

Guitar Notes Explained: A Guide For Beginners

Guitar notes are at the heart of everything a guitarist does. They are the building blocks we use to play all chords, riffs & solos.



In this GuitarFire guide you will learn:

- The guitar string notes
- The difference between guitar notes and guitar chords.
- The musical alphabet
- The difference between sharps and flats
- 3 useful theory tips to help you navigate the fretboard fast

Let's dive straight in!

Guitar String Notes (Standard Tuning)

In standard tuning these are the open string guitar notes:



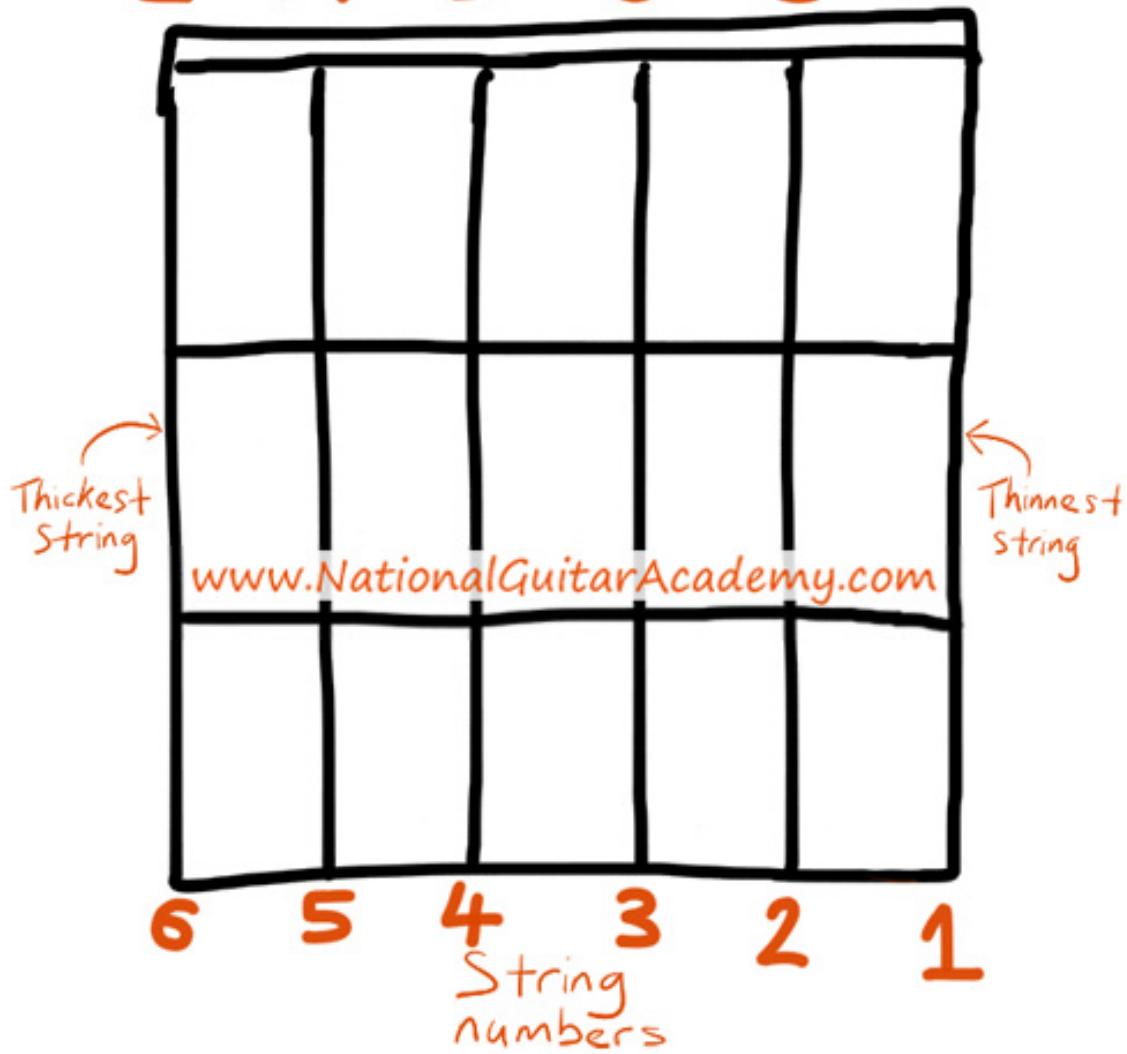
This is the way most guitars are tuned. There are other ways to tune a guitar that change the guitar notes, but it's best to avoid alternate tunings while you're a beginner.

Stick with standard tuning for at least the first 6 months of your guitar journey. If you switch to an exotic alternate guitar tuning, the chord shapes all change. That's not much fun for a beginner. Let's keep things nice and simple!

There are six strings on a guitar. Each string has a name AND a number.

- The thickest string is called the **6th string**. In standard guitar tuning, this is tuned to **E**. We often refer to this as the '**low E string**'. This is the deepest/lowest guitar note you can play.
- The **5th string** is tuned to **A**, so it's usually referred to as **the A string**.
- The **4th string** is tuned to **D**, so it's usually referred to as **the D string**.
- The **3rd string** is tuned to **G**, so it's usually referred to as **the G string**.
- The **2nd string** is tuned to **B**, so it's usually referred to as **the B string**.
- The **1st string** is tuned to **E**. This is the thinnest of all the strings. We often refer to this as **the 'high E string'**.

E A D G B E



How to remember the guitar string notes

The easiest way to remember the guitar string notes is to use a mnemonic:

- **E**lephants
- **A**nd
- **D**onkeys
- **G**row
- **B**ig
- **E**ars

Or my personal favourite...

