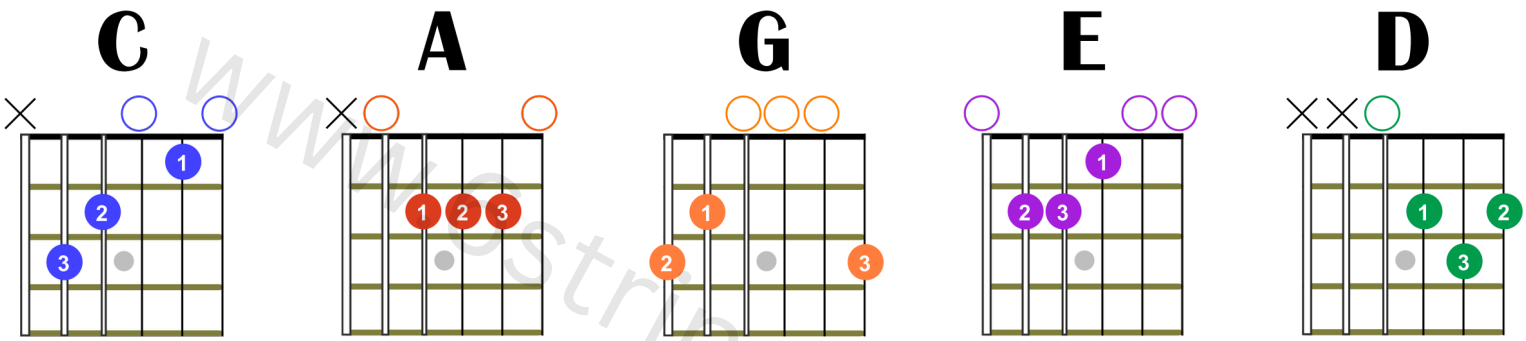
PART I

What is the CAGED System?

The **CAGED** system maps the fretboard using the five common open chord shapes—**C, A, G, E**, and **D**. It acts as a roadmap that works in any key, helping guitarists **navigate the entire fretboard.** You can use it at any level, from simply finding chord voicings to exploring scales, arpeggios, improvising, or even memorising full pieces.

Before we dive in, let's take a quick look at the five open chord shapes.

The Five Open Chord Shapes



SHAPES vs CHORDS: An Important Distinction

1) What is a Shape?
A shape is the fingering pattern you use to play a chord on the fretboard. In the chord grids above, each shape is highlighted in a different color. For example, the C shape is shown in blue, forming a diagonal pattern across the fretboard.

2) What is a Chord?
A chord is the actual group of notes being played. A chord must have at least three different notes– this is called a **triad**. If it has four notes, it's called a **seventh chord**. For instance, a C Major chord is a triad made up of the notes C, E, and G.

In other words, a shape refers to how a **chord looks** on the fretboard, while a chord refers to the actual **sound** or **pitches being played**.

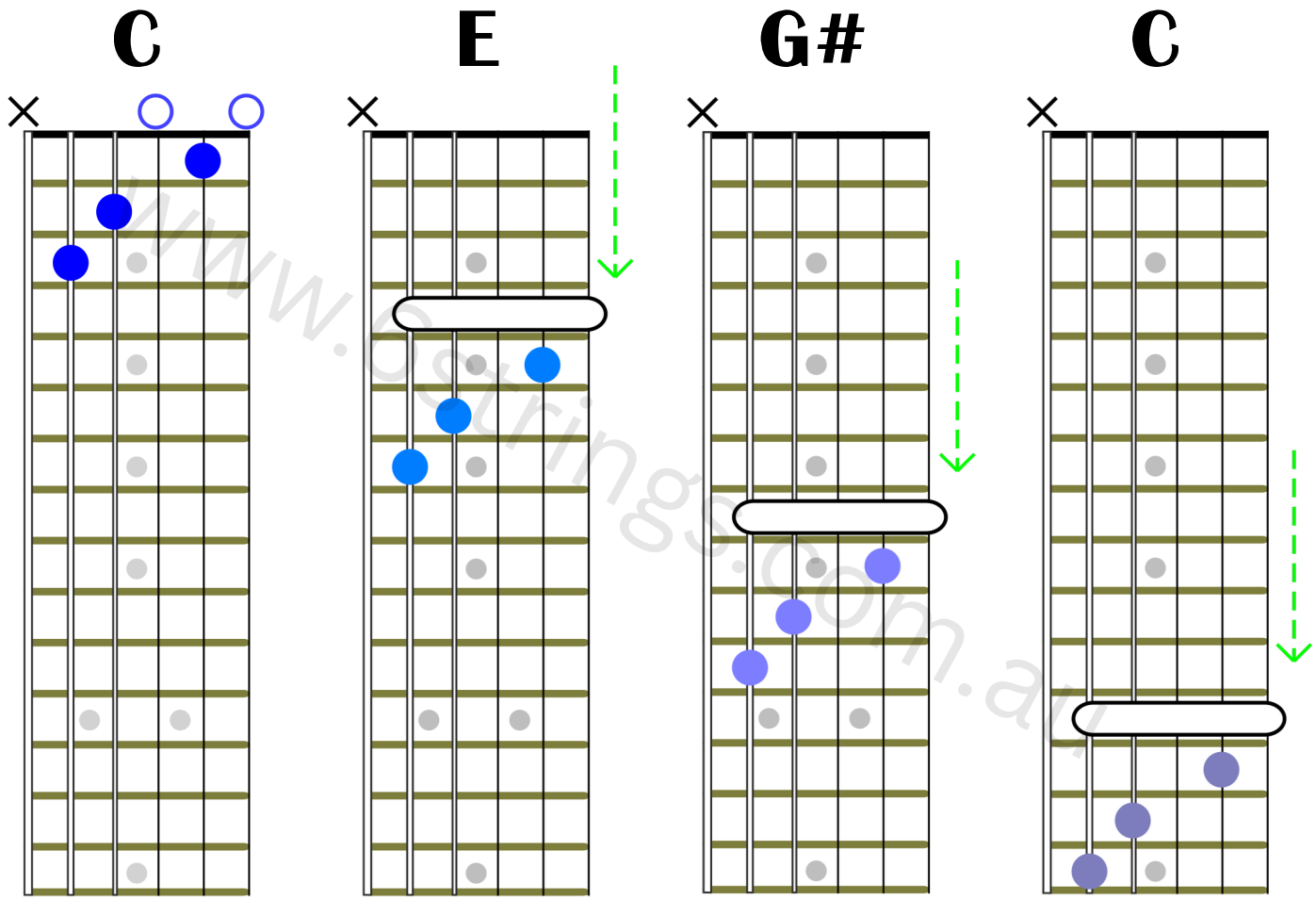
This concept is essential for understanding the CAGED System, so we'll be exploring it thoroughly in this chapter.

