

Mastering Key Signatures

Instructional Guide



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Mastering key signatures

Oh no! Not key signatures! Could it get any more boring and tedious? That's the reaction that most traditional piano students have about learning something so...well, fundamental. But my job is to make it fun, interesting and hopefully easier for you to learn something that you'll use for the rest of your musical life.

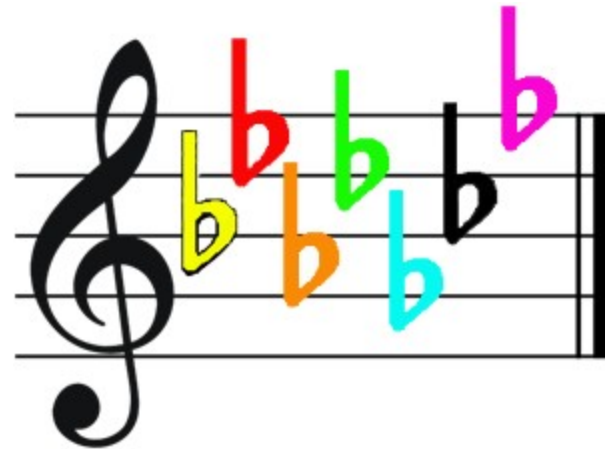
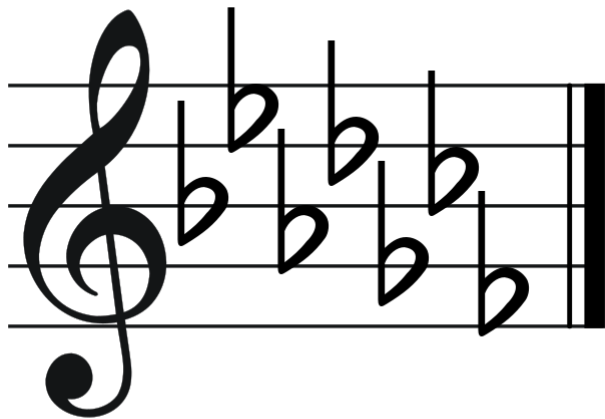
Even if you're not a traditional music reader, lead sheets and fake books are everywhere. And even without written music, every song lives within a musical key. So let's go.

Using the Color Score Colors



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Let's start out by making music more colorful.
The flats and sharps we're using are color coded
to distinguish them from one another.





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4 things to know about key signatures:

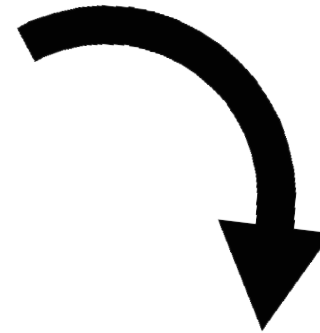
- Every key of music has one. Even if it doesn't include any sharps or flats in it.
- They are always in the same sequence or order. They never appear randomly.
- They always appear on the staff line or space in which they're named.
- They never include flats and sharps mixed together. They will always be sharps *or* flats exclusively.

How understanding key signatures will help you

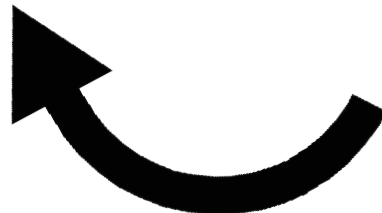


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Know which notes are to be raised or lowered in a song



Helps you to understand how to play songs in different keys and how they relate to each other

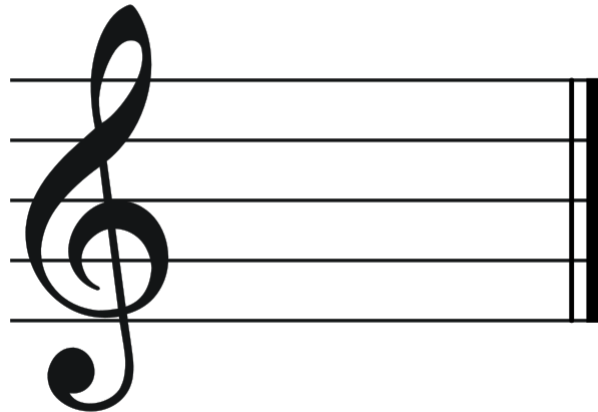


Allows you to follow along with key signatures in lead sheets and traditional written music