- **E**ddie
- **A**te
- **D**ynamite
- **G**ood
- **B**ye
- **E**ddie



Kaboom!

Try and make a mnemonic yourself. (The sillier it is the better; that will make it more memorable.)

QUICK TIP

These notes are exactly the same on acoustic, electric, classical and semi-acoustic guitars.

What's the difference between guitar notes and guitar chords?

- **Notes** are the smallest unit of musical language.
- We group notes together to form **chords**.

Some of our students find this analogy helpful:

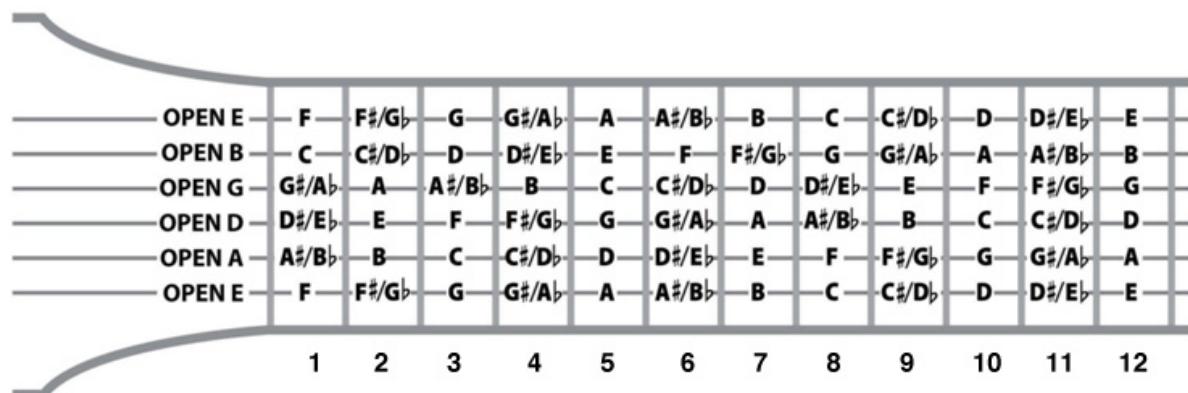
- Notes are like letters.
- Chords are like words.

To form a chord, we need to group some notes together.

Let's look at some examples:

Notes

Guitar notes are individual pitches.



Chords

A chord is made when we stack guitar notes together and play them all at the same time.

The chord has a larger and fuller sound because we hear several guitar notes played at the same time.

Don't make this common beginner mistake!

One of the worst mistakes you can make as a beginner guitarist is to try and learn all the guitar notes on the fretboard.

In my experience (20,000+ hours teaching guitar beginners) it's totally overwhelming for guitar learners who take this approach.

All your energy as a new guitarist should be focussed on chords.

Objectively, this is a more successful approach.

I think this is because it's easier and more fun to learn some static chord shapes and immediately begin making music.

So learn a few simple chords and get strumming; You can master your fretboard's DNA at a later point.

Eventually everyone 'graduates' to focussing more on guitar notes, scales and theory, but you should NOT start there.

(If you do you will make slower progress and your guitar journey will be more difficult than it needs to be. You will also become a very lop-sided guitarist.)

Quick Tip

Focus exclusively on chords and strumming during the first 3-5 months of your guitar journey.

Guitar Notes: Exploring The Fretboard

We're going to move on now and explore the fretboard in greater depth. This is NOT essential knowledge for an absolute guitar beginner, but it will deepen your understanding of the instrument if you want to learn more.

Read on only if you want to learn more about the musical alphabet and how guitar notes lay across the fretboard.

There's useful stuff here, but I don't want to overload you if you're new to the instrument.

Understanding guitar notes & the musical alphabet

Guitar notes are the same as violin notes and piano notes. (The musical alphabet is the same across all instruments.)

I've always found it a bit odd how many musicians don't know their musical alphabet. After all, the normal alphabet has 26 letters and the musical alphabet only has 12 notes.

- The normal alphabet goes from A to Z.**
- The musical alphabet goes from A to G.**

However, we have to remember our sharps and flats which appear between most (though not all) of the letters.

The musical alphabet (and hence, order of guitar notes) looks like this:

A, A#, B, C, C#, D, D#, E, F, F#, G, G#, A.

Quick Tip

The # symbol means ‘sharp’. So you pronounce “A#” as “A sharp”.

Sharps vs flats

Sharps and flats are the same thing, just looked at from a different angle.

We can describe all sharps as flats. If we do, the musical alphabet looks like this:

A, Bb, B, C, Db, D, Eb, E, F, Gb, G, Ab, A.

We use the “b” sign to denote “flat”.

So A sharp (A#) can also be called “B flat” (written as Bb). **A# and Bb are the same note.**

If it were 9.30 in the morning you could say it was “half past nine” or you could say it was “30 minutes to ten”. Both descriptions would be accurate and both describe the same thing.

Once again: **A# and Bb are the same note.**

The same goes for the other sharps.

- C# (AKA “C sharp”) is the same note as Db (AKA “D flat”).
- D# is the same note as Eb.
- F# is the same note as Gb.
- G# is the same note as Ab.

So we can write all the guitar notes like this (with sharps):

A, A#, B, C, C#, D, D#, E, F, F#, G, G#, A.

Or like this (with flats):

A, Bb, B, C, Db, D, Eb, E, F, Gb, G, Ab, A.

In reality, you will often see a blend of both.

Like this:

A, Bb, B, C, C#, D, Eb, E, F, F#, G, G#, A.

Do all guitar notes have a sharp or flat?