1) Understanding SHAPES

Any of the CAGED shapes can be **moved along the fretboard** to create **various chords**.

In the diagrams below, we focus on the C shape and how it can be shifted. Since this shape includes two open strings (**G** and **e**), you should treat them as part of the C position and move them together with the other notes as you shift across the fretboard.

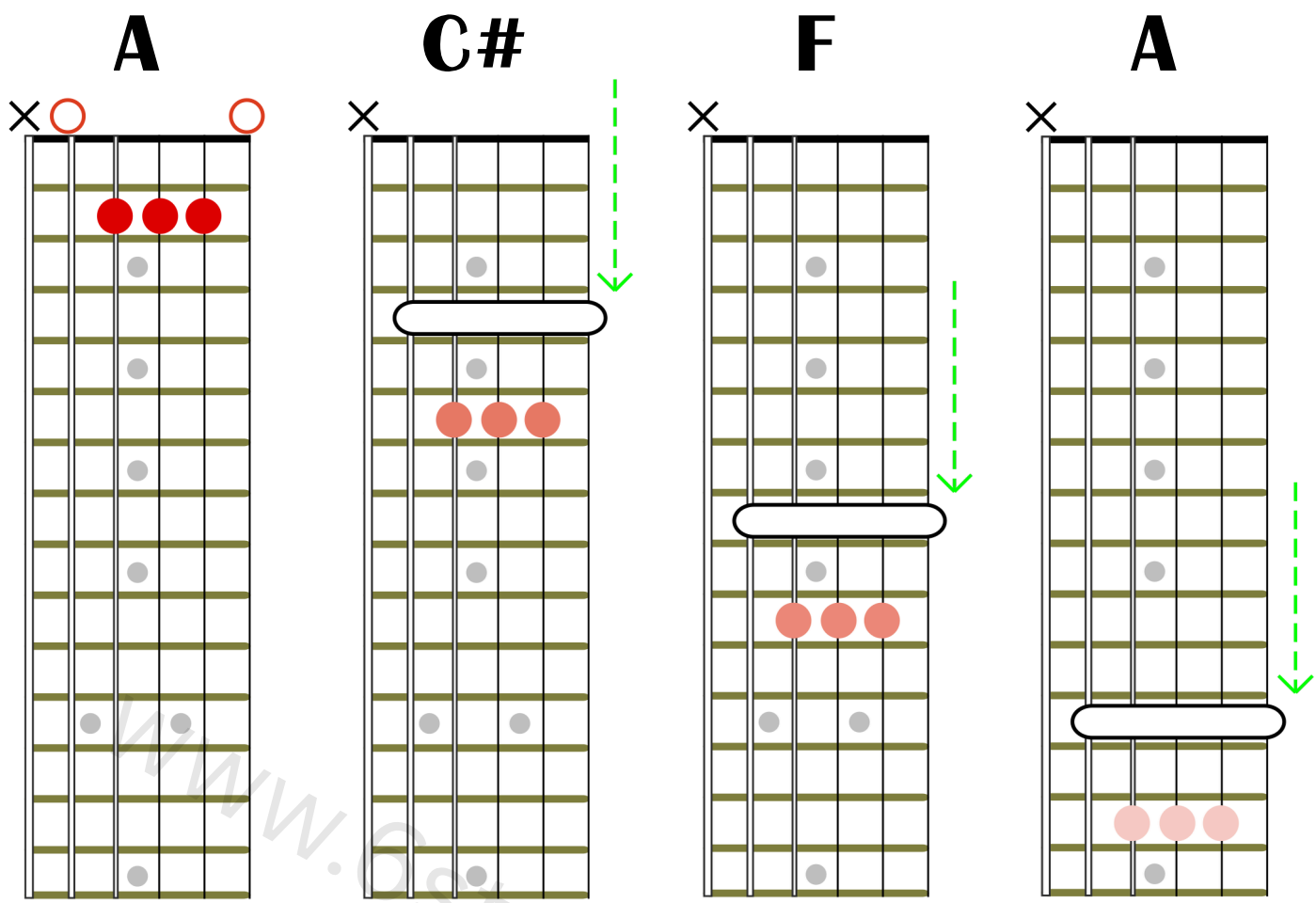
An easy way to visualize this is by using a capo, placing it in different positions to "move" the shape. Alternatively, if you're comfortable with barre chords, you can play the C shape as a barre.



