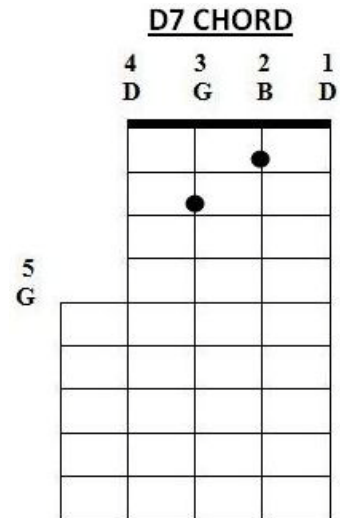


## The full D chord is a monster, but don't be afraid of it...

Crack open many of the commercially available books that purport to teach you how to play the banjo, and within the first few pages you'll likely be shown three chords: G, C and D. The G is pretty straightforward; usually it's the open G with no fingering on the neck. (Remember, banjos are tuned to **open G**.) You'll also find the 3-finger C chord based at the first and second fret. The next natural chord to be shown is the D chord. But you see Maynard, I disagree with what most books show you at this point.

### Don't replace the D chord with a D7 chord

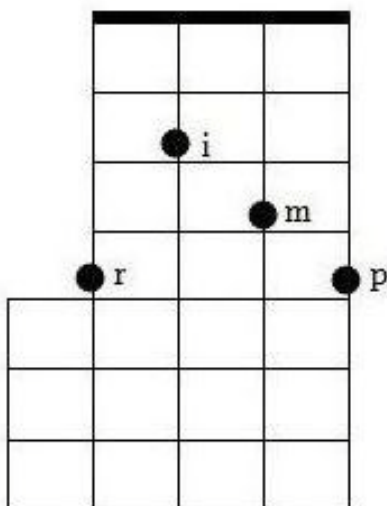
Take a look at the chord chart at the right. The chord that's shown is the D7 chord. I have noticed over the years that many banjo books show this as one of the first few chords to be learned in the key of G. They suggest that when it comes time to form a D chord, the D7 is an acceptable substitute. In fact, they don't even label it as a substitute for the D chord; they simply show this chord to a beginner and suggest that this chord is a regular chord in the key of G progression. **This is incorrect!** Some beginners may not even realize that they are not playing the correct chord or that D7 isn't the proper chord for the progression. **The correct chord is D.** The two chords are similar...but yet very different.



I suspect the reason for showing the D7 chord and not the D chord is for simplicity; you can see the D chord diagram below, and as you'll see it's not an easy chord to make. Doesn't look hard? Wait until you try it. D7 is much much easier, and it sounds "close enough".

### The progression for the key of G is: G, C, and D!!

#### D Chord



Here's the D chord, at the left. Take a look at that puppy! If you've been picking awhile then you've played this many times. Perhaps you are like many beginners and you feel very frustrated by this chord? I've actually had many people quit taking banjo lessons because they could not play this chord. I'm not kidding! So, if this is a tough one for you, you aren't alone. No matter what, don't give up! You will eventually get it, and I've got some pointers to make this chord easier to deal with.

### Yes Banjo Paul, but why not D7? It sounds pretty good!

The thing I shoot right back at you when you ask me that is: if the D7 is acceptable, then why not use C7 in place of C and G7 in place of G? The answer is that just because the chords have the same beginning letter, and just because they sound similar, does not mean they are

**the same chord.** Likewise with D7. Due to a lack of classical music training, there are a few mysteries that I can't fully explain using music theory terms. So in very layman's terms, I like to say that the D7 is in the same family as D; they are kind of cousins. Just as cousins can look similar, so can the D's of the D family sound similar. Yet...D7 has a very specific purpose, as does D. **NO SUBSTITUTING!**

## A couple of general chord fingering rules first

As we look at some pointers for dealing with the D chord specifically, let's go ahead and talk about a couple of fingering rules that will help when making any chord that you want to try. While general in nature, these tips are the bare minimum that you need to be able to tackle in order to work on the D chord specifically.



### Make your table tops!

Look at my finger that I am fretting the string with in the picture at the right. Notice that I am pushing down on the string with the tip of my finger. Also notice how the section from my first knuckle to my second knuckle is flat, almost parallel to the banjo fretboard. I call that area my "table top", and your fingers should look like mine. No laying your finger down flat with only a bend at the large knuckle; when you fret properly, every one of your finger knuckles will be bent.