No. Let's use this pattern to explain. (We're going to stick with all sharps to make this easier to understand.)

A, A#, B, C, C#, D, D#, E, F, F#, G, G#, A.

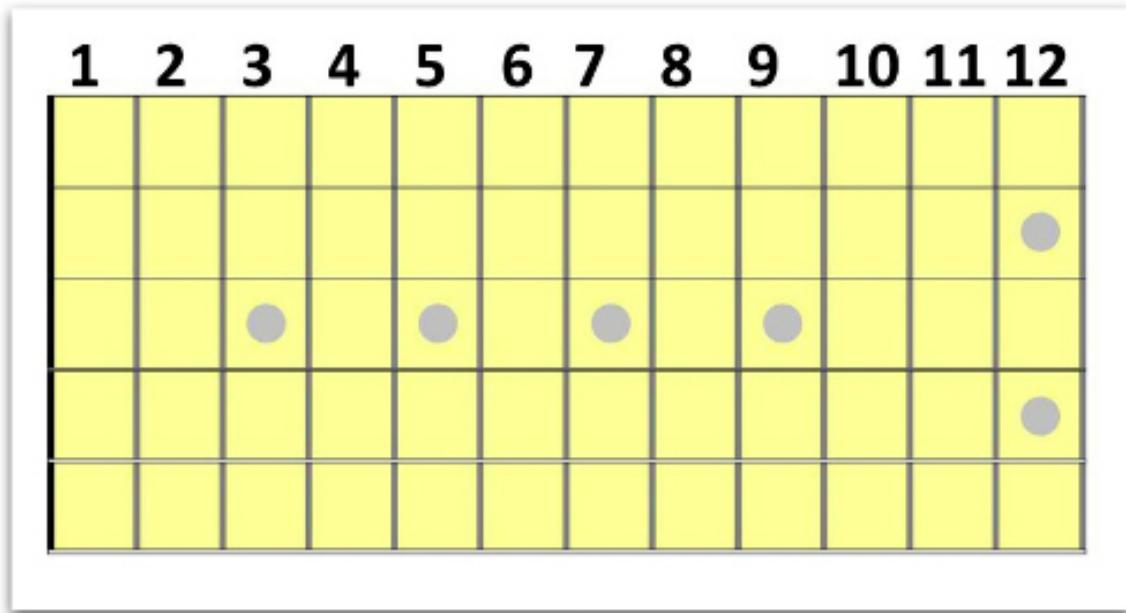
You may notice that not all the letters have a sharp between them.

- **We go straight from B to C. There is no 'B#' or 'Cb' in-between.**
- **We go straight from E to F. There is no 'E#' or 'Fb' in-between.**

In music, there is no B#/Cb or E#/Fb. They don't exist.

How to memorise the musical alphabet

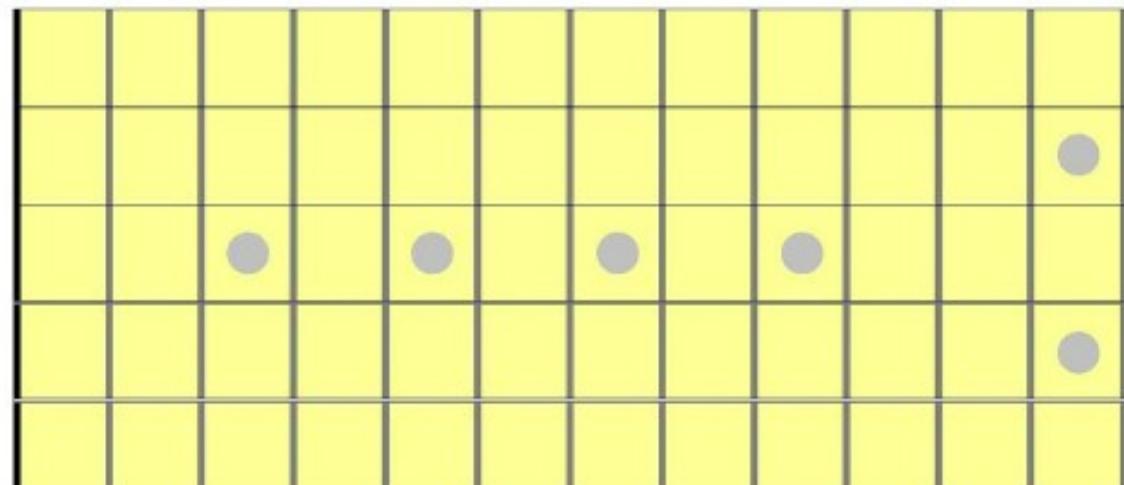
Each fret has a number and it goes up one by one as we ascend the fret board:



If we pluck a string without fretting any notes we say that we're playing an "open string".

We think of this as zero. An open string = 0

From 0, when we go 'up' the fretboard, we're heading towards the body of the guitar, like this:



We say we're travelling 'up' because the pitch of the notes goes higher.

