

BLUEGRASS RULES:

Vocal bluegrass layout:

In a vocal bluegrass song, there are a prescribed set of rules. The point of this strict set of rules is so that anyone, anywhere can play with each other and sound like they've played together for ages. As such, there is a set canon of songs, a set role for each instrument, and a set order of events throughout a song. The rules are as follows:

Layout for a song:

- 1) Often there is an instrumental intro. This is usually an instrument playing the verse melody once through, although it can also be a "turnaround" —which would be a smaller section, usually the last line or two of the verse.
- 2) Usually then the first verse happens, although sometimes the singing will start with a chorus. For direction on which one to start with, consult your nearest old recording of the song or your nearest experienced bluegrass jammer.
- 3) Verses are almost always sung by just the lead singer by themselves, while choruses are almost always sung with three-part harmony. Usually the lead singer will take the "lead" (the melody). The two other parts of a three part harmony are the higher part (known in bluegrass as the "tenor"), and the lower part (known in bluegrass as the "baritone"). Sometimes a lower 4th part will be added below the baritone (known as the "bass"), or occasionally a higher part above the tenor will be added (known as the "high baritone"). Picking out the harmony is a learned skill, and the best way to learn is to just learn a few harmony parts off of your favorite recordings until the patterns become natural to your ear. (Technically you can go through note by note and build a chord off of each melody note, but really the best way to do it is to just learn to do it by ear.) In between each line of singing, instruments take turns doing "fills." These are short instrumental breaks that fill the space between singing.
- 4) After the first verse and a chorus, there will be a "break." The break is almost always played over the chords to the verse. During breaks throughout the song, one does not need to stick as closely to the melody as one does during the intro. Any notes that "fit" over the chord are acceptable, although it is good to have at least some hint of the melody throughout the break. For beginners, it is fine also to just play the melody, and slowly work on changing or adding a note here or there to work up to an improvised break.

The person leading the song (the lead singer) indicates who takes each break by nodding at them, or giving them a "look." Usually the song leader will try to spread the breaks amongst the band members, but that doesn't mean that every person playing has to get a break in every song. Breaks can also be "split," where one person takes the first half and the next person takes the second half.

5) The song progresses following this same pattern (verse, chorus, break etc), until the end. Usually the song will end on a chorus. Often the last line of the chorus will be repeated, but other options are repeating the whole last chorus, or the last half of the chorus, after which an instrumental “tag” is usually played.

INSTRUMENT ROLES:

Guitar: Plays “boom-chuck” rhythm, takes breaks

Mandolin: Plays chords on the off-beat (the “chuck” of “boom-chuck”), plays fills in between vocal lines, takes breaks

Bass: Plays the down-beat (The “boom” of “boom-chuck”), every once in awhile takes a break

Fiddle: Plays fills in between lines, takes over for Mando — chopping on off-beat — when

Mando is doing something else (like playing fills or breaks), takes breaks

Dobro: Plays fills in between lines, takes breaks

Banjo: Plays rolls throughout, plays fills in between lines, takes breaks

INSTRUMENTAL BLUEGRASS:

In an instrumental bluegrass tune, one instrument will start by playing the melody, while everyone else plays backup (either chords or chops). Then the melody will be passed around the group, where everyone improvises off of the melody one time through the tune.

The order of players is either indicated by the tune leader (usually the one that played the melody), by nodding at people in turn, or it may just go around in a circle.

Often the tune will be passed around the group either once or twice, before ending with the lead instrument playing through the melody once again. Sometimes two or more instruments might play the melody all together. The tune will often end with a tag.

Jamming tips:

In bluegrass, as in old time, people take turns calling tunes/songs. In bluegrass, vocal songs tend to be more common than in old time. Vocal songs can be played in any key, in order to best fit the vocalist’s range. The vocalist will indicate to the rest of the jam what key the song will be played in. Common keys to sing in are: G, A, Bb, B, C, and D. Instrumental tunes don’t change keys.

Some jamming precautions:

When joining a jam, be cognizant of what style is being played and try to stick with that. If the jammers are much more experienced than you, stay on the outside of the circle and play quietly until you are invited in, or even just show up with an instrument and ask if you can join! If you’re at a festival, asking before you join can be good practice, because that gives the group the opportunity to let you know if they’re actually a band warming up for their set, and not a jam at

all. Generally in a bluegrass jam, a smaller jam is preferred to a larger one. So when joining a jam, try to make sure that you are adding something, such as: an instrument that isn't already there, a vocalist when no one seems to want to sing, a tenor harmony if there's no tenor, a six-pack of beer, a cool dog, or some great jokes.