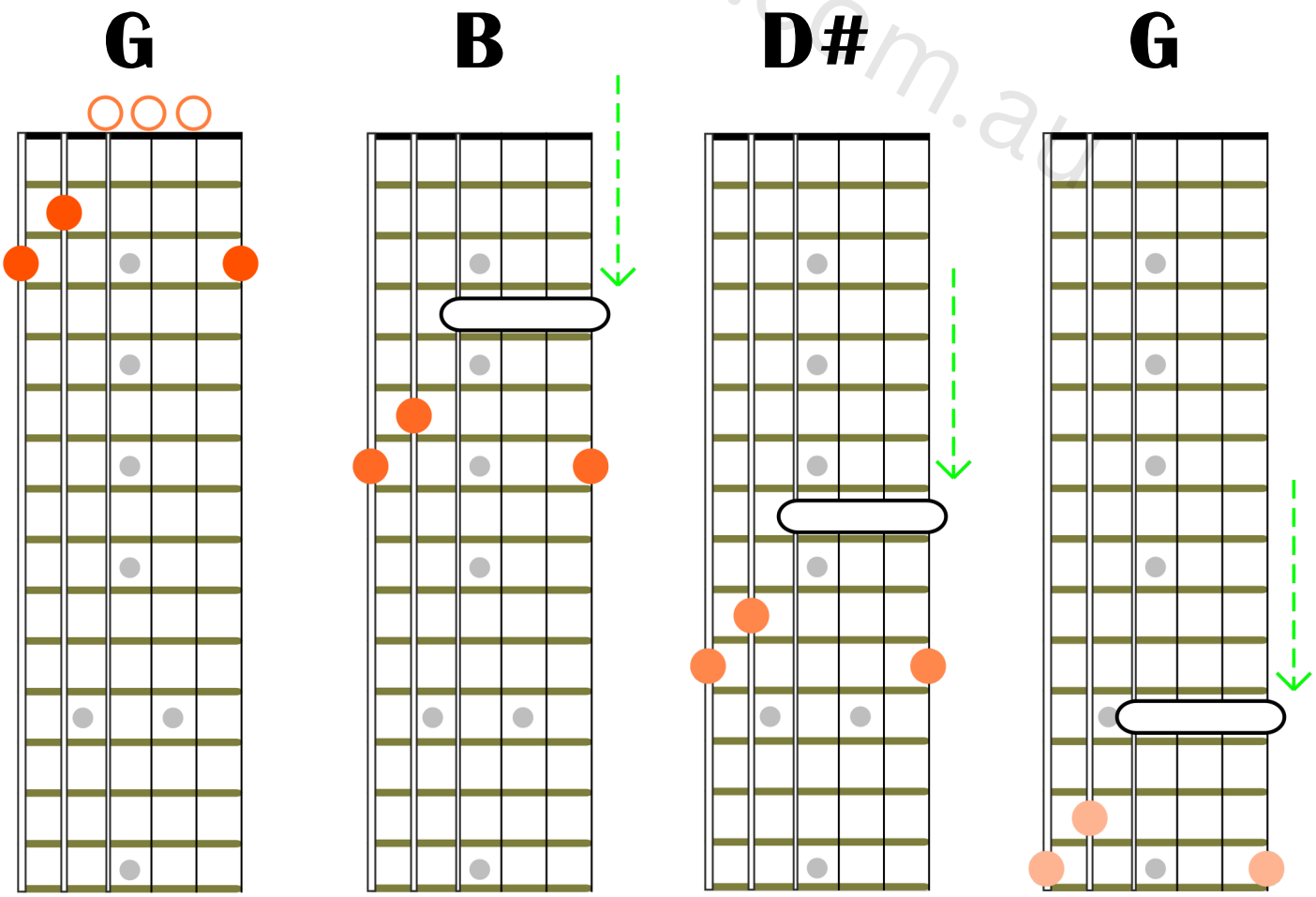
The **C shape** always looks the same, but as you slide it up the neck the chord changes: **C** in open position, **E** at the 4th fret, **G♯** at the 8th, and **C** again at the 12th.

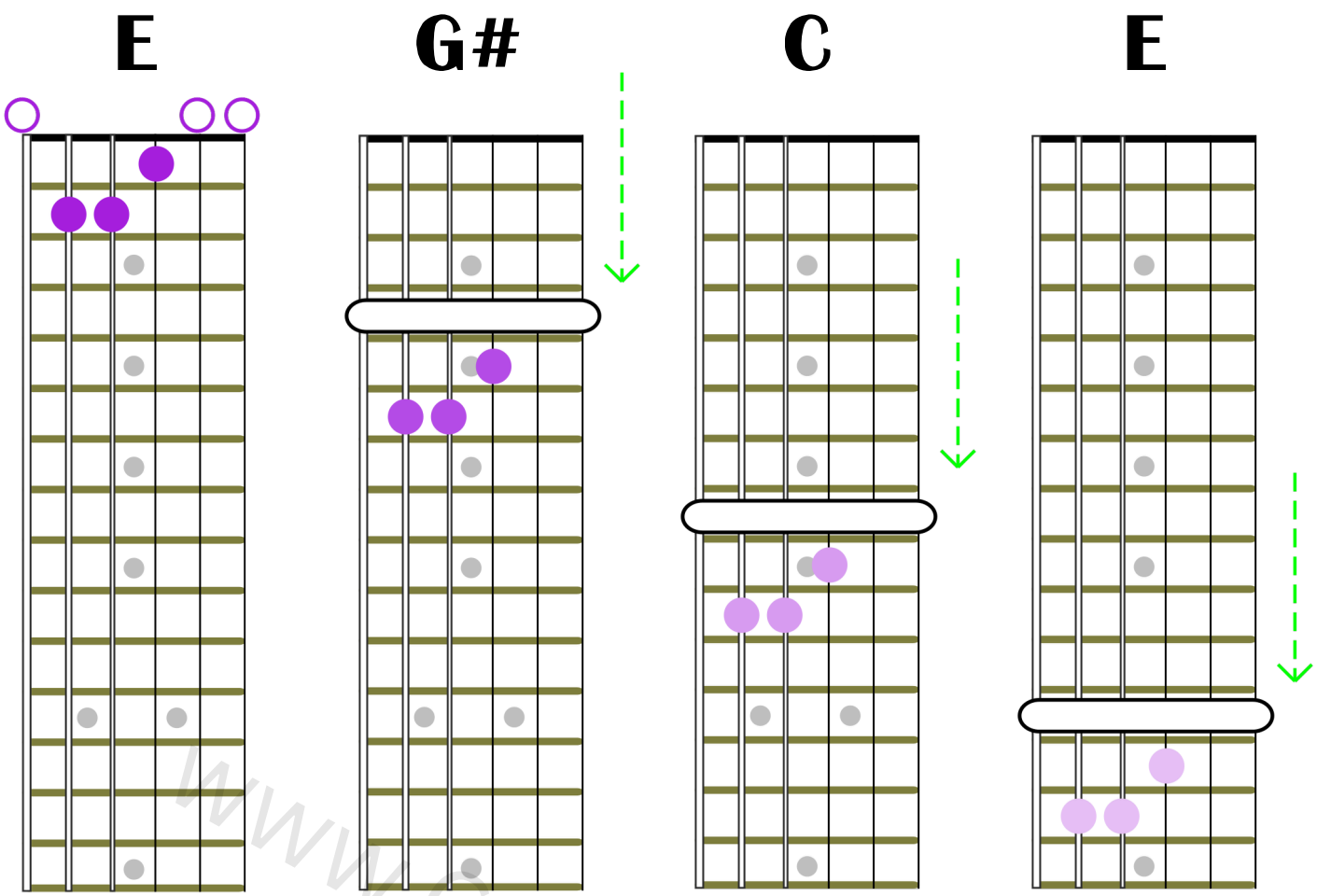
In the following diagrams, you'll see the same concept applied to the **A, G, E**, and **D** shapes. Pay close attention to any open strings and empty frets. For example, in the **A shape**, the **5th** string and the **1st** string are **open**, while the **1st** fret is left empty. This relationship should be maintained as you move the shape up the neck.

