

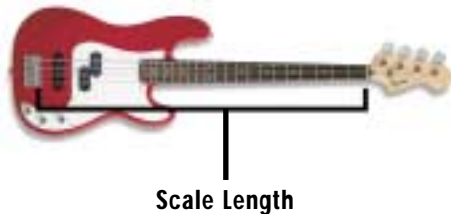
Mr. GEARHEAD™ presents an absolute beginner's guide to

# Getting Down to Bass-ics

If you've been listening to the radio, your CDs, tapes and your favorite live bands, and you always find yourself humming or singing along with the bass part, there just might be a great bass player locked up somewhere inside you, just dying to get out. The question is, how do you break the lock and set that bad boy or girl in you free?

Well, maybe we can help. The first thing you'll need, of course, is a bass. But before you walk into your local dealer and throw your hard-earned cash down on the first bass they put in front of you, it's a good idea to have at least some working knowledge of the variations you are likely to come across in your search.

Here are a few terms and features that it would be really good to understand when trying to choose your first bass.



The scale length refers to the active vibrating length of the strings, and it is usually measured in inches. The longer the scale length, the longer the neck. The longer the neck, the longer the distance between each fret and, consequently, the longer the stretch on your fretting hand. Smaller hands may be more comfortable on shorter necks, and vice versa.

These are the most common scale lengths for electric basses:

*Short Scale:* 30 inches;  
*Medium Scale:* 32 inches;  
*Long Scale (Standard):* 34 inches;  
*Extra-long Scale:* 35+ inches.

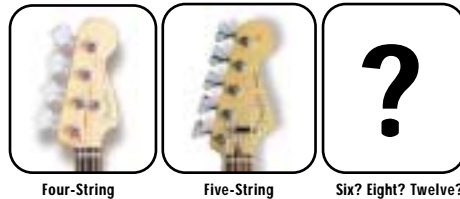
## Nut Width

The nut width is the actual width of the neck at the nut. The nut is the grooved plastic component through which the strings run on their way to the tuners.

A wider nut will mean wider string spacing and this may translate into accelerated fatigue for smaller hands or shorter fingers.



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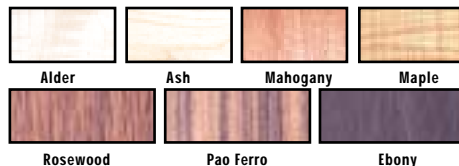


## Configurations

The electric bass was conceived as a four-stringed instrument, and it remained that way for decades, but basses are now available in four-, five-, six-, seven-, eight- and even 12-string configurations. Whether you choose a four-string or five-string—the most common configurations—will depend on what style of playing interests you.

The traditional four-string electric bass is tuned E-A-D-G. This four-string configuration has been used on countless recordings for nearly 50 years, and a electric bass style is essentially built upon this foundation. The five-string bass usually adds a lower string, which increases the bottom range of the instrument. Five-strings are most often tuned B-E-A-D-G. However, you can increase the upper range by using a higher C string instead, in the tuning of E-A-D-G-C.

Generally speaking, other configurations such as six-, seven-, eight- and 12-strings are much more specialized niche instruments, and it's a good idea to get your chops down on a four- or five-string before you start working with a fretboard the size of an air-



## Wood

Since basses are made of wood, it is important to know what to expect from the tonewoods of which they're made. Pick them up, play them and compare. Listen to them and see how these differences translate to your ears. The most commonly used body woods for electric basses are:

*Alder:* full and rich, with fat low end, nice cutting mids, and good overall warmth and sustain;

*Ash:* exhibits a "snappier" tone with a bright edge, warm lows, and good sustain;

*Poplar:* one of the lighter and softer hardwoods, resonant with a meaty tone;

*Basswood:* warm low end with nice full mids and good sustain (similar to alder).

The most commonly used fretboard woods for electric basses are:

*Rosewood:* warm, with nice overtones;  
*Maple:* punchy, bright, with good bite on high end;  
*Pao Ferro:* Rich and warm with a nice attack.



## Pickups

Pickups are electromagnetic coils that sense the movement of the string when you play and convert the pulse into an electronic signal that your amplifier can understand. The most common types are single coil, humbucking, and Noiseless:

*Single-coil:* great, traditional Fender Jazz and Precision Bass tone.

*Humbucking:* dual-coil pickups with a hot fat sound—the two coils combine to eliminate 60-cycle hum for quiet operation.

*Noiseless:* great, authentic single-coil tone, but with quiet humbucking operation.

## Preamps

Basses may be either "active" or "passive." On passive instruments, the signal going to the amplifier is generated solely by the pickups. Active instruments use a battery-powered preamp that boosts or cuts specific frequencies to shape the tone.

## Strings

They are often overlooked, but strings are one of the most important ingredients in bass tone. Strings come in a variety of styles and materials:

*Roundwound:* the outer cover of the string is a round wire—bright tone, slick to the touch;

*Tapewound:* the round outer covers of the string are tapered down to the core of the string for increased fundamental projection;

*Flatwound:* the outer cover of the string is a flat tape/wire—warm and dark-sounding;

*Pure Nickel:* the softest material, the warmest tone;  
*Nickel Plated Steel:* a bit harder and gives a brighter full tone.

*Stainless Steel:* the hardest material and has the brightest tone with a bit more sizzle.

People and basses come in many shapes and sizes, so put your hands on a few basses and see what feels comfortable in your hands and on your body. As always, the most important thing is to have fun!

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