



# Acoustic Guitar Syllabus

Free Choice Piece Guidance

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**For general information about Free Choice Pieces please see:**

<https://www.rslawards.com/free-choice-pieces/>

The following guidelines outline features that would normally be found within a free choice selection for acoustic guitar to meet the grade level. These features are indicative and would not all necessarily occur to the same degree within any particular piece. Standards can be measured by making a balanced judgement regarding various musical elements based on these guidelines. If in any doubt, please consult the pieces in the grade book for a guide.

It is not a prerequisite for free choice pieces to be approved by RSL Head Office, as the examiner will make a judgement about the suitability of the piece in the exam. However, if you are unsure about the eligibility of your piece(s) you can seek approval which incurs a fee of £10 per piece. Please email [info@rslawards.com](mailto:info@rslawards.com) with details of the proposed piece(s) (including a copy of the sheet music) and the grade / instrument you intend to enter for. A full reply will be given no later than 4 weeks after payment of the approval fee, which will be facilitated via an online link that we will e-mail to you.

## Free Choice Piece Guidelines | Debut

<b>Duration</b>	40 secs–1 min 20 secs
<b>Tempo</b>	60–130 bpm
<b>Time signatures</b>	Simple time signatures, ie. 4/4, 3/4
<b>Rhythmic values</b>	Dependent on tempo: whole, half, quarter, 8th notes and rests, occasional dotted half notes or dotted quarter notes
<b>Dynamics</b>	None, or very simple/sparse
<b>Articulation</b>	None, or very simple/sparse
<b>Harmonic features &amp; tonality</b>	Chord types generally will not extend beyond triads, and tonality will be predominantly diatonic
<b>Melodic features</b>	<p>Melodies will be predominantly diatonic</p> <p>Small intervallic transitions in melody unless adjacent strings</p> <p>Passages will remain on single strings, or move at a slow tempo to adjacent strings</p> <p>String skipping is very minimal</p>
<b>Physical techniques</b>	<p>Chords will largely be limited to three-string voicings, or occasional four strings (if predominantly open)</p> <p>Harmonic rate of change is slow, giving time for preparation</p> <p>Requirement for muting techniques is minimal</p> <p>Passages only require basic fingerstyle technique or picking technique</p>

## Free Choice Piece Guidelines | Grade 1

<b>Duration</b>	50 secs – 1 min 30 secs
<b>Tempo</b>	60–140 bpm
<b>Time signatures</b>	Simple, or basic compound time signatures, ie. 4/4, 3 /4, 6/8
<b>Rhythmic values</b>	Dependent on tempo: 8th notes and rests, occasional dotted 8th notes and syncopations, occasional 16th notes, and very occasional non-complex triplet groupings
<b>Dynamics</b>	Simple dynamics [P, F, MP, MF]. Subtle transitions will be very infrequent
<b>Articulation</b>	Simple changes in articulation and phrasing, occasional staccato
<b>Harmonic features &amp; tonality</b>	Chord types generally will not extend beyond triads, and tonality will be predominantly diatonic, but there may be occasional closely related non-diatonic chords
<b>Melodic features</b>	Melodies will be predominantly diatonic Small intervallic transitions in melody unless adjacent strings Passages will largely span adjacent strings
<b>Physical techniques</b>	Chords may feature 5 strings, or 6 strings but with very simple fretting. '5' chords can be fretted. Harmonic rate of change is moderate, giving time for preparation Melodic passages will remain on single strings, or move at a moderate tempo to an adjacent string. String skipping may occasionally feature. Melodic work might be harmonised with occasional double stops Basic muting techniques and very occasional simple slides

## Free Choice Piece Guidelines | Grade 2

<b>Duration</b>	1 min 10 secs – 1 min 45 secs
<b>Tempo</b>	60–140 bpm
<b>Time signatures</b>	4/4 (straight or swung), 3/4, 2/4, 6/8, 12/8
<b>Rhythmic values</b>	Dependent on tempo: 16th notes and rests, dotted 8th notes and syncopations, occasional 16th note syncopation, non-complex triplet groupings
<b>Dynamics</b>	Simple dynamics [P, F, MP, MF], crescendo (<) and diminuendo (>)
<b>Articulation</b>	Frequent changes in articulation and phrasing, slurs and simple use of staccato/accented articulation. Occasional hammer-ons, pull-offs and slides
<b>Harmonic features &amp; tonality</b>	Chord types might extend to 7ths, and tonality will be predominantly diatonic, but there may be occasional closely related non-diatonic chords
<b>Melodic features</b>	Melodies will be predominantly diatonic but chromatic notes may occur
<b>Physical techniques</b>	Chords may feature up to 6 strings, including occasional simple major and minor barre chord shapes. Harmonic rate of change is moderate Melodic passages may move at a faster rate between strings. String skipping may feature more frequently Can be performed with plectrum or fingers, unless stipulated Melodic work might be harmonised with occasional 6ths or thirds Basic RH and LH muting, and some legato techniques

