

Scales Defined

Learning and understanding scales is a critical element in your guitar journey. Scales are the building blocks to creating licks and the roadmap to the fretboard. Pentatonic Scales are the most common scales used in most genres of music so they are a great place to start, especially for blues and rock.

Scales are a group or collection of notes in ascending or descending order that we use in music. Scale notes are listed out in order and usually sound from low to high.

The order of the notes utilized in a scale is crucial as that order provides a measure of musical distance. The distance between notes is called an interval. How scale notes line up, or the intervals, will give the scale not only its name but also its mood or musical color. Just like certain chords have a mood to them, scales also produce a certain sound or mood.

One critical aspect of a scale is its root note. The root note is the starting note and note which all the other scale notes gravitate toward. I like to call the root note “home base”. Most other notes seem to want to resolve to the root as it’s the tonic center for the scale. Often you can determine the key of a given progression by just listening for what sounds like home base, what all the chords are pulling toward.

When learning scales, always make mental notes as to where the root notes are in that scale. In all my educational materials as well as in these written lessons the root notes are illustrated with black ovals. It’s critical to know your root note locations.

The successive notes in a scale are divided by steps, or tones. A half step is also called a semi-tone and is one fret on the guitar. A whole step is also called a whole tone and is two frets. A minor third is three frets and a major third is four frets.

The table below illustrates some common scales and their intervals. Scales listed below in red text are the modes of the major scale. When learning scales also learn their application and how to play them in all keys.

Major Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Natural Minor Scale	1	2	b3	4	5	b6	b7
Minor Pentatonic Scale	1		b3	4	5		b7
Blues Scale	1		b3	4	b5	5	b7
Major Pentatonic Scale	1	2	3		5	6	
Major Pentatonic Sus4 Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Ionian Mode (Major Scale)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Dorian Mode	1	2	b3	4	5	6	b7
Phrygian Mode	1	b2	b3	4	5	b6	b7
Lydian Mode	1	2	3	#4	5	6	7
Mixolydian Mode	1	2	3	4	5	6	b7
Aeolian Mode	1	2	b3	4	5	b6	b7
Locrian Mode	1	b2	b3	4	b5	b6	b7
Harmonic Minor Scale	1	2	b3	4	5	b6	7