

Lesson 10: What Is a Key?

Basic Music Theory for Guitar

What you will learn: what it means when a song is "in the key of G", and how to find the key.

The home note

Most songs have one note that feels like **home**. The music can travel away from it, but when it comes back, it feels **finished and relaxed**. This home note is called the **tonic** (or the **key note**).

Try it: play the C major scale (Lesson 8), but stop on **B**. It feels like it's not finished, right? Now play the last **C**. Now it feels like home.

What is a key?

A **key** is the home note **plus** the scale that the music uses. When we say a song is "**in the key of G major**", it means:

- The home note is **G**.
- The song uses mostly the notes of the **G major scale**: G A B C D E F#.
- The chords in the song are built from those notes (you will learn this in the chord lessons).

Major keys and minor keys

A key can be **major** (happy, bright) or **minor** (sad, dark). A song in **A minor** has A as home and uses the A minor scale. There are **12 major keys** and **12 minor keys**, one for each of the 12 notes.

Some common keys for guitar

Key	Notes used	Sharps / flats
C major	C D E F G A B	none
G major	G A B C D E F#	1 sharp: F#
D major	D E F# G A B C#	2 sharps: F# C#
F major	F G A Bb C D E	1 flat: Bb
A minor	A B C D E F G	none
E minor	E F# G A B C D	1 sharp: F#

Look at the sharps and flats: each key has its own. In the next lesson, you will learn how musicians show them at the start of the music.

How to find the key of a song

1. **Listen to the last note or chord.** Songs usually end on home. If the last chord is G, the song is probably in G.
2. **Look at the first chord.** Many songs also start on the home chord.
3. **Look at the sharps or flats** at the start of the music (next lesson).
4. **Sing or hum** the note that feels like home, and find it on the guitar.

Changing the key on guitar

On guitar, changing the key is easy. Play the same shape **higher on the neck**, and every note moves up together. This is called **transposing**. For example, if you play a C major scale and move it up:

Move up	0 frets	2 frets	4 frets	5 frets	7 frets
Key	C	D	E	F	G

A **capo** does the same thing: it moves all the open strings up, so you can play easy shapes in a new key.

Practice

1. Play the C major scale and stop on B. Then play C. Feel the difference between "not finished" and "home".
2. Play G major on string 6 (frets 3 to 15). Which note feels like home?
3. Play C major on string 5 (frets 3 to 15). Now move it up 2 frets (frets 5 to 17). What key is it now? (Answer: D major)
4. Listen to a favorite song. Can you hear the home note at the end?

Next lesson: Key Signatures