

Key Signatures and the Cycle of Fifths

How to find the key of a piece? Go to the final bar. What is **last and lowest letter**? This usually the first degree (tonic) of the key. But is it a minor or major key? To find out play the 1st degree, 2nd degree and 3rd degree. Are any of them effected by the key signature? Have we got a minor 3rd (counting 0,1,2,3 guitar frets) or a major 3rd (0,1,2,3,4 frets)? Check your result against the table below.

If the piece is in the minor the raised 7th may show up as an accidental near the beginning and towards the end. You may also see the raised 6th but rarely on its own. The minor key and its accidentals are shown in grey.

If there are no flats or sharps next to the clef look in the central column. There the two possible keys are C major and A minor.

the flat signatures

the sharp signatures

the Cycle of Fifths

	c^b	g^b	d^b	a^b	e^b	b^b		$f^\#$	$c^\#$	$g^\#$	$d^\#$	$a^\#$	$e^\#$
	g^b	d^b	a^b	e^b	b^b			$c^\#$	$g^\#$	$d^\#$	$a^\#$	$e^\#$	
	d^b	a^b	e^b	b^b				$f^\#$	$c^\#$	$g^\#$	$d^\#$	$a^\#$	$e^\#$
	a^b	e^b	b^b					$f^\#$	$c^\#$	$g^\#$	$d^\#$	$a^\#$	$e^\#$
	e^b	b^b						$f^\#$	$c^\#$	$g^\#$	$d^\#$	$a^\#$	$e^\#$
	b^b							$f^\#$	$c^\#$	$g^\#$	$d^\#$	$a^\#$	$e^\#$
<i>major key</i>	G^b	D^b	A^b	E^b	B^b	F	C	G	D	A	E	B	$F^\#$
<i>minor key</i>	E^b_m	B^b_m	F_m	C_m	G_m	D_m	A_m	E_m	B_m	$F^\#_m$	$C^\#_m$	$G^\#_m$	$D^\#_m$
<i>7th degree</i>	d^\natural	a^\natural	e^\natural	b^\natural	$f^\#$	$c^\#$	$g^\#$	$d^\#$	$a^\#$	$e^\#$	$b^\#$	f^\times	c^\times
<i>6th degree</i>	c^\natural	g^\natural	d^\natural	a^\natural	e^\natural	b^\natural	$f^\#$	$c^\#$	$g^\#$	$d^\#$	$a^\#$	$e^\#$	$b^\#$

these accidentals are often used in the minor key

Each column is a Perfect 5th apart (7 guitar frets aka half-steps in US or semitone in UK). The minor tonic is a minor 3rd (3 frets) below the major tonic, e.g. Bm and D.

Gb and F# fall on the same piano key and are said to be *enharmonically equivalent* allowing the keys to loop into the circle or cycle shown in the middle. Beginners usually learn the middle columns first.

