

# Key Signatures

How to read the sharps and flats at the front of the staff, and name the key they belong to

The key of **C major** is neutral. No sharps, no flats.

## 1 The order never changes

### ORDER OF SHARPS ( # )

**F C G D A E B**

*Fat Cats Go Down And Eat Birds*

Sharps are always added in this order. One sharp means F#. Two sharps means F# and C#. It builds left to right and never skips.

### ORDER OF FLATS ( b )

**B E A D G C F**

*BEAD, then G C F*

The first four letters spell the word bead. Flats are added in this order. One flat means Bb. Two flats means Bb and Eb.

## 2 Find the key

### IF YOU SEE SHARPS

**Go up one letter from the last sharp.**

Last sharp is F#, so the key is **G**. Not G#. Just plain G.

Another: sharps are F# C# G#. Last one is G#, go up one letter, the key is **A major**.

### IF YOU SEE FLATS

**The key is the second to last flat.**

Flats are Bb Eb Ab Db. Second to last is Ab, so the key is **Ab major**.

The one exception to memorize: a single flat is the key of **F**. There is no second to last flat to count back to.

## 3 Major and relative minor

Every key signature belongs to **two** keys at once, one major and one minor, and both share the exact same sharps or flats. That pair is the **relative major** and **relative minor**.

| MAJOR KEY                                                      | RELATIVE MINOR                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| The <b>1st</b> note of the major scale<br><b>C</b> D E F G A B | The <b>6th</b> note of that same scale<br>C D E F G <b>A</b> B |
| Key of <b>C major</b>                                          | Key of <b>A minor</b>                                          |

**One more thing about minor.** When you actually play in a minor key, the **5th degree of the major scale is usually raised one half step**. In C major that 5th degree is G, so in A minor it becomes G#. That raised note is what gives minor its pull back home, and it is why you see an accidental in the music that is not in the key signature.

# Every Key Signature

The whole system on one page. Read down the left column to count sharps or flats, then read across.

## Sharp keys

| HOW MANY | THE SHARPS, IN ORDER | MAJOR KEY | RELATIVE MINOR |
|----------|----------------------|-----------|----------------|
| 0        | none                 | <b>C</b>  | A minor        |
| 1        | F#                   | <b>G</b>  | E minor        |
| 2        | F# C#                | <b>D</b>  | B minor        |
| 3        | F# C# G#             | <b>A</b>  | F# minor       |
| 4        | F# C# G# D#          | <b>E</b>  | C# minor       |
| 5        | F# C# G# D# A#       | <b>B</b>  | G# minor       |
| 6        | F# C# G# D# A# E#    | <b>F#</b> | D# minor       |
| 7        | F# C# G# D# A# E# B# | <b>C#</b> | A# minor       |

Check it against the rule: last sharp, up one letter. F# goes up to G. D# goes up to E.

## Flat keys

| HOW MANY | THE FLATS, IN ORDER  | MAJOR KEY | RELATIVE MINOR |
|----------|----------------------|-----------|----------------|
| 0        | none                 | <b>C</b>  | A minor        |
| 1        | Bb                   | <b>F</b>  | D minor        |
| 2        | Bb Eb                | <b>Bb</b> | G minor        |
| 3        | Bb Eb Ab             | <b>Eb</b> | C minor        |
| 4        | Bb Eb Ab Db          | <b>Ab</b> | F minor        |
| 5        | Bb Eb Ab Db Gb       | <b>Db</b> | Bb minor       |
| 6        | Bb Eb Ab Db Gb Cb    | <b>Gb</b> | Eb minor       |
| 7        | Bb Eb Ab Db Gb Cb Fb | <b>Cb</b> | Ab minor       |

Check it against the rule: second to last flat. Bb Eb Ab reads back to Eb. The one flat key, F, is the exception you memorize.

The bottom two rows on each chart, six and seven accidentals, are real keys but you will almost never read music written in them. Learn the top five of each list cold and you can sight read nearly anything.