How to practice the notes of the musical alphabet

The best way to practice the musical alphabet on a guitar is to start on the open A string (5th string) and count up one fret at a time, naming the notes as you go until you get to the 12th fret (the one with two dots on it):

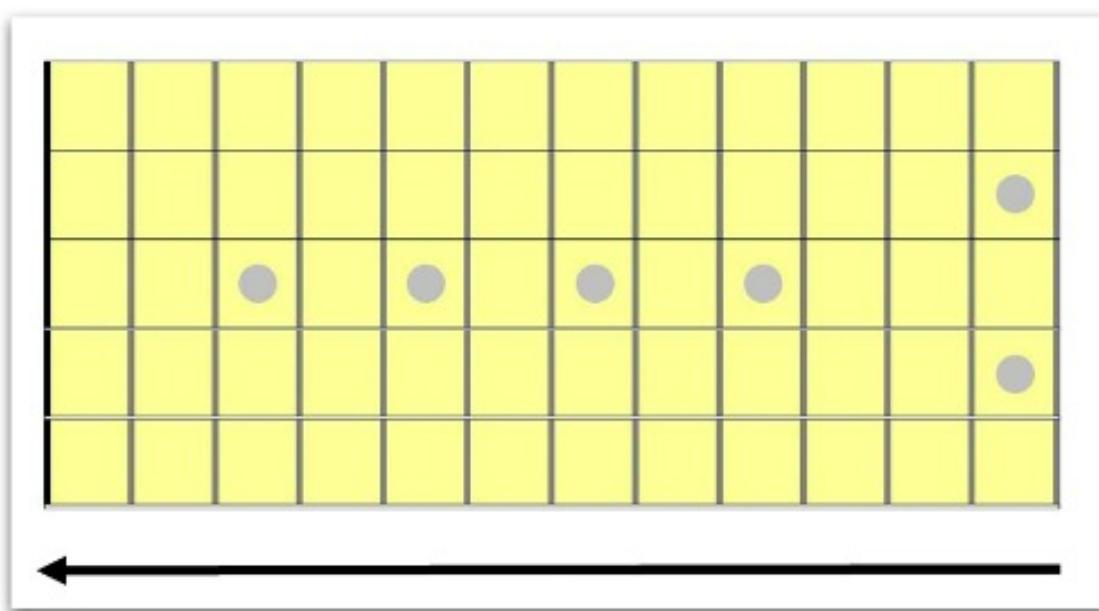
- Start by plucking the open 5th string and you will hear an A note.
- Then press on the first fret on the 5th string and pluck. You will hear an A# note. Keep going.
- This is the full order you will hear from the open string all the way to the 12th fret:

A, A#, B, C, C#, D, D#, E, F, F#, G, G#, A.

Congratulations, you just moved through a full octave!

- By the time you're on the 12th fret, you will be back at A again. (But you've now moved into a higher octave.)
- If you're not at A when you reach the 12th fret, chances are you've missed out a sharp or added one where there shouldn't be one. Go back and check.
- Once you get used to counting up the string using sharps, why not try counting back down it, this time using flats?

If we want to go 'down' the fret board we go the opposite way, towards the neck and tuning keys.



From the 12th fret down the open string, the guitar notes will flow like this:

A, Ab, G, Gb, F, E, Eb, D, Db, C, B, Bb, A.

This is harder to do, as most people don't know their alphabet going in reverse!

Take your time and get it right.

NINJA TIP: Saying the notes aloud as you play them helps embed the guitar notes in your mind. This is an example of neuro-linguistic programming and you can use this to learn faster.

Use Fret Markers To Quickly Get Your Bearings

If you look on the neck of most guitars you will see fret markers (little white dots).



These show you which frets are which. The dots are usually on the 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th and 12th frets.

Natural notes vs sharps and flats

Natural notes are the notes that aren't sharps or flats:

A B C D E F G

There is no 'H'. After **G** the next note is **A**, but it's a higher **A** than the previous one. (We have now entered a higher octave.)

Don't worry too much about what this means (octaves are just how we split all the notes into manageable portions).

The notes we've covered so far are called natural notes, because they have no sharps or flats.

A B C D E F G

Let's have a look at finding these natural notes on the fret board.

There are couple of rules we can use here to help us find these notes.

Rule #1

- Between every natural note, there is a two fret gap.
- This is what's known as a **whole step**.

Rule #2

- However some notes don't follow the two fret rule!
- The gap between these notes is just one fret.
- As we learnt earlier, this is between B and C, and E and F.
- This is known as a **half step**.

Now let's look at how we can find these notes on each string.

Let's start with the low E string (the thickest string)

We know that the open note is tuned to E, which is a natural note.

Let's try and find the natural notes on the E string. Play along with this exercise.

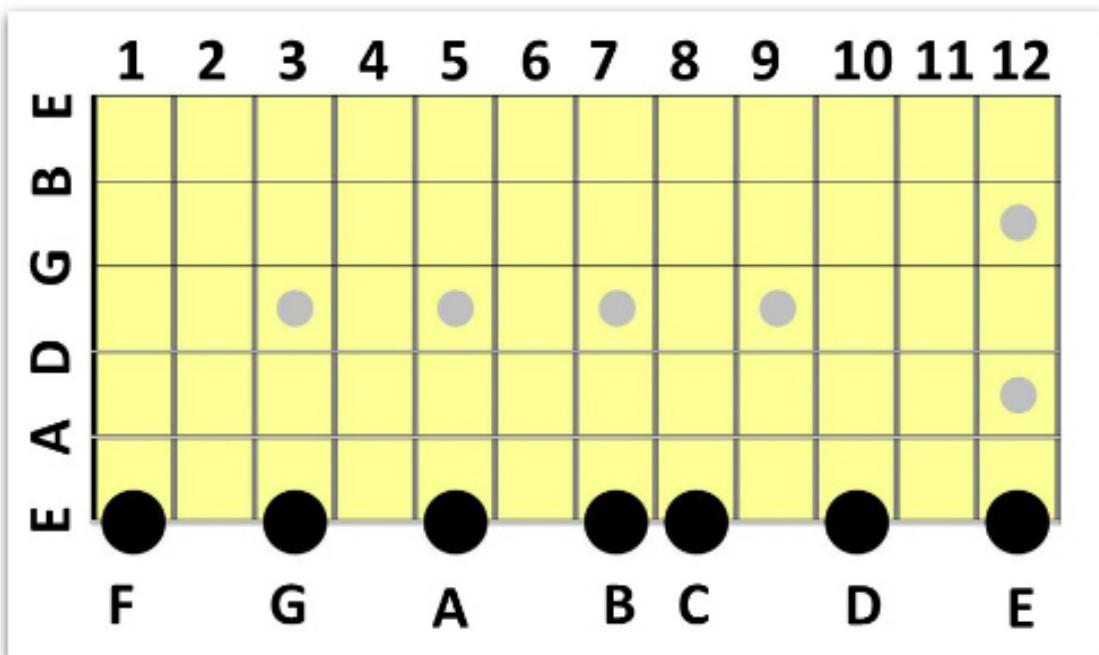
This means we start from E and that the notes we want to find are:

E F G A B C D

So if we take a look back at our rules, we can easily find the 2 fret gaps in between the notes, as well as the one fret gaps.

- Between E and F, there is only one fret. We covered this above.
- We know E is the note of our open 6th string, therefore F must be found on the very next fret. The first fret.
- F and G have a 2 fret gap between them, so if we go up two frets from the 1st fret we land at fret 3. **So fret 3 on our E string is a G note.**
- G to A has a 2 fret gap too, if we go up two frets from the 3rd fret where our G was, we end up at the 5th Fret. **So fret 5 on the E string is a A note.**
- A to B also has a two fret gap, so if we go up two frets we end up at fret number 7, therefore **the 7th fret on the E string is a B note.**

I hope you can see that it's pretty easy stuff, but watch out for the B to C. This is that sneaky half step, where we have to go up only 1 fret, instead of 2.



Ready to keep going? Let's walk together all the way up to the top.

- So if B to C has a 1 fret gap, we end up at the 8th fret on the E string. **Therefore fret number 8 is a C note.**
- C to D has a 2 fret gap, therefore if we go up two frets from 8th fret, we end up at the 10th fret. **So the 10th fret is the note D.**
- D-E has a 2 fret gap, therefore if we go up two frets from the 10th fret, we end up at fret number 12. **So the 12th fret on the E string is an E.**

So we've now done the full cycle and ended up at the E note in the higher octave.

You should be able to hear that the open E string, and the note at the 12th fret sound the same. The note on the 12th fret is higher in pitch, but can you hear that they're the same? Try it now.

All together, the notes you've played should sound something like this:

Try this exercise to develop your understanding of guitar notes

- Find all the natural notes on the low E string.
- Find all the natural notes on the A string.
- Find all the natural notes on the D string.
- Find all the natural notes on the G string.
- Find all the natural notes on the B string.
- Find all the natural notes on the high E string.

Once you've done this, you may realise that some notes overlap from one string to the next. Well done! You are discovering the fretboard.

Unlike the piano, where notes are played in a continuous line, the guitar notes overlap from string to string.

Making sharps and flats clear

We covered this earlier, but I'd like to look at it again, from a slightly different perspective that helps it 'click' in some people's minds.

This is very confusing for most people, so it probably is for you too. Don't worry, it's normal!

Now you know about natural notes, you will see this from a different angle.

Sharps and flats are the notes that are in-between the natural notes.

A B C D E F G

Sharps and flats live in the ‘spaces’ between these notes.

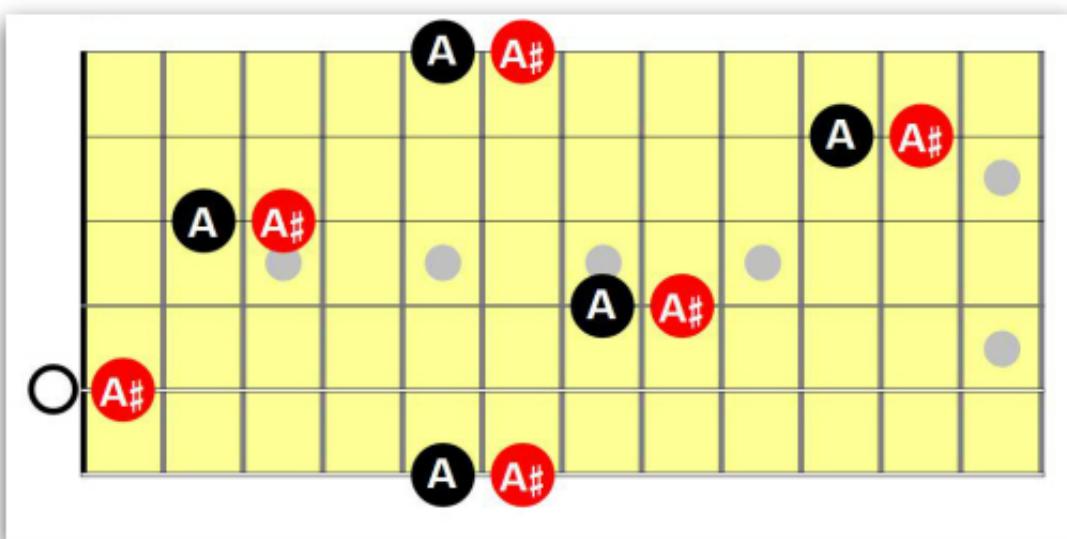
Guitar Notes Explained: Sharpening Notes To Make Sharps

To create a ‘sharp’ we have to sharpen a natural note. We do this by increasing the pitch of the note by one fret. This is a half step.

So for example, if we have the natural note of “A” and we sharpen it, it will become “A sharp”.

Once again: We write ‘sharp’ by using a hashtag symbol. “A sharp” is written as “A#”.