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If you have a key signature with no sharps or flats then the only Major key you could be in is C Major.
(we'll cover the subject of minor keys later)

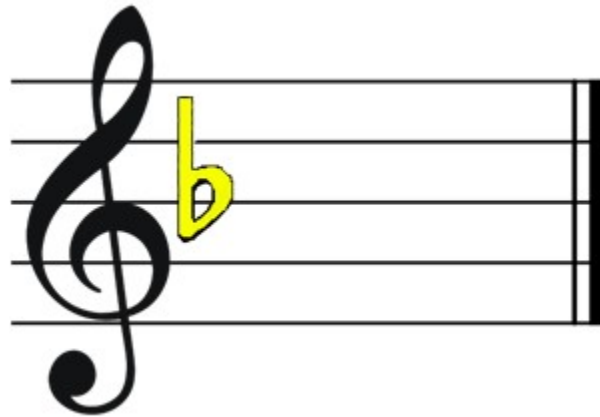


Key Signatures With Flats



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If you only have one flat in the key signature, you're in the key of F Major. Having only one flat makes this simple to memorize.



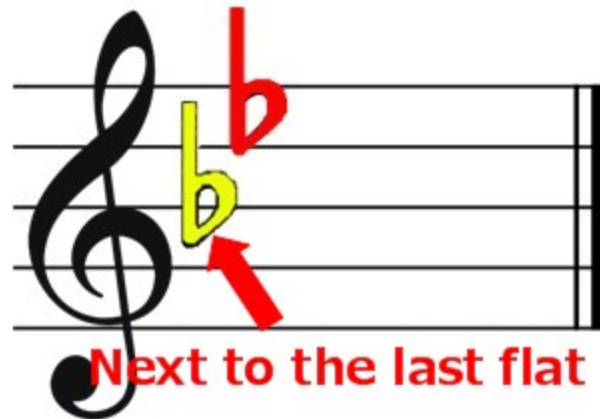
F Major

Key Signatures With Flats



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When you have two or more flats, you can easily find out what key you're in by locating the flat to the very left of the last flat. In this example B flat Major is the key you're in.



B flat Major

Key Signatures With Flats



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Now we have three flats in the key signature.
Locate the flat to the left of the very last flat.
With three flats, you're now in the key of E flat.



E flat Major

Key Signatures With Flats

This shortcut works with every key of music that has more than one flat. Now that you understand the concept, the next page is going to include every key signature with flats. Your task is to identify each one of these key signatures simply by saying them out loud or writing them in the space beside it.

Once you familiarize yourself with them, use a timer to assess your progress by allowing yourself a limited amount of time to name all of them. Start with 60 seconds and then reduce it until you can name them all in less than 10 or 12 seconds.



