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Troubleshooting Checklist for Correcting Problems w/ Muting or Buzzing

Quick List:

- Fingertips should be placed directly behind the frets whenever possible. This will help you enormously- for one thing, it means you don't need to press as hard, so the beginning stages of developing callouses will be less uncomfortable.
- Wrist should not be crowding the neck of the guitar; relax the wrist of your fretting hand. Just let it drop. It doesn't need to do the work- your fingers do.
- Leave some air space between the inside of your fretting hand and the neck of your guitar, on the right side, where your fingers meet your hand. This raises the angle of your fingers for a better approach to the strings.
- Keep your thumb out of the way, somewhere around the back of the neck. When the thumb comes up close to the strings, the wrist follows it and crowds the neck, making it very hard to get a high angle to your fingers at the first joint.
- Keep the angle of your fingers high enough at the first joint that the fleshy part of the finger doesn't lean over onto the string next to it. It's a juggling act at first to get all these minor adjustments made, but if one finger is leaning into the neighboring string, the result will be a deadening, or muting, of that note, even if you're doing everything else right.

More In-Depth Explanations:

If a string is buzzing, it's usually because there's not enough pressure on the string for it to ring out clearly. Most often (assuming that it's not a problem with the guitar itself) this is because of fingertip soreness. As a new player, it simply hurts a bit to press the strings down hard enough to get clean sound. When first starting out, you need to gradually build up callouses, toughen up your fingertips. Then playing will not be painful. It doesn't take very long, if you spend 15 minutes every day in focused practice. In a few weeks, the soreness eases and you can practice for longer stretches, which will let you improve much more rapidly.

The best tip to make playing easier and reduce finger soreness is to place your fingertips just behind the frets- not on top of them, but just behind. The closer you are to the fret, the less pressure has to be applied to get clear sound. Always place your fingertips as close to the fret as you can get without actually being on top of the fret.

Another great help to achieving clear chords is to relax your wrist. There's a natural tendency for new players to try to compensate for the feeling of weakness in their fingers by applying pressure from somewhere else- specifically, the wrist. Experiment with this yourself- simply relax / drop the wrist of your fretting hand while playing a chord, and observe what good things happen automatically as a result. Your fingers will at once be raised to a higher angle at the first joint, which gives a much better approach to the strings- also, it will usually cause an improvement in the placement of your thumb; rather than crowding the neck of the guitar, the thumb will likely land somewhere out of the way, toward the back of the neck, helping to shift the workload where it belongs- with the fingers.

A very common cause of accidental string muting occurs when the angle of the fingers at the first joint isn't high enough. This causes the fleshy part of the finger to lightly touch the adjacent string, preventing it from sounding clean and clear, even if everything else is right- fingers right behind frets, good pressure on the strings, etc. The best remedy for this is, again, to relax the wrist. Also, check that there's enough empty space between the inside of your hand and the neck of your guitar so you could place a finger in that area. That's another place to watch out for crowding and unnecessary tension.