Here are the A and A# notes on the fret board. Can you see that the A# notes are always one fret higher than the A notes?



Here’s what it would look like on musical notation. See the ‘hashtag’ symbol?



When we look at sharps on a musical page, it never says the word ‘sharp’. It will have a ‘#’ instead.

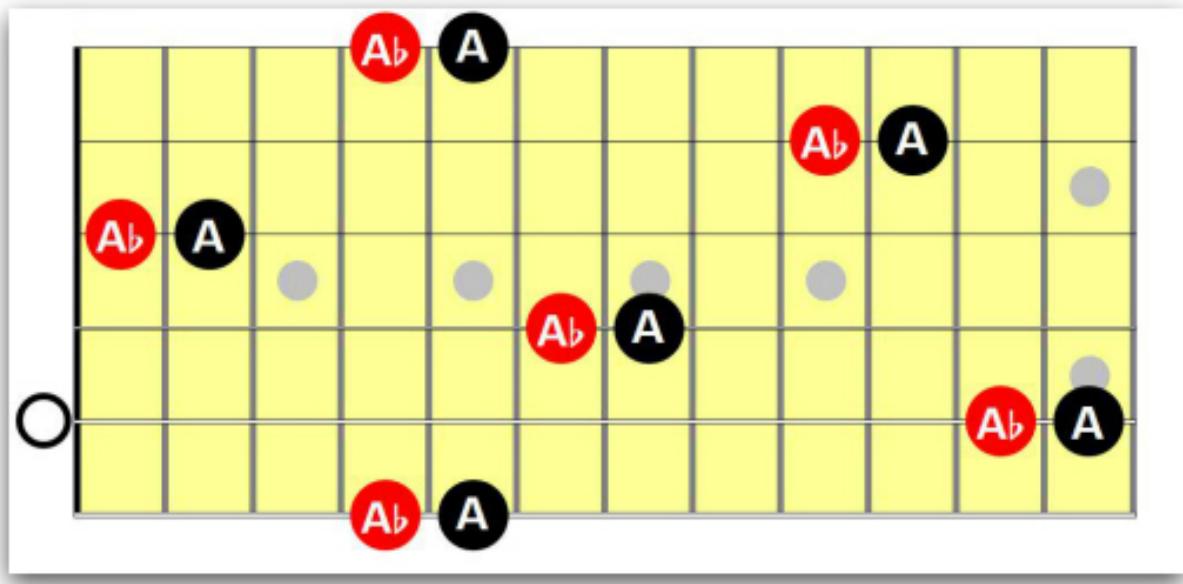
Guitar Notes Explained: Flattening Notes To Make Flats

A flat is like the ‘opposite’ of a sharp. When we flatten a note we go the opposite way, so we decrease the note by one fret. This is a half step.

So if we have the natural note of A and want to flatten it, we go down a half step/one fret. This becomes “A flat” which we write as “Ab”. The lowercase B symbol is how we write ‘flat’.

- Ab is how we write “A flat”
- Bb is how we write “B flat”
- Cb is how we write “C flat”
- Db is how we write “D flat”
- Etc!

Here’s a picture of the fret board showing you all the A’s and the Ab’s.



Can you see the Ab notes are always 1 fret lower than the A notes?

Here's a picture of what it would look like in musical notation.



Quick Tip

When we see flats on a musical page, it will never say the word ‘flat’. It will always have a lowercase “b” after it.

A quick sharps and flats test!

When we sharpen or flatten notes, there are a few rules to remember.

- A couple of notes can't be sharpened. What notes are these? (Yes, B and E!)
- As we know, flats are the opposite of sharps. So the above fact means what notes can't be flattened? (Yes, C and F!)

I teach my students this by telling them to remember the word "BE". I actually shout "To BE or not to BE" at them to drum it in. (It's a bit weird, I know, but it works.)

If all else fails, remember this:

All notes can be sharpened except B and E.
(Remember: "To BE or not to BE"!)

Because sharps and flats are essentially the same thing there is lots of confusion caused by the duplicate terminology.

This infuriates me as a guitar teacher because it just makes everything harder for beginners to learn. I wish it were easier for wannabe musicians, but we're stuck with this clumsy naming structure. (Sorry guys!)

Check out my article "**What's The Difference Between Sharps and Flats? Which should I use?**" to make this concept a lot easier.

Quick Tip

Let's try and make something really clear. Let's take two notes: A and B.

- We can sharpen the A. Which would give us A#.
- We can flatten the B. Which would give us Bb.
- **These two notes are EXACTLY the same, they just have different names.**

(Usually the key of the song determines what note names we use. But don't worry about understanding key theory right now! For now I just want you to know that A# and Bb are the same note.)

As well as notes, the **chords** A# and Bb are exactly the same.

Exercise: Finding the notes

Now we understand about sharps and flats, we can use this information to help us find these notes on the fret board.

Let's take the low E string.

FRET	0 (Open)	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th
NOTE	E	F	F#	G	G#	A	Bb	B	C	C#	D	Eb	E

We already know where all the natural notes are.

These notes are:

E F G A B C D

Let's look at how we move from one to the next:

Moving between guitar notes E & F

To find the notes in-between we can simply break it down:

- We already know that there are no sharps or flats between E and F.
- So the open string to fret 1 is easy! Nothing to worry about there. The next note after E is F.