## Free Choice Piece Guidelines | Grade 3

<b>Duration</b>	1 min 30 secs – 2 mins
<b>Tempo</b>	60–150 bpm
<b>Time signatures</b>	4/4 (straight or swung), 3/4, 2/4, 6/8, 12/8
<b>Rhythmic values</b>	16th notes and rests in more complex groupings, 16th note syncopation, more frequent triplet groupings. Simpler rhythms appear in conjunction with other elements (eg. more detailed harmonic work)
<b>Dynamics</b>	[P, F, MP, MF], crescendo (<) and diminuendo (>)
<b>Articulation</b>	Staccato can be more repetitive at this grade. Occasional hammer-ons, pull-offs and
<b>Harmonic features &amp; tonality</b>	Chord types might extend to 7ths, and tonality will be predominantly diatonic, but there may be occasional closely related non-diatonic chords
<b>Melodic features</b>	Melodies will be predominantly diatonic but chromatic notes may occur
<b>Physical techniques</b>	Melodic passages can incorporate basic string skipping and position shifts. Melodic work might be occasionally harmonised with thirds, sixths or octaves Harmonic rate of change is moderate but can include some more challenging sequences Rhythmic groupings may differ more frequently Muting and legato techniques might be more frequent or pose some increasing but moderate challenges
<b>Solo/development</b>	Open, solo or development sections are not obligatory, but if included should not exceed 8 bars' length as a guide.

## Free Choice Piece Guidelines | Grade 4

<b>Duration</b>	1 min 45 secs – 2 min 15 secs
<b>Tempo</b>	60-150 bpm
<b>Time signatures</b>	4/4 (straight or swung), 3/4, 2/4, 6/8, 12/8. Time signature changes may occur very infrequently
<b>Rhythmic values</b>	16th notes and rests in more complex groupings, 16th note syncopation. Simpler rhythms appear in conjunction with other elements (e.g. more detailed harmonic work). There may be occasional triplet rhythm permutations
<b>Dynamics</b>	[P, F, MP, MF], crescendo (<) and diminuendo (>)
<b>Articulation &amp; phrasing</b>	Articulation and phrasing will have more variety. Staccato can be more predominant at this grade. Occasional hammer-ons, pull-offs and slides, which can be repeated or extended points
<b>Harmonic features &amp; tonality</b>	Chords might occasionally extend beyond 7ths, and tonality may be diatonic or based in a modal key centre. Non-diatonic chords might occur more frequently
<b>Melodic features</b>	Intervallic transitions over an octave may occur, and chromatic notes may occur more frequently
<b>Physical techniques</b>	Melodic passages can skip strings more frequently, and incorporate more frequent position shifts Melodic work might be harmonised with thirds, sixths or octaves Rhythmic groupings may differ more frequently Muting and legato techniques might be more frequent or pose some increasing challenges Melody and accompaniment voicings may appear in one part Variety in voicings and accompaniment styles within sections Capo may be used
<b>Solo/development</b>	Open solo or development sections are not obligatory, but if included should not exceed 16 bars' length as a guide

## Free Choice Piece Guidelines | Grade 5

<b>Duration</b>	2 mins – 2 mins 45 secs
<b>Tempo</b>	60–160 bpm
<b>Time signatures</b>	4/4 (straight or swung), 3/4, 2/4, 6/8, 12/8. There may be occasional time signature changes
<b>Rhythmic values</b>	16th notes and rests in more complex groupings, occasional 32nd notes, 16th note syncopation. Simpler rhythms appear in conjunction with other elements (e.g. more detailed harmonic work). Triplet rhythm permutations may be more frequent
<b>Dynamics</b>	[P, F, MP, MF], crescendo (<) and diminuendo (>)
<b>Articulation &amp; phrasing</b>	Articulation and phrasing will have variety and there may be subtle differentiation between voices
<b>Harmonic features &amp; tonality</b>	Chords types might extend to 9ths
<b>Melodic features</b>	Intervallic transitions over an octave may be more regular, and there may be more frequent non-diatonic notes
<b>Rhythmic features</b>	Rhythmic groupings may differ frequently; faster note values may be more
<b>Physical techniques</b>	Melodic passages can skip strings more frequently, and incorporate more frequent position shifts Melodic work might be harmonised with thirds, sixths or octaves Muting and legato techniques will be reaching an upper intermediate level Variety in voicings and accompaniment styles within sections Simple alternative tunings
<b>Solo/development</b>	Open solo or development sections are not obligatory, but if included should not exceed 16 bars' length as a guide