If you're already familiar with barre chords, you can achieve the same result by playing these shapes as barre chords.

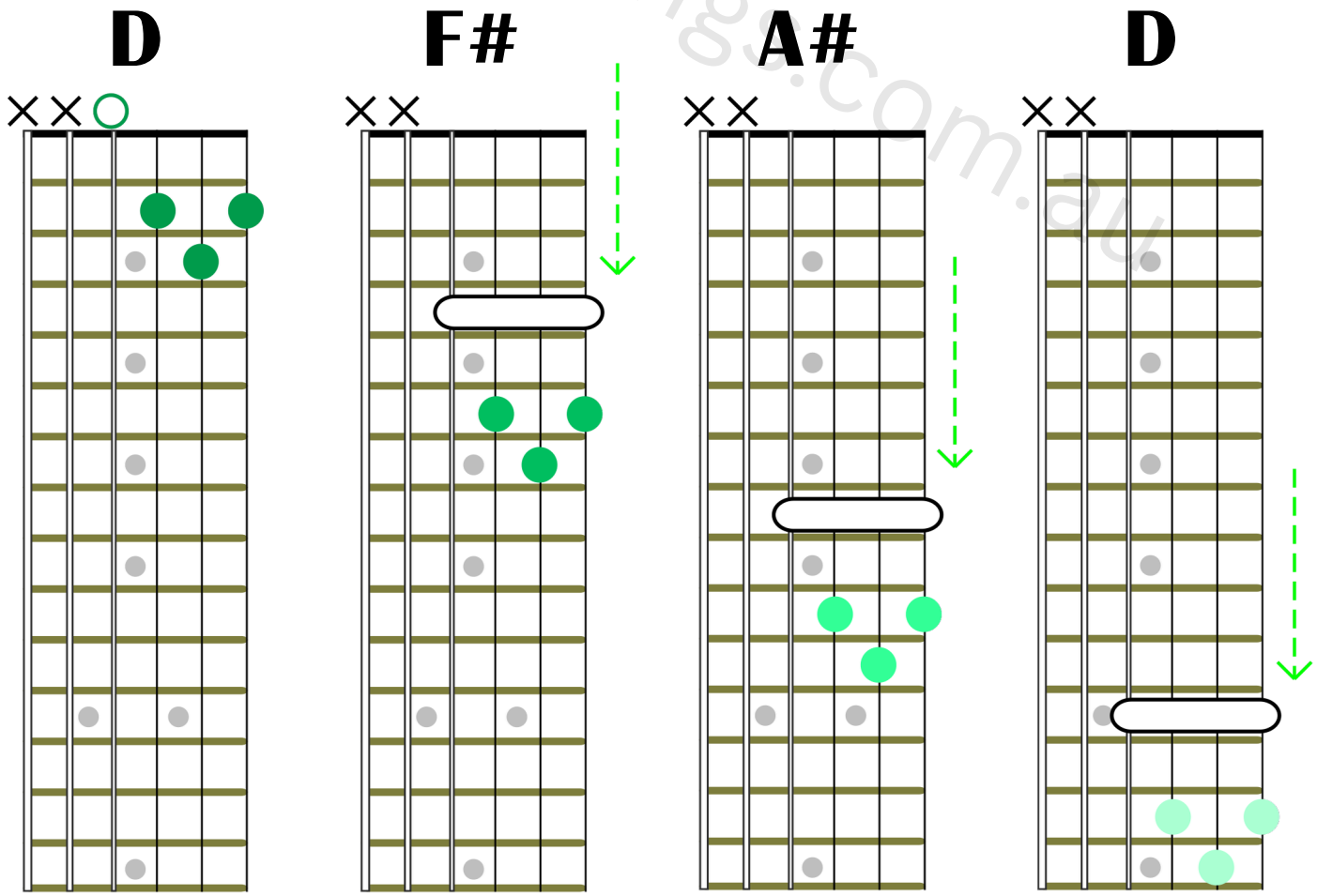


The **G shape** is by far the most awkward to play as a barre chord and **is rarely used in its full form**. However, for reference, it is shown below. See page 8 for more practical fingerings.





The **D shape** can be played with or without a barre; here, the barre is shown for reference.



