

Lesson 2 – The 12 Bar Blues Format

In this Lesson: By the end of this lesson, you should be able to identify the 3 chords that make up a 12 bar blues in any key. You will also learn 1 new 7th chord shape.

A 12 bar blues consists of 3 chords called the I chord, IV chord, and V chord. To explain this concept further, we have to step away from the blues for a minute. The concept of a I chord, IV chord, and V chord is simple, but it comes from a major scale, not a blues scale.

Simply put, if you build a chord off of the first note in the major scale, it's called a I chord. Similarly, if you build a chord off of the 4th note in the major scale, it's called the IV chord, and if you build a chord off of the 5th note in the major scale, it's called the V chord.

To find the I, IV, and V chords in any key on your guitar:

I chord: Find the note on the 6th string that matches the key you're in. In the key of A, you would find the A on the 5th fret of the 6th string.

IV chord: Use the same fret as the I chord, but on the 5th string. In the key of A, the IV chord would be D on the 5th fret of the 5th string.

V chord: Go up 2 frets from the IV chord. In the key of A, the V chord is E on the 7th fret of the 5th string.

This trick will work for any key, but I'll make it even easier. Here's a chart of every key with it's corresponding IV and V chords

KEY	A	Bb	B	C	C#	D	Eb	E	F	F#	G	Ab
I Chord	A	Bb	B	C	C#	D	Eb	E	F	F#	G	Ab
IV Chord	D	Eb	E	F	F#	G	Ab	A	Bb	B	C	Db
V Chord	E	F	F#	G	G#	A	Bb	B	C	C#	D	Eb

Check out the music below for a 12 bar blues in the key of A. Here's what to remember:

Bars 1 – 4 use the I chord.

Bars 5 and 6 use the IV chord.

Bars 7 and 8 return to the I chord.

Bars 9 and 10 are the V chord, and IV chord.

Bars 11 and 12 are called the **turnaround**. The simplest turnaround is to use the I chord for both bars 11 and 12.

A⁷ (I)

D⁷ (IV) A⁷ (I)

E⁷ (V) D⁷(IV) A⁷ (I)

The most common variation of this pattern is called a Quick Change Blues, where bar 2 uses the IV chord and all other bars are the same. It is also common to go to the V chord on bar 12.

Let's work on a new tune with a new voicing of the 5th string root 7th chords. The 3 chords in this tune will be:

A⁷

D⁷

E⁷

Now here's the tune. This one uses the quick change in bar 2 and goes to the V at the end – the most common variations.

EXAMPLE 2-1, CD 1 TRACKS 6-8

You should at least be moderately comfortable with the full speed versions of the first 2 lessons before you move on. That doesn't mean they have to sound perfect... they just need to be memorized and you need to be able to play them with minimal mistakes.

As I mentioned before, if the barre chords are tough for you right now don't worry about it. As you work on other things you can continue to revisit these first 2 lessons and improve your technique all around.