

Understanding Key Signatures

Before we can move on to the next bit of mode & arpeggio business we need a fool proof way to identify major and minor key signatures. Full knowledge of key signatures will allow you to see how the specific individual chords fit into each key. This in turn will allow you to pick the correct mode to use at the correct time given the context that the chord is in. Common chord progressions will become easily identifiable after you understand key signatures. The good news is that you already have the information you need to understand this. The cycle of fourths, and its inverse, the cycle of fifths.

Use the cycle of fourths to identify the flat keys.

The key of C Major and A Minor have no sharps or flats.
The relative minor key of A Minor starts on the 6th of C Major, on the "A" note.

Move up a fourth to "F".



The key of F Major and D Minor have one flat. B^b.
The relative minor key of D Minor starts on the 6th of F Major, on the "D" note.

Move up a fourth to B^b.



The next key of B^b Major and G Minor have two flats. B^b E^b.
The relative minor key of G Minor starts on the 6th of B^b Major, on the "G" note.

Move up a fourth to E^b.



The next key of E^b Major and C Minor have three flats. B^b E^b A^b.
The relative minor key of C Minor starts on the 6th of E^b Major, on the "C" note.

Move up a fourth to A^b.



The next key of A^b Major and F Minor have four flats. B^b E^b A^b D^b.
The relative minor key of F Minor starts on the 6th of A^b Major, on the "F" note.

Move up a fourth to D^b.



The next key of D^b Major and B^b Minor have five flats. B^b E^b A^b D^b G^b.
The relative minor key of B^b Minor starts on the 6th of D^b Major, on the "B^b" note.

Move up a fourth to G^b.



The next key of G^b Major and E^b Minor have six flats. B^b E^b A^b D^b G^b C^b.
The relative minor key of E^b Minor starts on the 6th of G^b Major, on the "E^b" note.



Notice that the flats accumulate in fourths just as the keys move up in fourths. Also notice that the newest flat is the next major key name.

Proceed to the next page to learn how to identify the sharp keys.