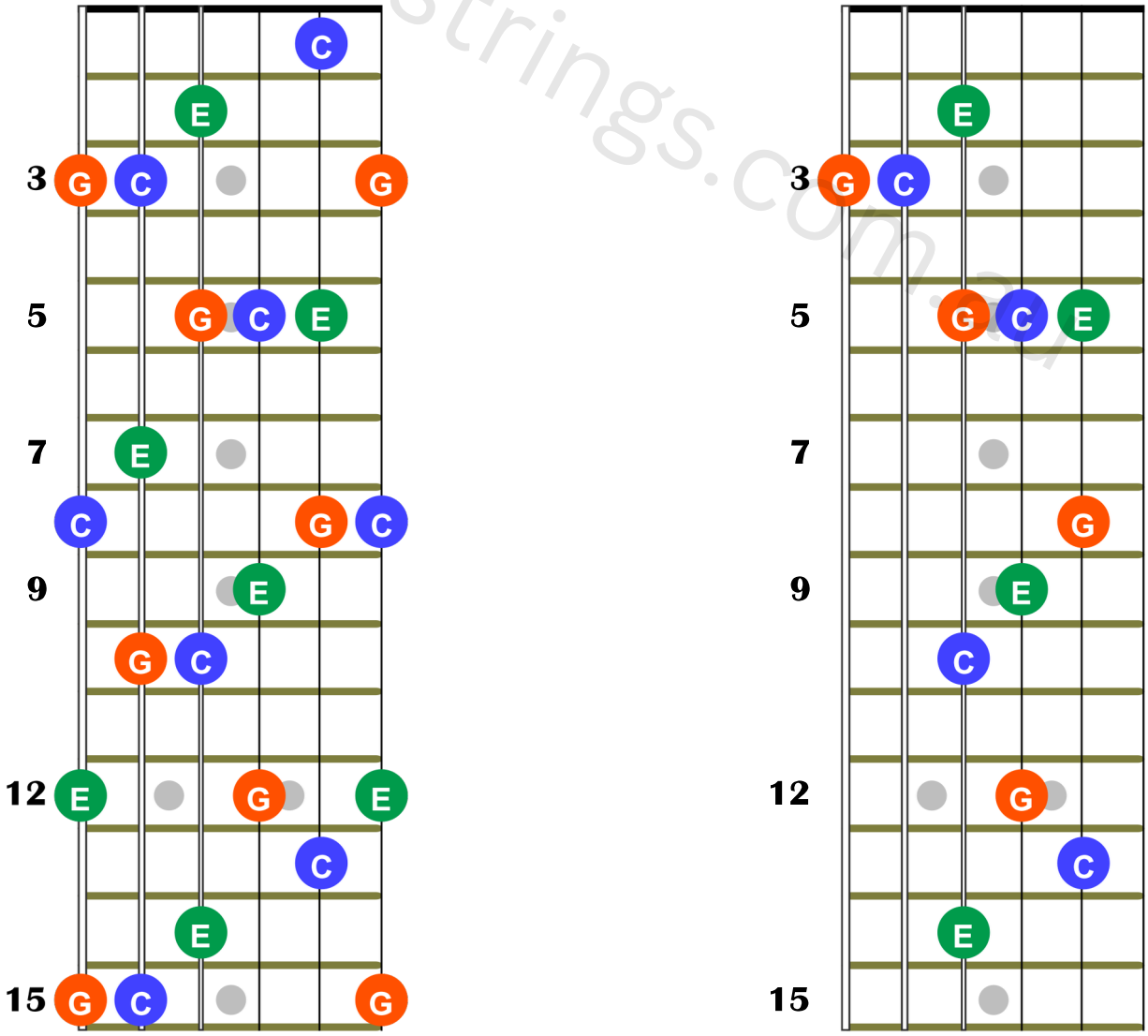
2) Understanding CHORDS

A chord is made up of three notes. For a **C chord**, those notes are **C**, **E**, and **G**. Because these notes appear in many places on the fretboard, there are multiple ways to build and play a **C chord**.

The diagram on the left shows **every place these notes appear along the neck.** At first, it might look confusing because the pattern isn't obvious—but there is one (more on that soon!).

The diagram on the right **simplifies things by removing some of the notes**, making it easier to see where the three-note chord appears and how you can form different C chords across the fretboard. Try experimenting—any combination of these three notes will create a valid C chord!

Mapping C Chord Notes Across the Fretboard



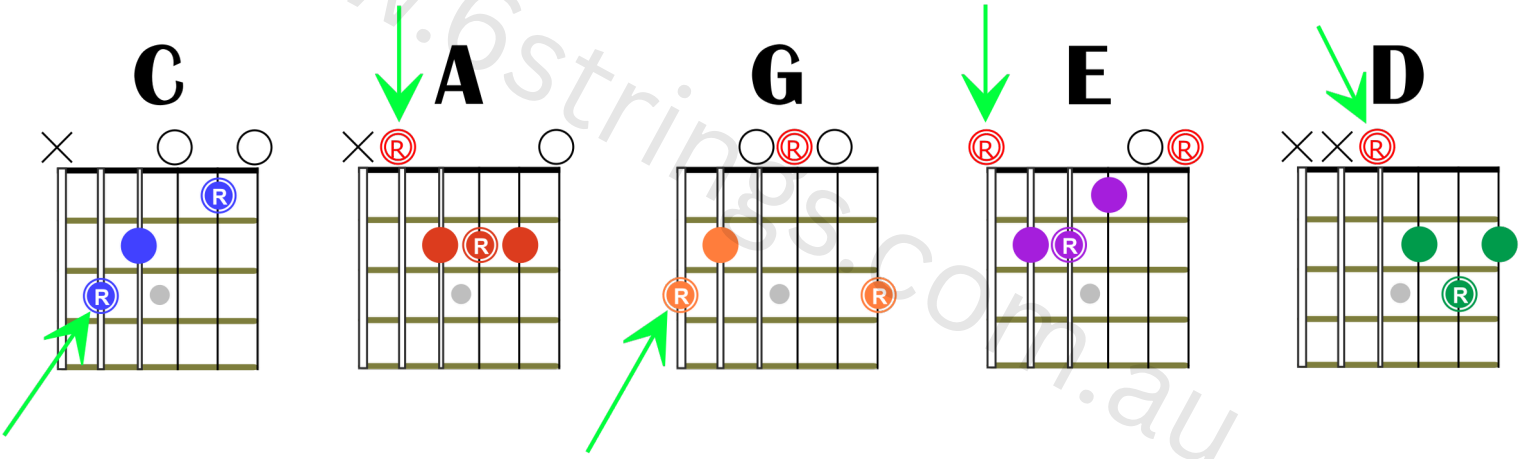
Root notes in the Five Open Shapes

As we've seen, **a chord is made up of three notes.** The first note gives the chord its name and is called the root. For example, in a C chord, the root is C.

Looking at the grids below, each shape contains **multiple root notes (R)** in different octaves. The lowest root serves as a reference, helping you identify the chord when moving the shape along the fretboard. This note is indicated by the green arrows.

Moving the shape to a different fret while keeping it intact changes all the note names, including the root, which changes the chord's name.

