

Learn Guitar Scales In 8 Easy Steps

Learn guitar scales in 8 easy steps with this free National Guitar Academy guide. (If you enjoy this article you should check out our Master Guide: [How To Play Lead Guitar](#).)

In this free guitar lesson we'll cover 8 steps...

Guitar scales decoded: A simple explanation, at last!

- Step 1: Understand the basics
- Step 2: The Major Scale
- Step 3: The Minor Scale
- Step 4: The Major Pentatonic Scale
- Step 5: The Minor Pentatonic Scale
- Step 6: The Blues Scale
- Step 7: Learn how to diagnose keys
- Step 8: Understand the huge importance of root notes

(If you just want an easy scale to solo with scroll down & read about the Minor Pentatonic Scale. If you want to learn guitar scales properly, read on.)

Ok, let's dive in!

Scales cause a lot of confusion for guitar learners, so before we look at the different scale patterns it's important we make a few things clear.

Why is it important to learn guitar scales?

Scales are the foundation of all lead guitar work and make it easy for you to crank out awesome single-note melodies.

When people start to learn guitar scales they unwittingly cross a 'bridge' and start understanding music theory. This makes you a significantly better guitarist because you start to truly *understand* the instrument.

When should I learn guitar scales?

It's never too early or too late to learn guitar scales. They are beneficial to know at any stage of your guitar journey.

I prefer total beginners to focus on chords, but I would never discourage anyone who wanted to learn guitar scales from doing so. This is useful stuff.



Ok, so what is a scale?

A scale is a series of steps between two fixed musical points. These two fixed points are always the same note, but in different octaves. We call these points "root notes".

How we get from the lower root note to the higher root note is called 'a scale'.



Because there are 12 'rungs' (AKA 'notes') there are lots of different patterns and permutations that we can choose to combine them in.

I often see people trying to learn guitar scales get overwhelmed by the amount of patterns, but thankfully it's very simple.

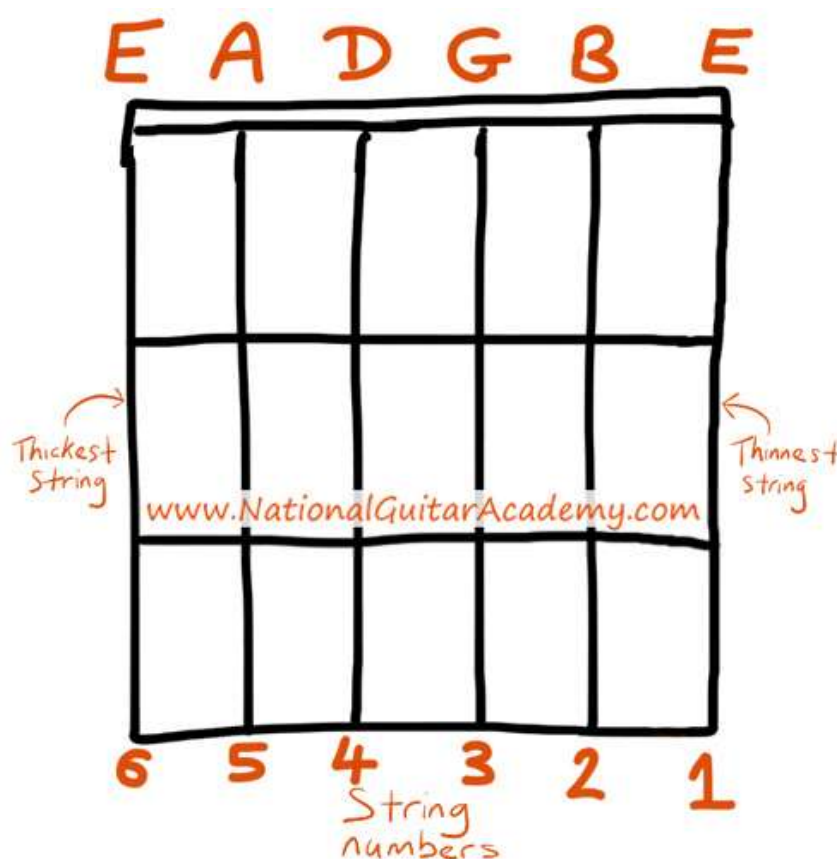
There are only a couple of scale patterns that 99% of guitarists need to know and we're going to run through them here.

Can you read chord & scale diagrams?

To understand what's coming next you need to be able to read chord diagrams (AKA 'chordboxes').

If you can't do this yet read this article: [How To Read Chordboxes In 60 Seconds](#)

All of the scale diagrams in this guide follow this layout:



Ok, you came here to learn guitar scales so let's look at our first scale!

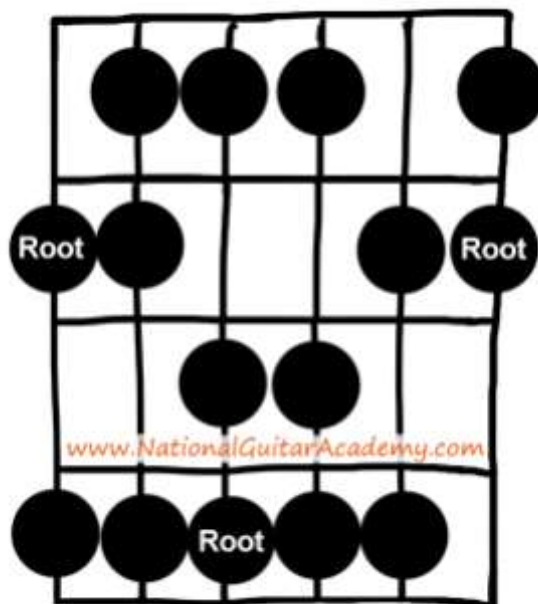
The Major Scale

It is essential to understand how the major scale works because its pattern is the yardstick by which we describe any other musical sound.