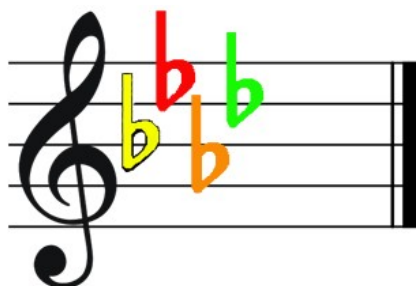
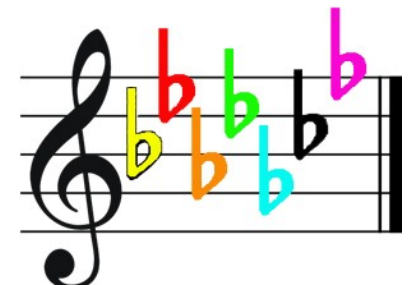
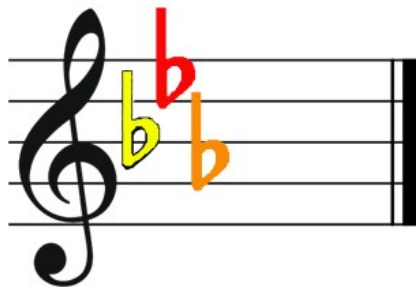
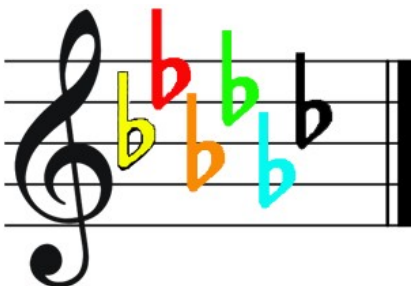
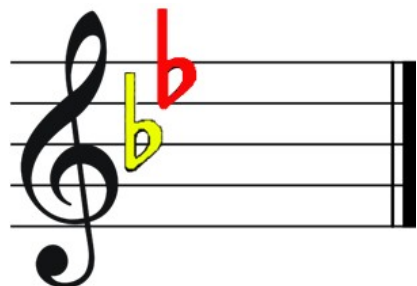
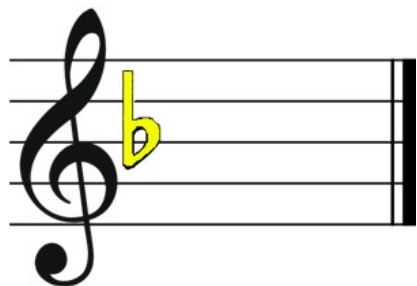
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Key Signatures With Flats



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Remember:
Find the flat to the very left of the last flat and that's the key you're in.

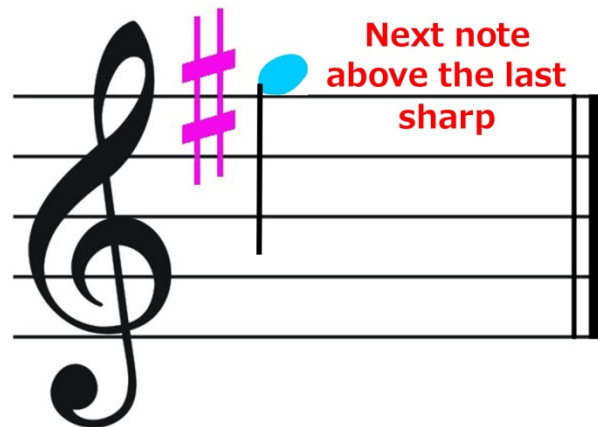
Answer key: F, B flat, E flat, A flat, D flat, G flat, C flat,

Key Signatures With Sharps



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No matter how many sharps you have in the key signature, you can easily find out what key you're in by locating the very last sharp in the sequence. Then the very next note (1/2 step) above it is the key you're in. In this example G Major is the key.



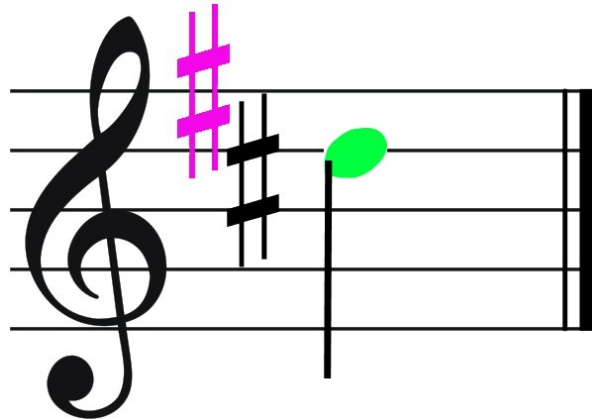
G Major

Key Signatures With Sharps



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With two sharps, your very next note above it is D.
So D Major is the key you're in with this example.



D Major

Key Signatures With Sharps

This shortcut works with every key of music no matter how many sharps you have. Just as we did in the key signatures with flats, the next page is going to include every key signature with sharps. Identify each one of these key signatures as you did before by saying them out loud or writing them in the space beside it.