Although each shape has more than one root note, our focus is on the **lowest-sounding root**, which is found on the **6th, 5th, and 4th strings.** In some shapes, this root note occurs on an open string.



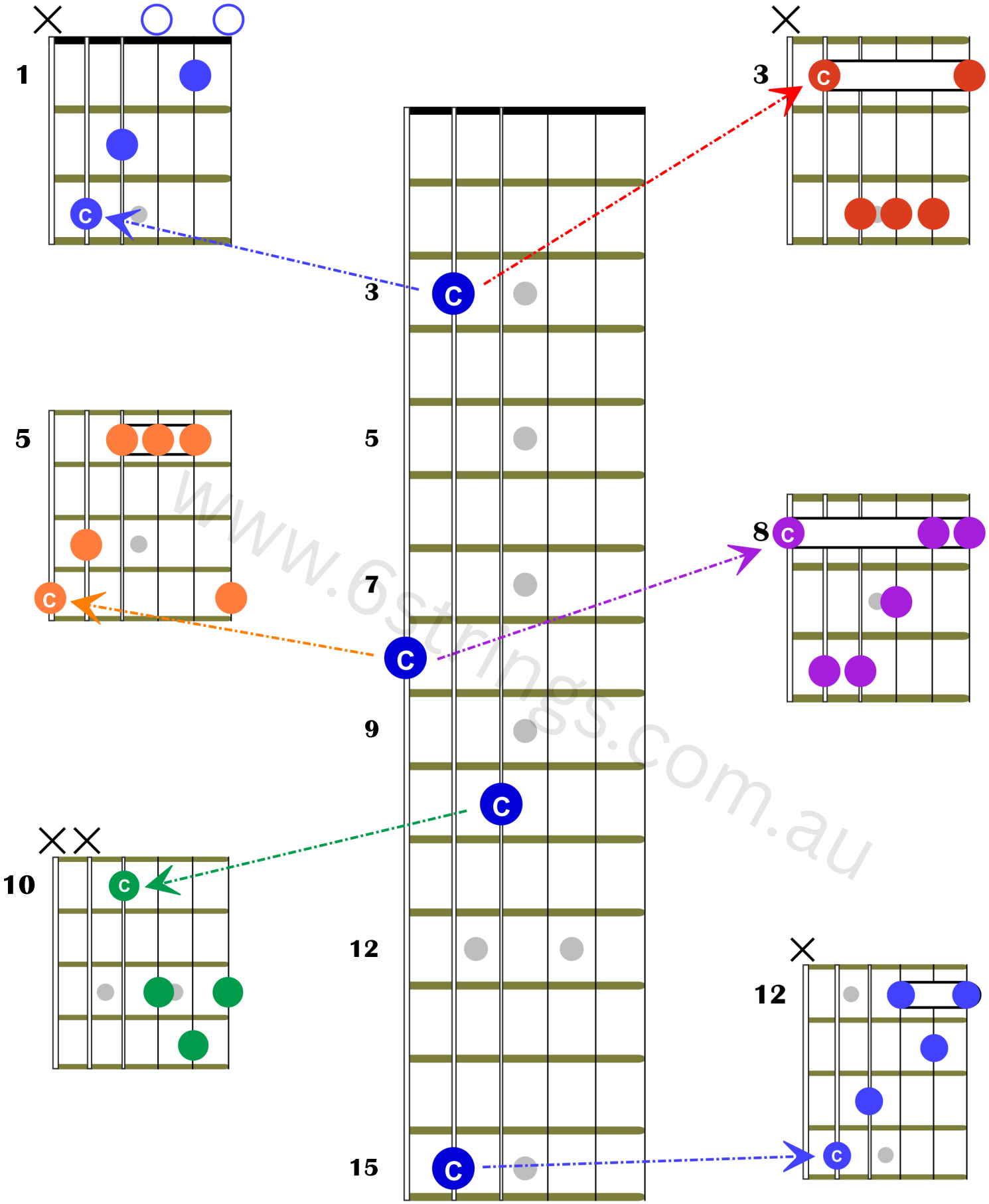
On the next page, we'll put everything into context. The fretboard in the center highlights where a C note can be found on strings **6**, **5**, and **4**.

The first **C** appears on the **3rd** fret of the **5th string**. The **blue arrow** shows that this note can form a **C chord** with the **C shape**, while the **red arrow** shows it can also form a **C chord** using the **A shape**.

The next **C** is on the **8th** fret of the **6th string**. Here, there are two options for a **C major** chord: the **G shape** (**orange arrow**) and the **E shape** (**purple arrow**).

On the **10th fret** of the **4th string**, we find another **C**. Since only one chord shape has its lowest root on the **4th string**, the only option is a **C major** with the **D shape** (**green arrow**).

