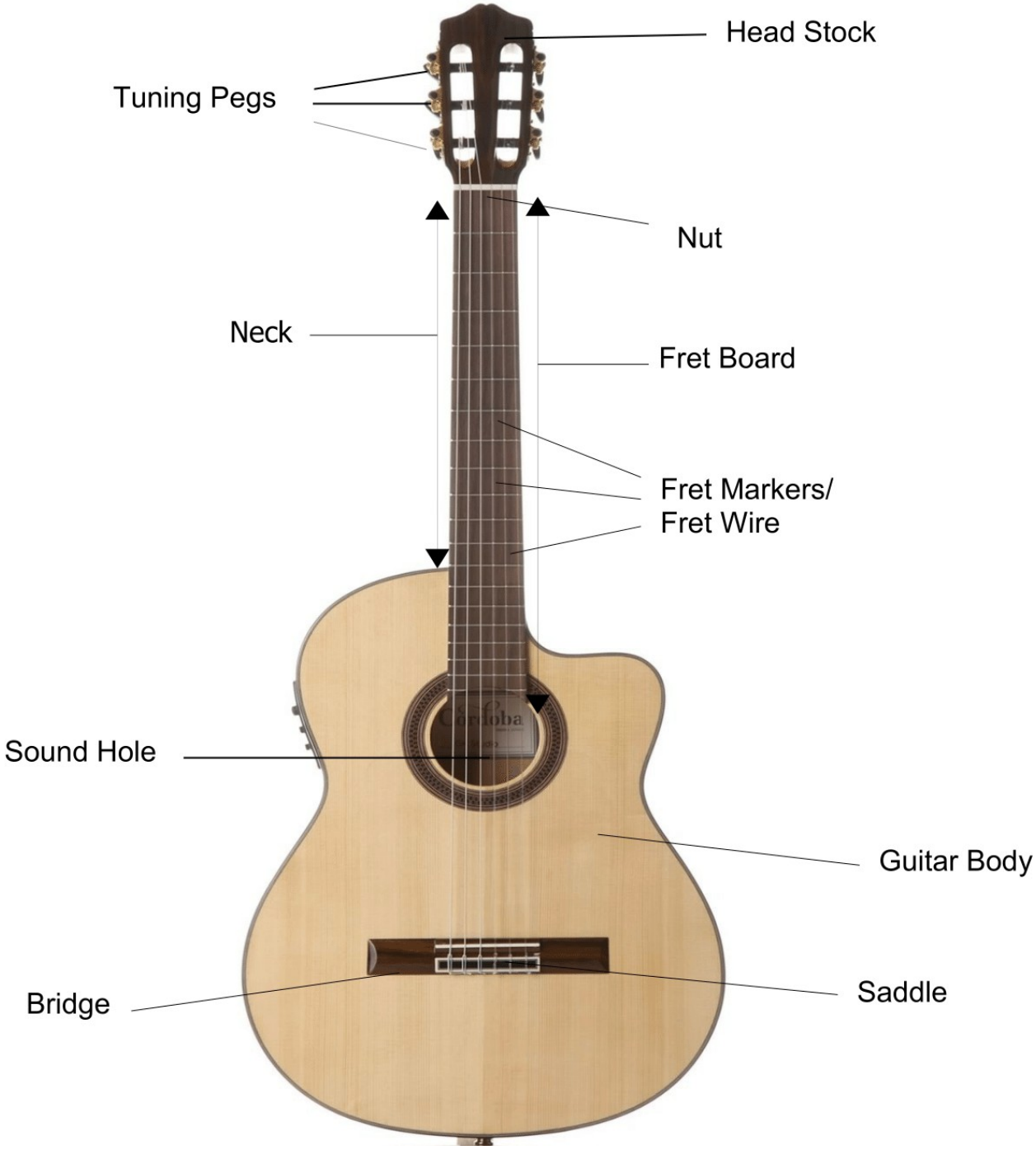
Now the types of chords we're looking at in this lesson are major and minor chords. If you take a gander at the chord diagrams you'll see that some of these chord names are suffixed by a lower case "m", those are the minor chords; and thus, those without the lower case m are the major chords. We tend to abbreviate major chords by avoiding the word altogether, so C major is simply referred to as "C", D major becomes "D", etc. We can't generalise the same laziness to minor chords however because we need to maintain the distinction. And the distinction in mood between these two sounds is the most significant in music harmony; the major tonality is chirpy and care-free, whereas antithetically anything minor sounds serious and perhaps even melancholic. You might be able to notice the differences already if you play them slowly and attentively, but if these terms seem a bit abstract and meaningless to you right now fear not; with a little guidance your "musical ear" will develop sufficiently to be able to decipher all sorts of variations in harmony, twinning each with a certain "feel". Fortunately music is a vast wealth of moods and feelings ripe for the gleaning. Anyway, without further ado, let me introduce you to your new friends:

Open Major Chords



Anatomy of the Guitar and Notes on the Fret Board

Firstly let's take a look at the anatomy of the guitar, as I'll be mentioning bridges and nuts, head stocks and fret boards all over the place. So let's find out here and now what that all means.



How to Tune Your Guitar

This is something you have to be able to do; your strings will go out of tune. It's caused by a change in the tension of the string. Fortunately you can manually adjust the tension of a string either tighter (higher in pitch) or slacker (lower in pitch) with the use of your tuning pegs. However there are plenty of variables that might do the job of changing the pitch of your string for you against your will: a third party for instance, children are especially drawn to the fun twisty tuning pegs; even leaning the instrument against a surface and accidentally knocking a peg can make things sound noticeably bogus. More common though is the guitar going "out of tune" seemingly all by itself; the strings seem of their own volition to want to head slowly towards entropy. Many factors are at play in causing this; the wood of the guitar itself can expand/contract/warp as a result of atmospheric pressure or humidity, or perhaps a hearty string bend or a particularly healthy strum may pull slack from the portion of the string beyond the nut and then fail to redistribute tension equally along the whole length of the string if the friction is too much between a string and its groove in the nut.

Note: *Incidentally that specific problem is a chronic one and you'll be going mad with it unless you address the source of the problem by lubricating the grooves in the nut. Graphite from a soft pencil does an ok job, but I can recommend the unfortunately named "nut sauce", available in all fine music shops for that purpose. If that doesn't work, then lighter strings or a new nut might be worth a thought. Strangely this seems more frequently to affect the D or G strings than the others.*

This may seem like a minefield already, but happily there is such a thing as a guitar tuner. If you're new to it all, I'd actually recommend using one because unless you have prior musical experience, you're unlikely to have developed a "musical ear" of sufficient aptitude to accurately discern relative pitch. Not to worry though, this little gadget does your discerning for you. There is no shame in using one; you'll undoubtedly see any of your favourite guitarists using one on stage between songs. However, let it be noted that although you can use a tuner whenever you like; you should aim to **be able to** tune by ear. Your ability to relate pitch is your most valuable asset as a musician and the tuning of a guitar by ear is a very rudimentary use of that skill.

Using a tuner

There is abundant variety in shapes and sizes of guitar tuners on the market as you might expect, but the vast majority work in the same way: you pick a note, the tuner detects the sound and tells you which of the notes of standard tuning that sound closest to in pitch – E, A, D, G, B or E. It also lets you know whether you need to sharpen or flatten the pitch in order to be achieve the note; and it most often communicates this to you by a meter and/or the lighting up of LEDs. The first thing you should know is that your strings are numbered 1-6. Counter-intuitively string 1 is the thin E string (the highest in pitch) and string 6 is the fat E string (the lowest in pitch), with the others in order between. There is therefore a reliance upon you to know the notes in standard tuning and also sometimes to know the string numbers. The tuner is unfortunately not a robot that tunes your guitar for you while you recline on a chaise longue and eat cheesecake; it doesn't know what pitch you want to tune your 2nd string to, instead you have to know that the 2nd string ought to be tuned to B.

The tuner, after you pick a note is likely to display something likely "4 D"; and that's a good thing if you're picking your 4th string because it should be tuned to that note - D. However if you're picking