## Free Choice Piece Guidelines | Grade 6

<b>Duration</b>	2 min 15 secs–3 mins
<b>Tempo</b>	50-200 bpm
<b>Time signatures</b>	4/4 (straight or swung), 3/4, 2/4, 6/8, 9/8, 12/8. There may be more regular time signature changes, or occasional irregular time signatures such as 5/4, 5/8, 7/8 etc.
<b>Rhythmic values</b>	16th notes and rests in more complex groupings, 16th note triplets, 32nd notes and frequent syncopation may occur. Simpler rhythms will appear in conjunction with other elements (e.g. more detailed harmonic work). Tuplet figures may be more complex
<b>Dynamics</b>	Any, with changes
<b>Articulation &amp; phrasing</b>	Articulation and phrasing will have variety, and there may be differentiation between voices
<b>Harmonic features &amp; tonality</b>	Chords may occasionally extend beyond 9ths, and include occasional alterations. Modal interchange may occur. Temporary modulations may occur more frequently
<b>Melodic features</b>	Melodic content may be diatonic or based on modal scales, and there may be more frequent chromaticism
<b>Rhythmic features</b>	Rhythmic groupings may differ frequently, and faster note values may be more
<b>Physical techniques</b>	Chordal cluster voicings may be more advanced, denser and/or more frequent. Variety in voicings and accompaniment styles within sections Alternate tunings may be used. Capo may be used Percussive effects using the guitar's body may feature Special expressive effects such as harmonics may feature A full range of legato and non-legato techniques may feature
<b>Solo/development</b>	Open solo or development sections are not obligatory, but if included should not exceed 16 bars' length as a guide

## Free Choice Piece Guidelines | Grade 7

<b>Duration</b>	2 mins 30 secs – 3 mins 30 secs
<b>Tempo</b>	50-200 bpm
<b>Time signatures</b>	Any, with changes
<b>Rhythmic values</b>	Any, up to 32nd notes. Complex combinations beyond 16th note triplets will not be frequent, but variations may occur regularly Simpler rhythms will appear in conjunction with other elements (e.g. more detailed harmonic work, faster tempos or more complex time signatures). Triplet figures will show more complexity
<b>Dynamics</b>	Any, with changes, and including strong contrasts
<b>Articulation &amp; phrasing</b>	Articulation and phrasing may vary regularly Subtlety of control between legato and staccato will be required and there may be different articulations occurring simultaneously
<b>Harmonic features &amp; tonality</b>	Chord voicings may regularly extend beyond 9ths, and include alterations. Modal interchange may occur. Temporary modulations may occur more frequently
<b>Melodic features</b>	Melodic content may be diatonic or based on modal scales, and there may be frequent chromaticism
<b>Rhythmic features</b>	Rhythmic groupings may differ frequently; complex and faster note values may be more repetitive/continuous
<b>Physical techniques</b>	Voicings and accompaniment styles within sections will show depth and variety of technique Variety in voicings and accompaniment styles within sections Alternate tunings may be used. Capo may be used Percussive effects using the guitar's body may feature Special expressive effects such as harmonics may feature A full range of legato and non-legato techniques may feature
<b>Solo/development</b>	Open solo or development sections are not obligatory, but if included should not exceed 16 bars' length as a guide

## Free Choice Piece Guidelines | Grade 8

<b>Duration</b>	2 mins 30 secs – 3 mins 45 secs
<b>Key</b>	Any, with changes
<b>Tempo</b>	50-200 bpm
<b>Time signatures</b>	Any, with changes
<b>Rhythmic Values</b>	Any. Complex combinations beyond 16th note triplets may be frequent and variations may occur regularly. Simpler rhythms will appear in conjunction with other elements (e.g. more detailed harmonic work, faster tempos or more complex time signatures). Tuplet rhythms may be complex
<b>Dynamics</b>	Any, with changes, and including strong contrasts
<b>Articulation &amp; phrasing</b>	Articulation and phrasing may vary regularly Subtlety of control between legato and staccato will be required and there may be different articulations occurring simultaneously
<b>Harmonic features &amp; tonality</b>	Chord voicings may regularly extend beyond 9ths. Chordal voicings may be more advanced, denser and/or more frequent, and differ regularly, and include alterations. Modal interchange may occur. Temporary modulations may occur frequently
<b>Melodic Features</b>	Melodic content may be diatonic or based on modal scales, and there may be frequent chromaticism or challenging intervals
<b>Rhythmic Features</b>	Rhythmic groupings may differ frequently; complex and faster note values may be more repetitive/continuous
<b>Physical techniques</b>	Voicings and accompaniment styles within sections will require depth and variety of technique Variety in voicings and accompaniment styles within sections Alternate tunings may be used. Capo may be used. Percussive effects using the guitar's body may feature. Special expressive effects such as harmonics may feature. A full range of legato and non-legato techniques may feature. Voicings and accompaniment styles within sections will show advanced depth and variety of technique
<b>Solo/development</b>	Intervallic transitions over an octave may be more regular, and there may be more frequent non-diatonic notes