Moving between guitar notes F & G

- We know F and G are frets 1 and 3.
- So what we need to find out is what note fret number 2 is.
- **We know we can sharpen F, which would make fret 2 F#.**

Or

- We could flatten G, which would make it Gb.
- **Therefore we can say the guitar note on fret 2 is either F#/Gb, because they are exactly the same note.**

Moving between guitar notes G & A

- We already know G to A is frets 3 to 5. So the fret we are looking for is fret number 4.
- **To do this we can sharpen G, which would make fret 4 G#.**

Or

- We need to flatten A, which would make fret 4 Ab.
- **Therefore fret 3 is either G# or Ab. They are the same note.**

Moving between guitar notes A & B

- We already know A to B is frets 5 to 7.
- So the fret we are looking for is fret number 6.
- **To do this we could sharpen the A, which would make fret 6 A#.**

Or

- We could flatten the B, which would make fret 6 Bb.
- **Therefore fret 6 is A# or Bb. They are the same note.**

Moving between guitar notes B & C

- We know that B to C is a half step and that we can't sharpen or flatten either note. So that one is easy!
- **The next note after B is always C.**

Moving between guitar notes C & D

- We know that C to D is frets 8 and 10.
- So the fret we're looking for is fret 9.
- Here we could sharpen C, which would make fret 9 C#.

Or

- We could flatten D, which would make fret 9. Db.
- **Therefore fret 9 is C# or Db. They are the same note.**

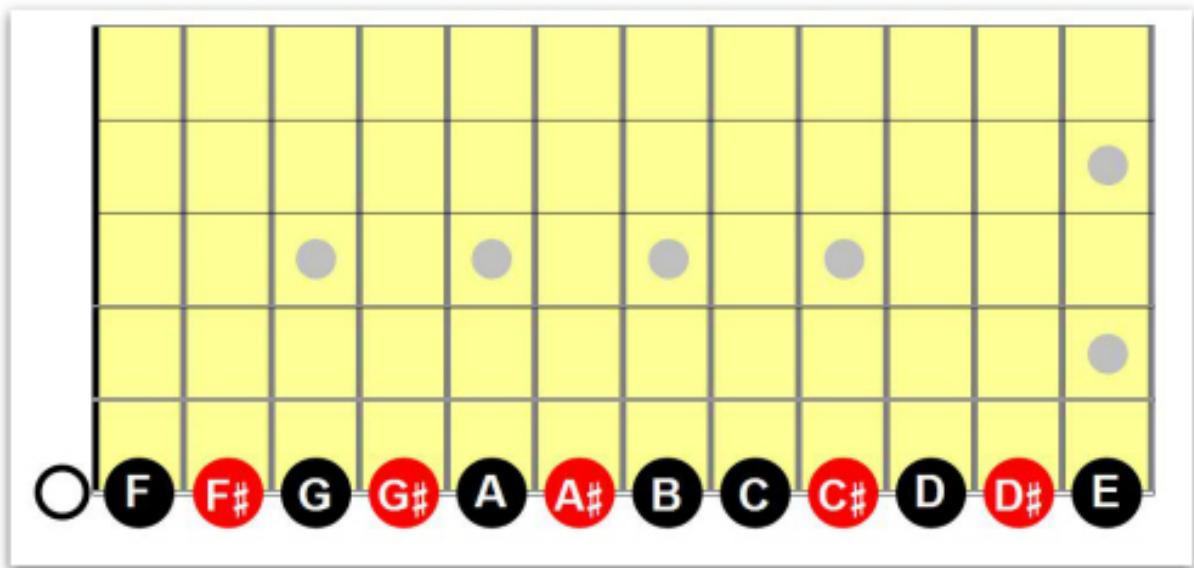
Moving between guitar notes D & E

- We know that D to E is frets 10 and 12.
- The fret we're looking for is fret 11.
- We could sharpen D to make fret 11 D#.

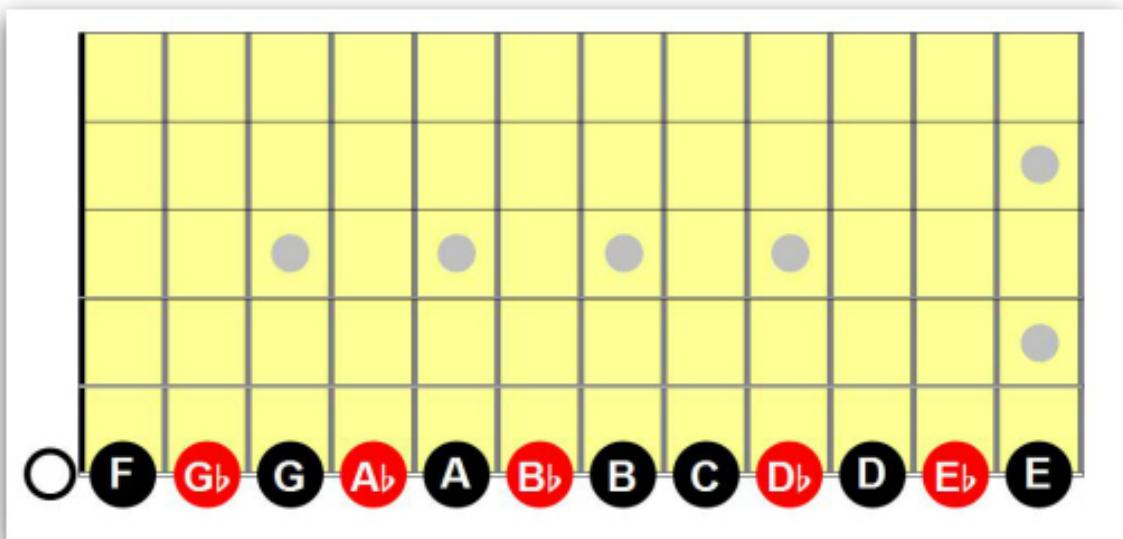
Or

- We can flatten E to make fret 11 Eb.
- **Therefore fret 11 is either D# or Eb. They are the same note.**

Here are some diagrams of the natural and sharpened notes.



