

Why go up the neck?

As we play higher up the neck, we don't only gain new, higher notes, and lose a corresponding number of deep bass notes... notes of the same pitch are found on different, thicker strings. The combination of extra thickness and reduced length changes the note appreciably, giving it a much warmer sound, with a reduced harmonic content and a less pungent "attack".

But there are other gains and losses too - let's explore some of them.

On the upside

- Vibrato is much easier to effect - as we near the centre of the string, it is easier to make longitudinal movements of the fingers and easier to take the string with the finger, giving a true vibrato in which the pitch variation above and below the note are essentially equal.
- Reach is smaller and it's easy to "borrow" a finger outside the position to find those elusive few notes that are missing from each position on the guitar - an advantage that's particularly powerful if the music is rich in incidental sharps and flats.
- Tone is altogether more liquid (though the open strings present a tone that's markedly different and harder to incorporate seamlessly).
- The lesser reach reduces tension in the left hand and makes it much easier to be agile up the neck.

On the downside

- A high action (and action always will be higher further up the neck) can make it cumbersome to get the fingers placed properly, and can make it difficult to mix fretted notes (depressed quite some way down) with open strings (vibrating some distance above the frets). Good guitars have a lower action, partly because they are inherently louder and don't need a high action, and partly that the curvature of the neck is spot on along the whole length (there is no need to raise the action to defeat persistent buzzes at certain areas of the neck).
- It is easier to deform the string laterally with a finger that does not descend vertically, making it very easy to sharpen perhaps one note in a "difficult" chord.
- It is also easier to deform the string longitudinally, so that a big stretch of 5 or 6 frets can see the high note pulled sharp and the low note tugged flat.
- The gap between strings 2 and 3 is a semitone less than all the other strings, and up the neck it's quite easy to find a "familiar" fingering - (for example in VII position, the bottom string yields D under the 4th finger, in exactly the same way as in II position, the 5th string yields D under the same finger. However, as the scale is traversed, the notes affected by the 3rd string will be at a different point in the scale. This feeling that "I know how it goes but it's gone wrong" is easily overcome in time, but in the early stages of going up the neck can cause all sorts of errors that are quite unsettling, as familiar fingerings no longer "work" quite as they used to.

Somewhere else

- Sometimes a plus, sometimes a minus... the crossover between nylon and wound strings is at a different point in the scale. The crossover point marks a real difference in tone between the thickest, stiffest string and the thinnest, brightest one. Sometimes a careful choice of position can give exactly the right result. Sometimes we have to make do (and playing the 4th string with the flesh of the thumb instead of the nail can help minimise the difference.

What position should I be in?

Now if we knew the answer to that, fingering a guitar piece would be so easy we wouldn't need editors!

Certainly, some positions suit some keys - in the IX position, every diatonic note in the key of D is under the fingers.

Yet curiously, VII position is often used for D - the top octave is under the fingers, but the bottom octave is less so.

As you can see, it's not obvious! A little experimentation, however, will soon show whether, for example, the position you've chosen requires lots of low notes with the 4th finger (not the easiest finger to reach a long way with), or whether the "strong" fingers take the lion's share of the work.

One thing is clear - facility all over the neck opens up a greater palette of tone and, indirectly, lyricism. Just as a cook can serve one type of meat in many ways, so we, by position work, can serve up a phrase in an almost infinite variety of colour...

See also the Seventh Position article.