Use a timer again to assess your progress by allowing yourself a limited amount of time to name all of them. Start with 60 seconds and then reduce it until you can name them all in less than 10 or 12 seconds.



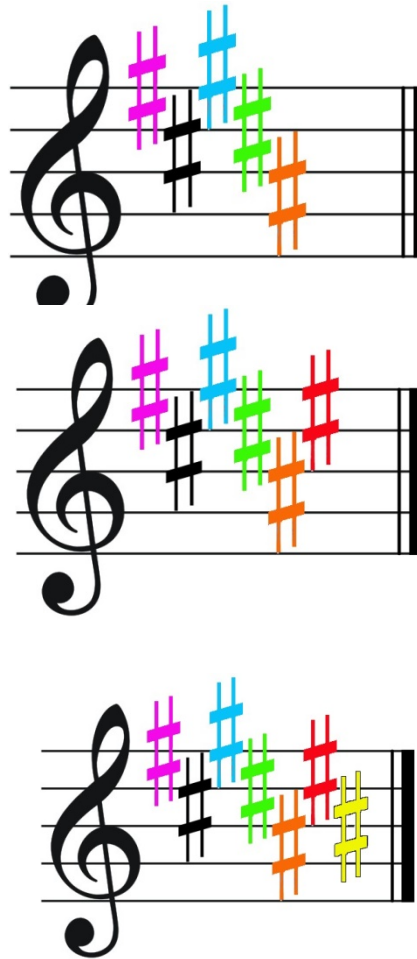
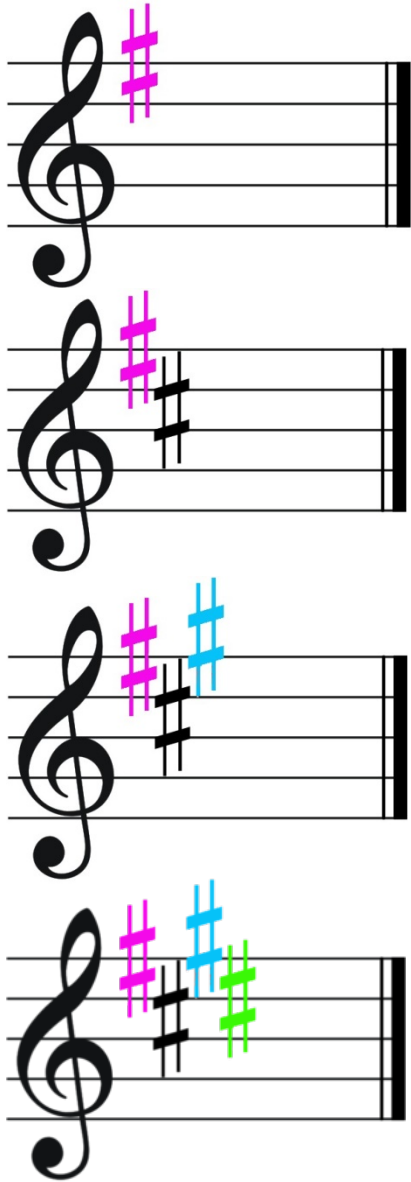
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Key Signatures With Sharps



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**Remember:
Find the very
last sharp
and move to
the very next
note to the
right (1/2
step) and
that 's the
key you're in.**

Answer key: G, D, A, E, B, F sharp, C Sharp,

The Exception Within Key Signatures



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Now that you have a good grasp on key signatures, it's important to understand when an exception is made that cancels out any given sharp or flat.

That exception can be a natural sign or it can be an accidental to raise or lower a note that's not listed in the key signature.



Natural sign cancels the sharp or flat until the next measure

Accidentals can sharp or flat a note that's not in the key signature until the next measure

Determining Minor Keys



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If you've studied music theory for any length of time, you've run across the subject of minor keys. What can make things confusing is that Major and minor keys have the same key signature.