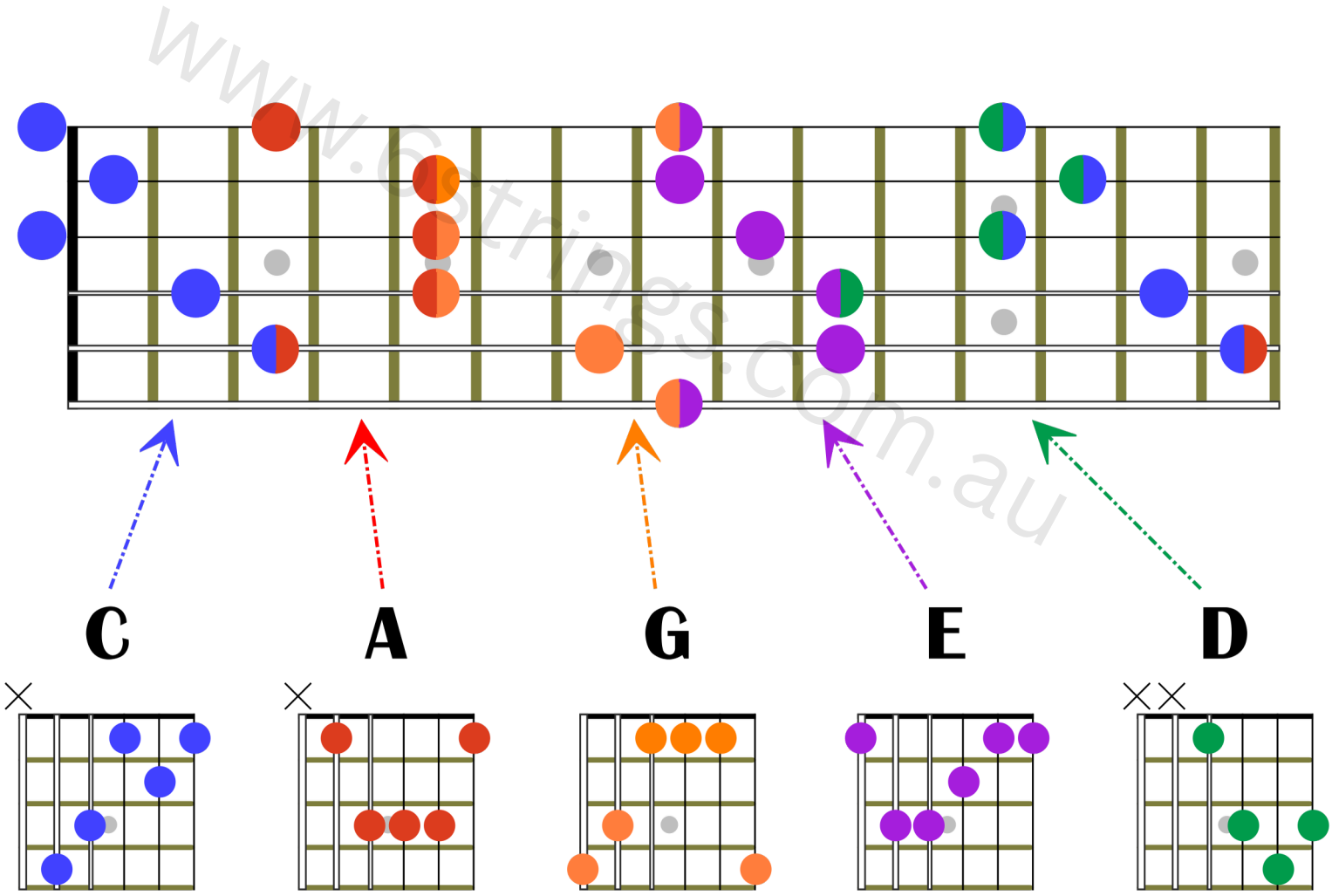
Moving up the neck, the pattern repeats, with the **C shape** using the **C note** on the **15th** fret of the **5th** string.



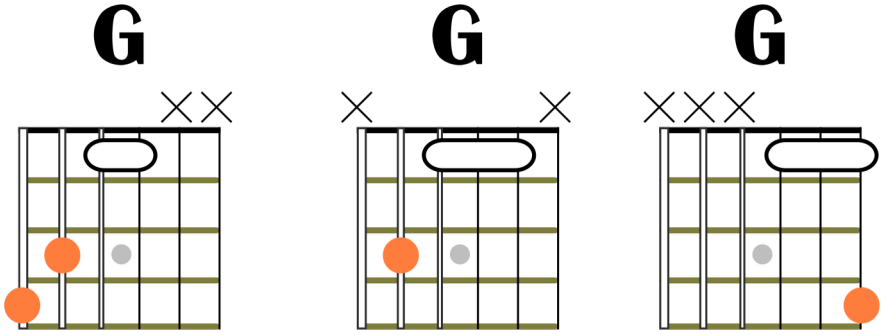
The **CAGED** acronym makes it easier to memorize the chord shapes and the sequence in which they appear on the fretboard, a pattern that repeats across all keys.

In the diagram below—the last one of this chapter!—you can see how the **CAGED** shapes line up along the fretboard for a **C major chord**.

Notice how the shapes overlap: one begins where the other ends, since they share some of the same notes. The sequence always follows the C–A–G–E–D order and cycles back to the C shape at the 12th fret. In a different key, the entire pattern simply shifts up or down the neck.



** When moved up the neck (without a capo) the **G shape** is rarely played in its full form due to the awkward fingering. Instead, guitarists usually rely on partial versions of the shape, as shown below.