### No Cradling! Don't wrap your thumb around the neck!



Classical guitar players and classically trained violinists are the masters of adhering to this rule. We acoustic, roots-music pickers tend to get lazy sometimes. Well, alright, most times. I'm guilty of it. Having said that, you may as well try to learn good habits right off the bat. **Don't cradle your neck in the crook of your thumb.** (If you are not sure what I mean, look at the picture at the left. See my thumb wrapped around the banjo neck? Make sure your hand doesn't look like that.) If you *can* do it, prefer to do it, love to do it, refuse to stop, etc.,

then more power to you and continue on. However, if you are just learning your instrument, cradling the neck will hold you back when it comes to trying to make the D chord. Now, you'll notice that I am doing it in the picture. Why? Because I can. And...to show you how not to do it.

**The D chord is hard. It takes awhile to get used to it. Don't fight yourself by trying to cradle it. Put your thumb tip under the neck! Continue reading to learn more...**

## Attention class: put your thumb here!

The picture at the right shows where your thumb should go. I've got the banjo almost flipped upside down so that you can see the underside of the neck. Make your hand look like this.

Once you give this a try, don't come back and cuss me out. Be warned ahead of time: making the D chord is very unnatural for your arm, and it'll feel counter-intuitive to try and put your thumb under the neck. You'll notice that your elbow wants to shoot way out away from your side, and your forearm will ache. Don't despair! In time, you'll "stretch out" and limber up; your forearm pressure will decline, your arm will relax, and your elbow will drop. Or, that is, all of that will happen **once you've made the D chord a couple hundred times!** So...time to get busy!



## Let's tackle the D chord!

Alright, ready? I've got some great insight that I think can help you in trying to build up the **muscle memory** needed to get this chord tackled. Over the years, I've developed a few thoughts on this tough chord. I've come to realize that there are really 3 stages to this chord. Here are the 3 stages:

1. Putting down one finger at a time
2. Being able to lay down index, middle and pinky all at once, then laying down ring finger
3. And finally, being able to put all 4 fingers down at once

## Important stage 1 tip: I.M.P.R.

But Banjo Paul, what in the world is I.M.P.R.? Funny you should ask young Grasshopper! I.M.P.R. is simply the abbreviation for each finger tip that you use to make the D chord. I=index finger, M=middle finger, P=pinky, R=ring.

I've discovered that to reach stage 2, it's important to condition your fingers and arm, or in other words: develop the muscle memory needed. The best way I've found to do this is to avoid having a haphazard, lack-of-direction type of approach when it comes to assembling your fingers into this D chord shape. Condition your hands by laying your fingers down in this order: I.M.P.R.





As you practice this D chord, take my advice and spend countless minutes and hours just laying your fingers down in the order prescribed: I.M.P.R., I.M.P.R., I.M.P.R., I.M.P.R., I.M.P.R., I.M.P.R., and so on. Do this until you are sick of it! Then, once you've reached that point, do it a couple hundred more times! What you'll find after some time has gone by is that it slowly becomes a little easier and a little easier to force I.M.P. down at the same time...like a mini chord...and then laying down the ring finger shortly after. In other words you'll be doing

stage 2: laying down 3 fingers at the same time, then dropping on the ring finger. 3 fingers at once then ring, 3 fingers at once then ring, 3 fingers at once then ring, etc. Now, notice my fingers in the pic at the left...I've got 3 fingers laid down, now all I have to do is drop the ring finger in place. **Note: don't curl your ring finger under the neck as I've done; I am just trying to get it out of the way for the sake of the picture.**

## And finally...

Once you've accomplished stage 2 in learning the D chord, you'll be surprised how quickly stage 3 arrives, which is being able to lay down all 4 fingers at once. Check out my picture at the right and you can see the finished product. Notice my "table tops". Notice my thumb placed under the neck of the banjo. Notice my finger tips pushing straight down onto the strings. Notice how none of the fingers are laying down. Try to make your hand look like mine. Oh, take a look at my elbow in the background; you can't tell by the picture, but it is relaxed and hanging straight down at my side. If I was having the typical beginner's struggle with the D chord, you'd see my elbow jutting off at a right angle, almost parallel to the banjo neck in the pic. Work towards keeping your elbow down in time.

