

Lesson 11: Key Signatures

Basic Music Theory for Guitar

What you will learn: how to read the sharps or flats at the start of the music, and know the key.

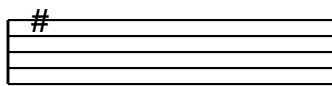
What is a key signature?

In Lesson 10, you saw that every key has its own sharps or flats. Instead of writing # or b next to every note, musicians write them **once**, at the start of each line of music. This is the **key signature**.

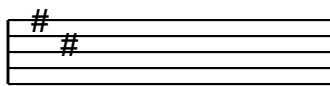
The rule: a sharp or flat in the key signature changes **every** note with that letter, in the whole song, on every octave. For example, with an F# in the key signature, every F is played as **F#**.

What they look like

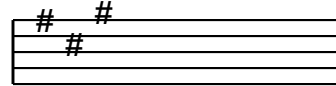
Guitar music is written on the **treble clef** staff. Here are some key signatures:



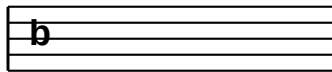
G major (1 sharp)



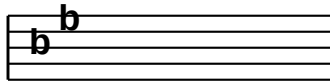
D major (2 sharps)



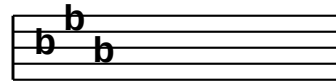
A major (3 sharps)



F major (1 flat)



Bb major (2 flats)



Eb major (3 flats)

The order of the sharps

Sharps always come in the same order: **F# C# G# D# A# E# B#**. A sentence to remember: **F**ather **C**harles **G**oes **D**own **A**nd **E**nds **B**attle.

Major key	Sharps	Which notes	Relative minor
C	0	none	A minor
G	1	F#	E minor
D	2	F# C#	B minor
A	3	F# C# G#	F# minor
E	4	F# C# G# D#	C# minor
B	5	F# C# G# D# A#	G# minor
F#	6	F# C# G# D# A# E#	D# minor

Trick for sharp keys: look at the **last sharp**, and go **one half step up**. That's the major key. Example: the last sharp is C#, one half step up is **D**, so the key is D major.

The order of the flats

Flats come in the opposite order: **Bb Eb Ab Db Gb Cb Fb**. They spell the word **BEAD**, then G, C, F.

Major key	Flats	Which notes	Relative minor
F	1	Bb	D minor
Bb	2	Bb Eb	G minor
Eb	3	Bb Eb Ab	C minor
Ab	4	Bb Eb Ab Db	F minor
Db	5	Bb Eb Ab Db Gb	Bb minor
Gb	6	Bb Eb Ab Db Gb Cb	Eb minor

Trick for flat keys: the **second-to-last flat** is the major key. Example: the flats are Bb Eb Ab, the second-to-last is **Eb**, so the key is Eb major. Just remember that **1 flat = F major**.

Major or minor?

Every key signature works for **two keys**: a major key and its **relative minor** (the last column of the tables). For example, 1 sharp is **G major** or **E minor**. To know which one, look at the **last note or chord** of the song (Lesson 10).

Practice

1. Say the order of sharps out loud: F C G D A E B. Then the flats: B E A D G C F.
2. Cover the tables. What key has 2 sharps? (D major or B minor) What key has 3 flats? (Eb major or C minor)
3. Play G major on string 6 (frets 3 to 15). Find the F#. That is the one sharp of G major.
4. Play F major on string 6 (frets 1 to 13). Find the Bb. That is the one flat of F major.

Next lesson: The Circle of Fifths