CAGED Part I - Worksheet

Q1. What does CAGED stand for?_____

Q2. What is the difference between a CHORD and a SHAPE?_____

_____

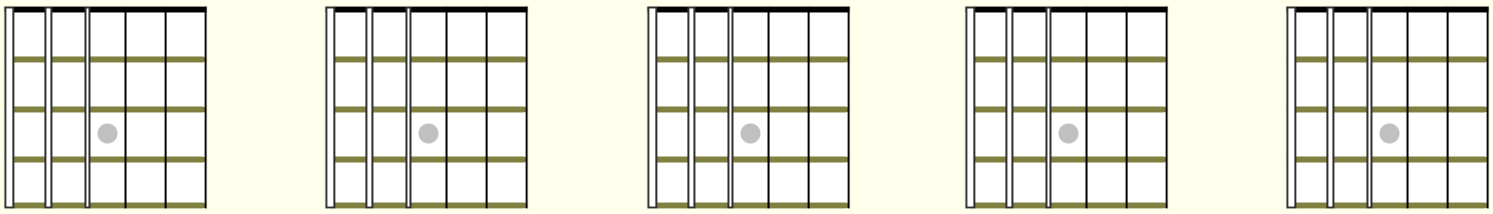
_____

Q3. How many notes does a triad have?_____

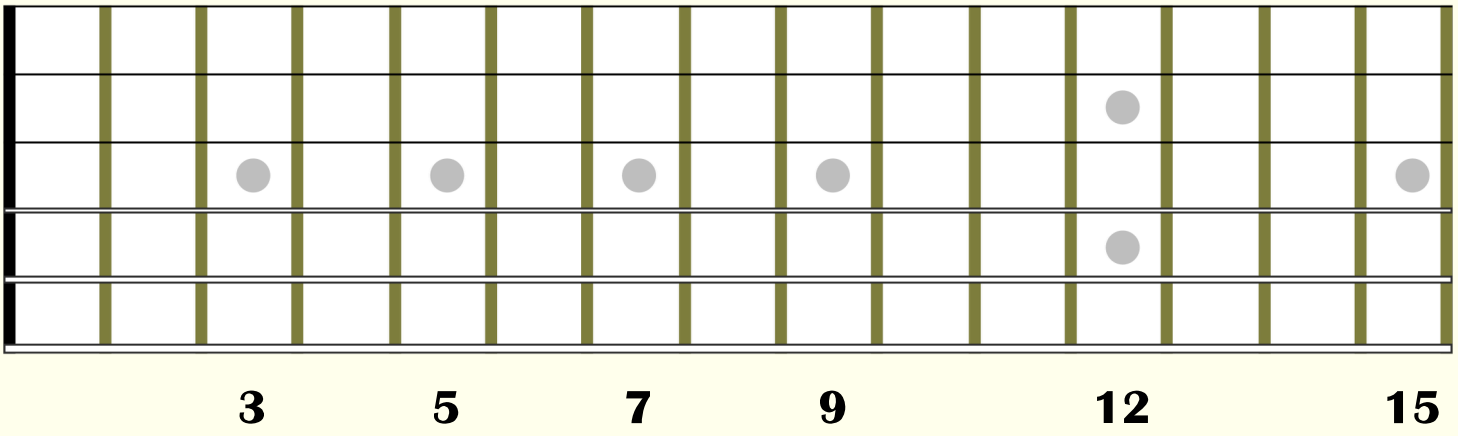
Q4. What is the root of a chord?_____

Q5. Draw the CAGED chord shapes below:

C **A** **G** **E** **D**



Q6. Now connect all the CAGED chords, starting with the C shape:



Q7. Find the following CHORDS on your guitar by first locating the root note:

- C Major using the E shape - root note on the **6th string**
- A Major using the C shape - root note on the **5th string**
- G Major using the D shape - root note on the **4th string**
- E Major using the A shape - root note on the **5th string**
- D Major using the G shape - root note on the **6th string** (refer to page 8 for partial shape)

CAGED Part I - Worksheet ANSWERS

Q1. What does CAGED stand for? C, A, G, E, D — the five basic open chord shapes on the guitar.

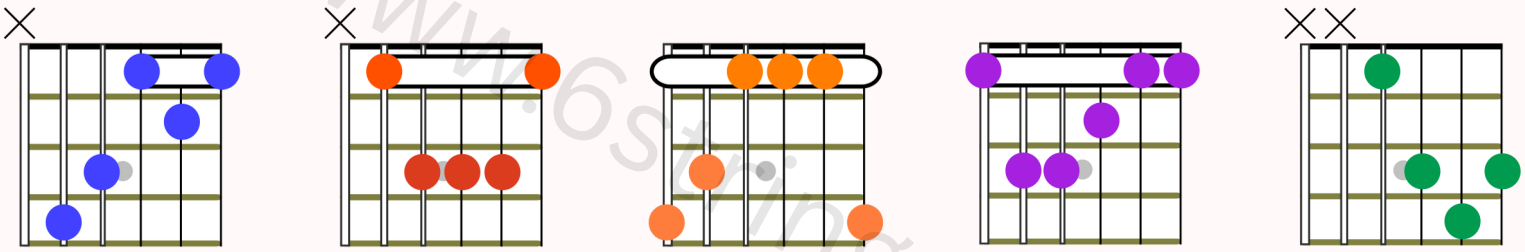
Q2. What is the difference between a CHORD and a SHAPE?
A chord is the set of notes that make up the harmony (e.g., C, E, G for C major).
A shape is the fingering pattern used to play a chord on the guitar.

Q3. How many notes does a triad have? Three notes.

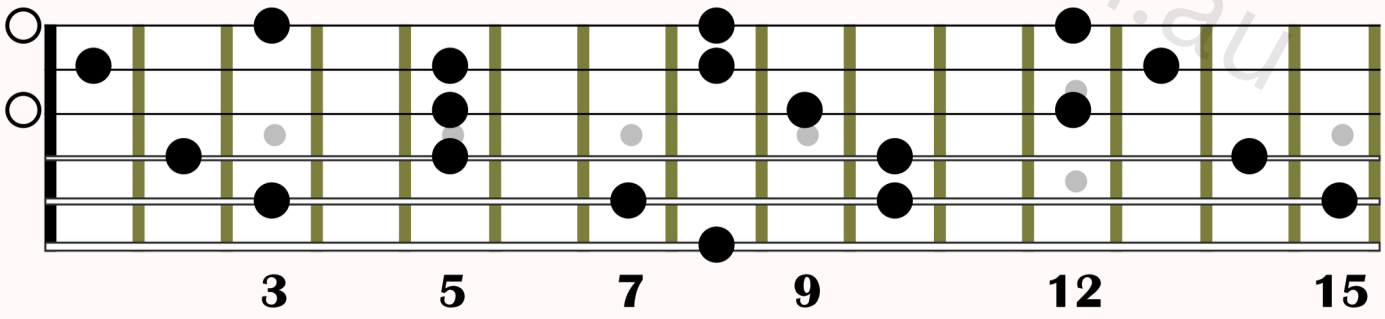
Q4. What is the root of a chord? The root is the main note that gives the chord its name, usally the lowest.

Q5. Draw the CAGED chord shapes below:

C A G E D



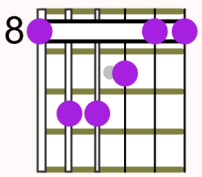
Q6. Now connect all the CAGED chords, starting with the C shape:



Q7. Find the following shapes on your guitar by first locating the root note:

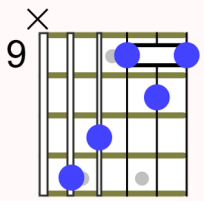
C Major using the **E shape**

C



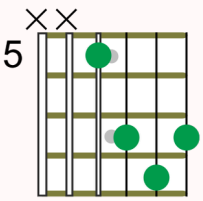
A Major using the **C shape**

A



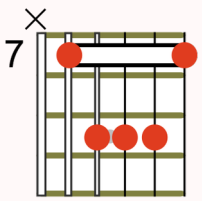
G Major using the **D shape**

G



E Major using the **A shape**

E



D Major using the **G shape**

D