

All About Bass Strings



The Importance of Bass Strings

Bass strings play a huge role in the overall tone you get out of your bass. There are a lot of different bass strings from which to choose. Understanding the various aspects of bass strings will help you know what to buy and try out. And, it'll hopefully make you sound better!

Bass String Construction

Every bass string is comprised of two strings – the core string and the winding string. The core string is a thick wire from one end of the string to the other. Around the core string another smaller string is tightly wound in a spiral all the way up the length of the core string. If you look closely at a bass string you will see little grooves all the way up the string. That is the tiny winding string. The winding string adds brilliance to the string's tone. If you have an old set of strings, try unwinding one to see how it looks.

Types of Bass Strings

The different types of bass strings usually refer to the string's winding string. There are two main types of windings and some that fall in-between them. The two main windings are roundwound and flatwound.

Roundwound Bass Strings

A roundwound string has a round shaped string wound along the core. Think spaghetti. Roundwound strings are the brightest sounding of the two windings. These are the most commonly used type of string. They feel a little rougher because they have more grooves. There is also more finger noise because of all those grooves. Roundwound strings are used in almost all styles of bass playing. And they are essential for slapping, popping and tapping where you want a nice bright tone. When you first put them on you may find they are too bright. After a little playing, they will lose some of that zing. I like them after a week or so.

Flatwound Bass Strings

Flatwound strings have a ribbon-like winding wound along the core string. It's like metal fettuccini. Flats have a mellow sound to them. They feel smooth and silky. They have very little finger noise since they have fewer grooves up and down the string. Flats also have a long playing life since there are fewer cracks where dirt and oil can build up. You may find flatwound strings to be a little too mellow for rock, r&b and funk. But you might like them for jazz and reggae where you might need a more mellow sound.

Groundwound and Halfround Bass Strings

In-between rounds and flats there are a couple of other types of string. Both in terms of tone and under-the-finger feel they are in the middle. I've been playing some groundwound strings recently and I really like them. They have a good brightness and hardly any finger noise. A groundwound string is a roundwound string that has gotten a shave. Basically, they take a roundwound and grind off some of the roundness. A halfround is kind of an oval-shaped winding.



Bass String Gauges

Gauge refers to the thickness, or diameter, of the string. The diameter is expressed in inches. A typical E-string is .105 inches in diameter. A typical G-string is .045 inches in diameter.

There is a trade off between tone and playability when it comes to string gauge. With lighter gauge strings you lose some tone, but they are very easy to play. Heavier strings have a great tone, but take a little more finger power to fret and pluck.

The lower the pitch you need, the thicker string you will need. If you are tuning down much, you may want heavier gauge strings.

Try a bunch of different gauges and see which suits your playing. If you are playing a lot of slap, try some light gauge strings. Just go easy on them so you don't break them.

Scale Length

The scale of your bass refers to how long it is from bridge to nut. Most basses are 34" scale. This is known as long scale. Some basses, like the Hofner Beatles bass and others, have short scale necks which are, um...shorter. Make sure you get the right scale strings for your bass – most likely long scale. If your strings are too short, you won't be able to put them on your bass! If they're too long, you won't be able to wrap them around the posts because they'll be too thick at the end.

The Sexy Silk Wrappings on Your Bass Strings

You may wonder what those silk wrappings are for. They don't do a whole lot. They help prevent scratching a bit and may help prevent the winding from coming off the core string. Mostly, I think manufacturers use them for a little brand recognition. Just make sure the silk is not on the point of contact at the bridge or nut. If so, you may have the wrong scale length string for your bass.

What Strings Should I Get?

It's impossible to tell anyone what set of strings to use. Finding the right strings is a long process of trial and error. The same set of strings can sound different on different basses and under different fingers. There are just too many variables to consider – playing technique, pickups, bridge, body, etc. You just have to experiment and find what you like.

Don't use strings just because your favorite bassist endorses them. You'd "like them" too if you were getting paid to like them and got boxes of free sets.

The best advice is to experiment a lot until you find your favorite set. And when you get a new bass you might have to do it all over again.

By Andrew Pouska <http://www.studybass.com/teacher/andrew-pouska/>