Here's the same diagram, but instead of sharpened notes we now have flattened notes!



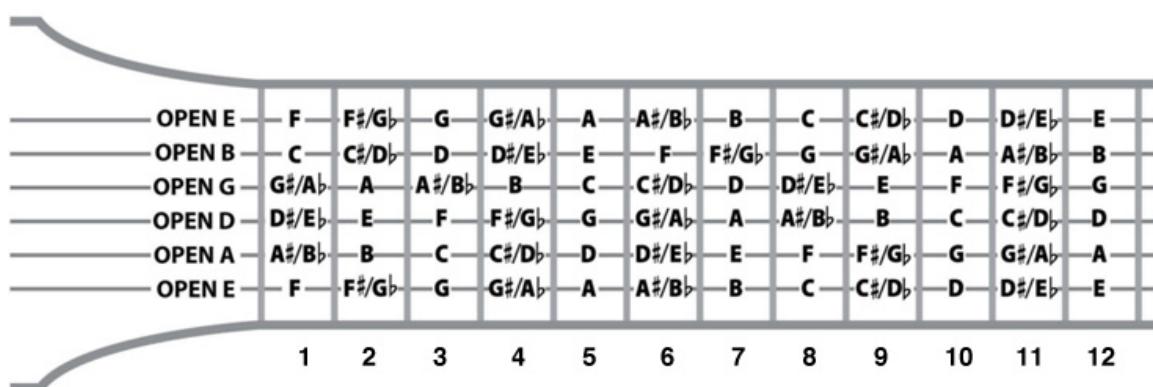
Hopefully you can see that the natural notes are the same and the sharpened and flattened notes line up in exactly the same place.

Ok, now try this by yourself...

Now you understand how to sharpen or flatten notes on the fret board. Try these exercises:

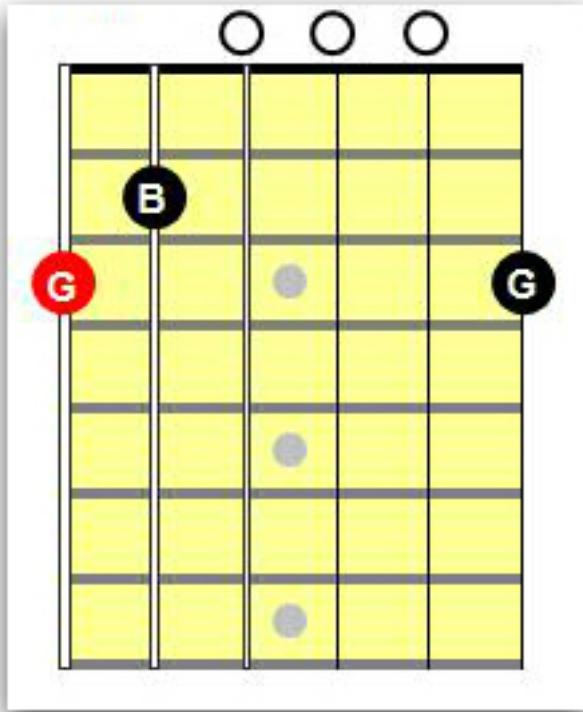
- Find all the sharp and flat notes on the E string.
- Find all the sharp and flat notes on the A string.
- Find all the sharp and flat notes on the D string.
- Find all the sharp and flat notes on the G string.
- Find all the sharp and flat notes on the B string.
- Find all the sharp and flat notes on the high E string.

When you feel you have a good grasp of this, you can review it with this diagram of the full fretboard of guitar notes:



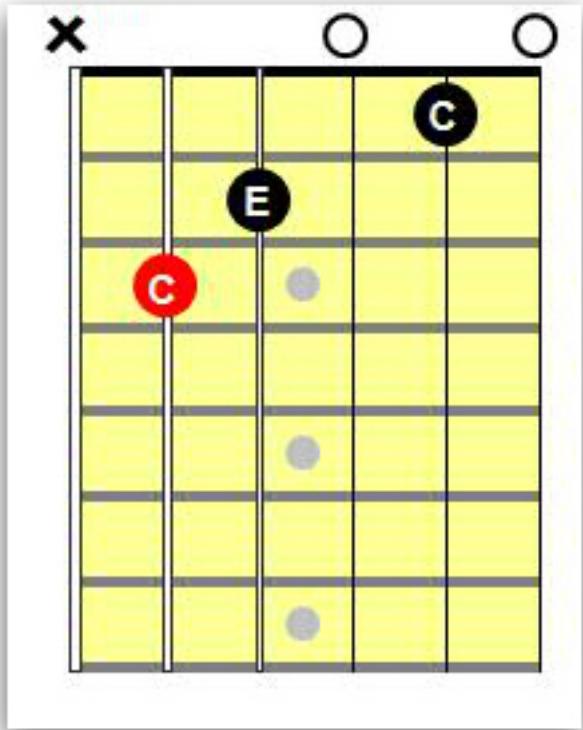
Your guitar note knowledge will help with chords (& vice versa)

Let's look at a G chord.



Can you see that the first note in the chord, which is the 3rd fret on the E string, is a G? (This is the root note.)

If we have a look at our C Chord, the first note which we play in a C chord is a C note.



The first note in a chord can help us know what the chord is (& vice versa).

Understanding the flow of guitar notes on the fretboard can help us develop our chord knowledge too.

Guitar chords and guitar notes blend together through rhythm and lead guitar. Knowledge of one helps you gain knowledge of the other.

It's a virtuous circle!