There are some key clues to look for that will reveal to just whether a key is minor instead of Major.

m

4 Steps to determine if a key is minor

1 If it has chord symbols, look at the first chord in the song. If it's not the root chord but is based on the sixth note in the scale, it's in a minor key.

Determining Minor Keys

For example, let's say that the key signature has no flats or sharps. That would indicate C Major. But if the first chord in the song is an A minor chord, then you could be pretty sure that it's in the key of A minor.



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A min

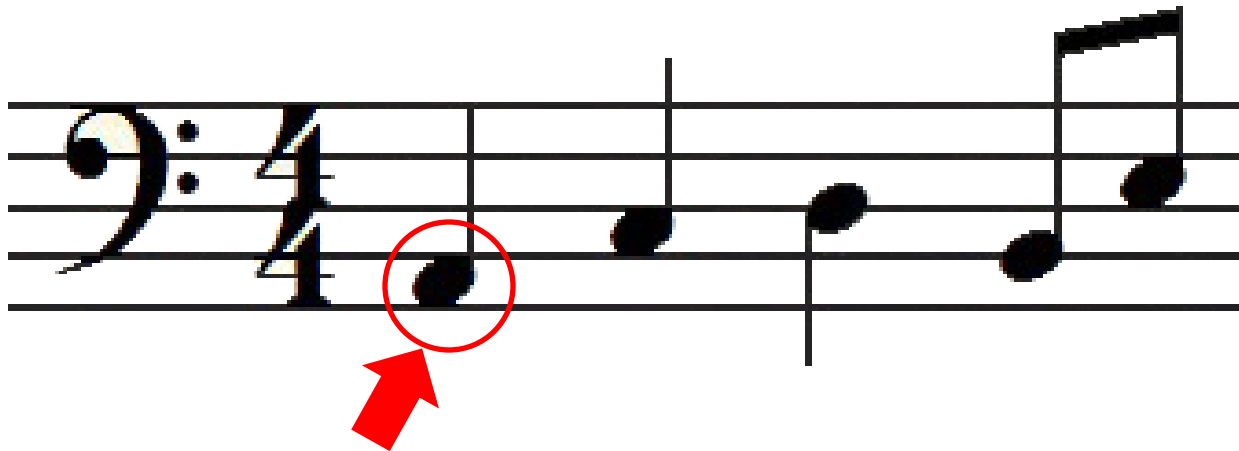
1. When our lives
Je - sus' life

Determining Minor Keys



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2 Look at the first bass note. This is assuming that you have a bass clef. Ask yourself: Is this the root of the Major key or is it the sixth. Using our example earlier of the C key signature, you would ask yourself: Does it have a C or an A as the first bass note.



A minor as the first bass note

Determining Minor Keys



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3 Look at the other chord symbols in the song. If you know your primary chords, this is probably the easiest way to tell whether the song is in a Major or minor key. Let's use our key of C example again.

If you have mostly C, F, and G Major chords spread throughout the song, then it's Major. If there's mostly A, D, and E minor chords, then it's in a minor key.

Primary Chords of C Major **C** **F** **G**

Primary Chords of A Major **A****m** **D****m** **E****m**



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Determining Minor Keys

4 What if you don't have chord symbols and the first bass note isn't revealing anything? In that case you should look at the melody itself. If the song is in a Major key, then you'll rarely find any accidentals. But if it's in a minor key, There's a couple of notes that you'll sometimes find accidentals on.

The melodic minor scale was created to accommodate a melody in minor keys. Without getting into the theory of minor scales, just look and see if the fifth note in the Major key (would be the 7th in the minor key) is raised a half step. That's a good indication the song is in a minor key.

Final Conclusion

Any kind of shortcut can be very helpful. I hope I've conveyed that here and you never get stumped trying to determine the key of a song again. But did you know that once you engage yourself in playing in different keys, these shortcuts will no longer be necessary to you? In fact, you won't even think about them.

You'll automatically know the key of a song just by glancing at the key signature. Until then, make friends with these shortcuts and allow them to carry you further with your music studies.

Greg Lee

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