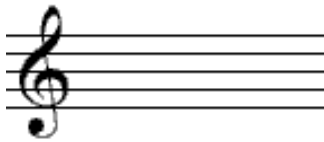


What Are Key Signatures?

A **key signature** tells us what **key** we're in.

Key signatures are made up of **sharps** and **flats** and **naturals**. They appear at the beginning of the music, but can also appear in other parts of the music. You can see key signatures between the **clef sign** and the **time signature**.



There is one important key signature that has no flats or sharps. It is the key of **C major**. It's like playing just white keys on the piano. This is also the key of **A minor**.

Tonal Center

A key signature creates a **tonal center**. That means your ear is drawn to certain notes in the key. In the key of **F**, your ear wants you to go to the note **F**. In the key of **G sharp**, your ear leads you to **G sharp**.

Think of **baseball** when you think of a **tonal center**. The batter begins at home plate. His job is to go around all the bases and return to home plate to score. The tonal center of music is like home plate; we want the music to return to its tonal center. Returning to the tonal center gives us the feeling that our musical journey has ended.

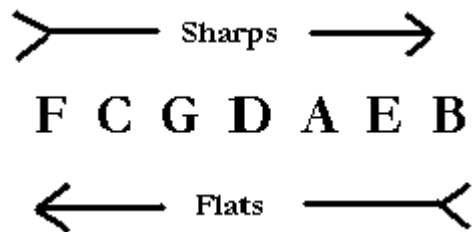
The Order of Flats and Sharps

Sharps and flats that appear in a key signature must be written in order. Here's an easy way to remember the order of the flats and sharps:

B, E, A, D, G, C, F are the order of the flats. The first four flats spell **BEAD**. That's easy to remember.

F, C, G, D, A, E, B are the order of the sharps. Try this memory trick to remember the order of the sharps:: **F**at **C**ats **G**o **D**own **A**lleys **E**ating **B**ugs.

Did you notice that the order of flats is exactly the same as the sharps, except backwards? Memorize this pattern of letters backwards and forwards to remember the order of the flats and sharps.



Flat Key Signatures

It is rare that you will see key signatures with lots of sharps or flats. That's because music with few flats or sharps is easier to play and write than music with lots of sharps or flats.

Here are the **flat key signatures**, in order:




| Key of C Major A Minor | Key of F Major D Minor | Key of Bb Major G Minor | Key of Eb Major C Minor | Key of Ab Major F Minor |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

| Key of Db Major Bb Minor | Key of Gb Major Eb Minor | Key of Cb Major Ab Minor |
|--|--|--|
| | | |

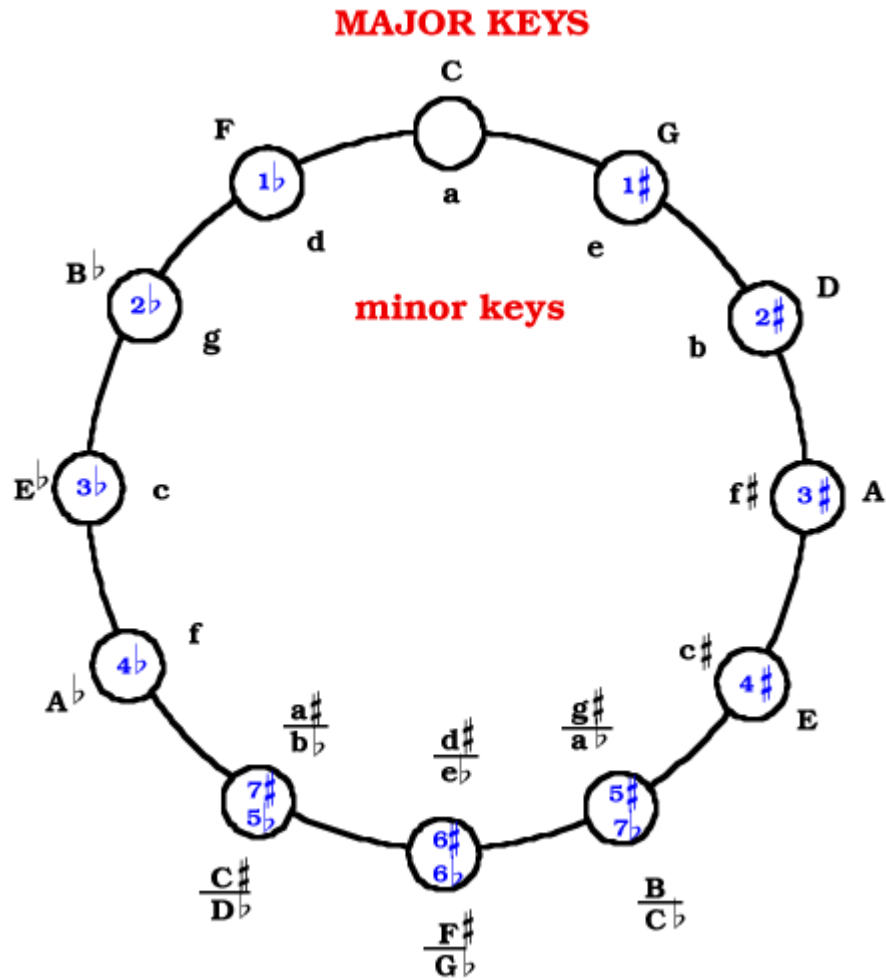
Sharp Key Signatures

Here are the **sharp key signatures**, in order:

| Key of C Major A Minor | Key of G Major E Minor | Key of D Major B Minor | Key of A Major F# Minor | Key of E Major C# Minor |
|---|---|---|--|---|
|  |  |  |  |  |

| Key of B Major G# Minor | Key of F# Major D# Minor | Key of C# Major A# Minor |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |

Notice that as you add sharps, each new key's [tonic](#) is the same as the fifth scale degree of the previous key. As you **remove** flats, the new key's tonic is the same as the fifth scale degree of the previous key. Another interesting point to note is that at the point of six flats and six sharps, the keys are G-flat and F-sharp Major (and e-flat and d-sharp minor) - which are [enharmonically](#) equivalent. This has the result of forming a kind of loop, or circle around which the keys progress in fifths. This can be summarized by the following chart, showing a simple presentation of the relationships between all major and minor keys called the **circle of fifths**:



If we move clockwise, each new key is built on the fifth scale degree of the previous key. **Every musician should have all of the key signatures for all keys (major and minor) memorized!** Being able to "figure it out with enough time" is like having to spell each word out loud before you can read it: it's a starting point, but it's not "reading music".

[Figure 4](#) demonstrates quick ways to name the (major) key simply by looking at the key signature. In flat keys, the second-to-last flat names the key. In sharp keys, the note that names the key is one half step above the final sharp.

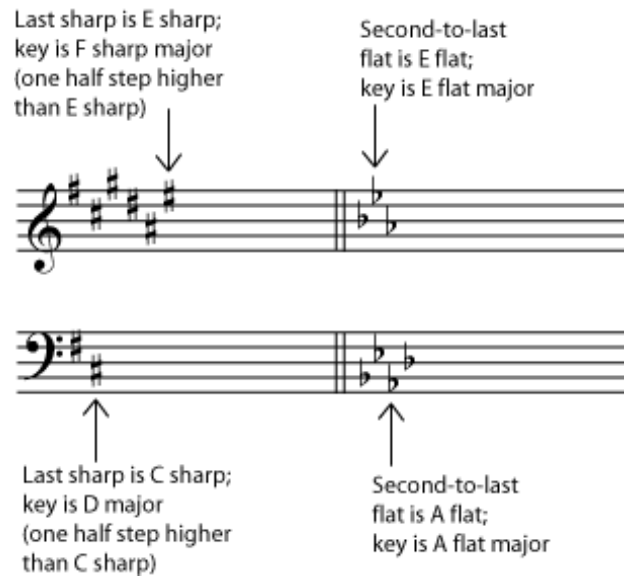


Figure 4

The only major keys that these rules do not work for are C major (no flats or sharps) and F major (one flat). It is easiest just to memorize the key signatures for these two very common keys. If you want a rule that also works for the key of F major, remember that the second-to-last flat is always a [perfect fourth](#) higher than (or a perfect fifth lower than) the final flat. So you can also say that the name of the key signature is a perfect fourth lower than the name of the final flat.



Figure 5: The key of C major has no sharps or flats. F major has one flat.

Relative Minor and Major Keys

Each minor key shares a [key signature](#) with a major key. A minor key is called the *relative minor* of the major key that has the same key signature. Even though they have the same key signature, a minor key and its *relative major* sound very different. They have different [tonal centers](#), and each will feature melodies, harmonies, and [chord progressions](#) built around their (different) tonal centers. In fact, certain strategic [accidentals](#) are very useful in helping establish a strong tonal center in a minor key. These useful accidentals are featured in the [melodic minor](#) and [harmonic minor](#) scales.

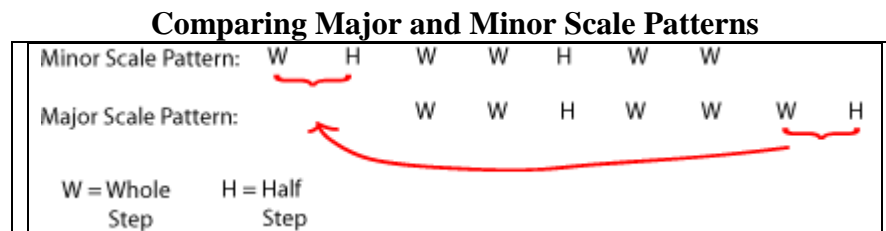


Figure 4: The interval patterns for major and natural minor scales are basically the same pattern starting at different points.

It is easy to predict where the relative minor of a major key can be found. Notice that the pattern for minor scales overlaps the pattern for major scales. In other words, they are the same pattern starting in a different place. (If the patterns were very different, minor key signatures would not be the same as major key signatures.) **The pattern for the minor scale starts a half step plus a whole step lower than the major scale pattern**, so a *relative minor is always three half steps lower than its relative major*. For example, C minor has the same key signature as E flat major, since E flat is a minor third higher than C.

All About Key Signatures