Every chord and scale is named by how it compares to this scale. If you want to learn guitar scales this is the best starting point.

This is a bright and happy sounding scale. It's uplifting, sweet and optimistic.

Box 1 of the major scale looks like this (we'll talk about 'boxes' later on):



Did you spot the three root notes here? Well done! Like most other scale boxes, this one covers TWO OCTAVES.

Scales are moveable patterns

A crucial point you must know if you want to learn guitar scales is that scale patterns are MOVEABLE.

What dictates the tonality of the scale is where you BEGIN playing it.

If you start playing the above pattern on the 5th fret (so the root note on the left is on the 5th fret of the 6th string) you will be playing the **A Major Scale**.

If you play the same pattern from a starting position two frets higher (starting on the 7th fret) you will be playing the **B Major Scale**.



A scale's root note is the hero note. Use it lots.

In every scale there is a root note. The root note is what names the scale. In the **A Minor Pentatonic Scale** the root note is A.

In the **E Major Scale** the root note is E.

The root note is the hero note. It's the note that will sound best and give a sense of resolution to the riffs, licks and solos that you play. **Finish your phrases on the root note to make what you played sound 'right'.**

The Minor Scale

The other scale that you must know if you want to learn guitar scales is the **Minor Scale**.

There are three different types of minor scale:

- The **Natural Minor Scale** (it is essential that you know this scale)
- The **Harmonic Minor Scale** (this is a cool scale and it would be good if you learn this, but it's not essential)
- The **Melodic Minor Scale** (it's not essential that you learn this scale)

When people talk about “the minor scale” they are almost always referring to the **Natural Minor Scale**. That’s the ‘main’ version of these three minor scales.

The Minor Scale is much cooler than the Major Scale

The **Natural Minor Scale** provides a counterpoint to the **Major Scale**. If you want to learn guitar scales you need to understand the *mood* they create. This scale sounds sad and melancholy and the contrast from the **Major Scale** is stark.

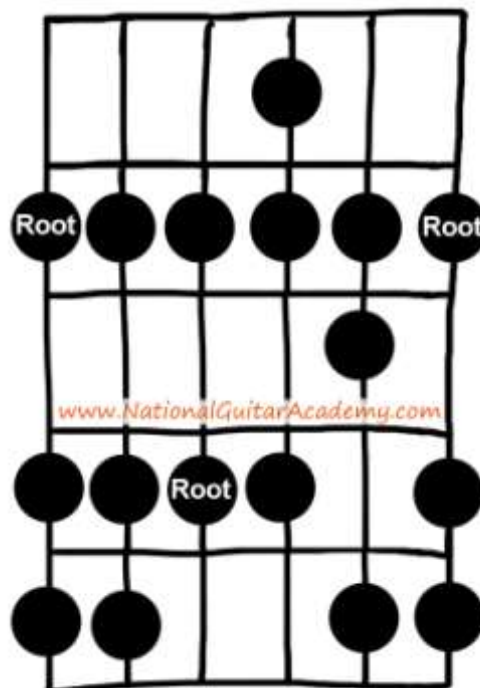
But of course, we need both! (Yin and Yang. Light and dark. Batman and the Joker, etc...!)

I think the **Natural Minor Scale** is much cooler than the **Major Scale**, it sounds more interesting and evocative.

But perhaps best of all, it gives us the foundation for the **Minor Pentatonic Scale** and **Blues Scale** which are the most fun scales for the majority of guitarists. (We’ll cover both of these scales later on in this guide.)

Clearly, I’m not alone in liking the **Natural Minor Scale** because this scale provides the foundation for almost all rock and blues lead guitar. (Playing a solo in a minor scale over major chords just sounds awesome. I’ve been doing it for years and it gets more and more fun as time goes by!)

The **Natural Minor Scale** looks like this:

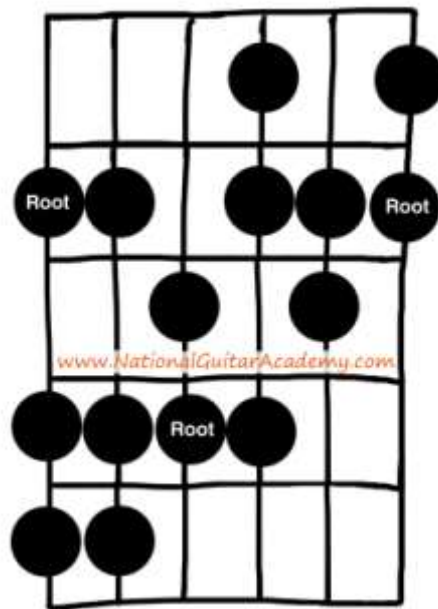


Technically, this scale 'ends' on the root note at the right, but people tend to add on the two notes on the far right. (These notes are from the start of the *next* octave.) I use all of these notes because they all sound good.

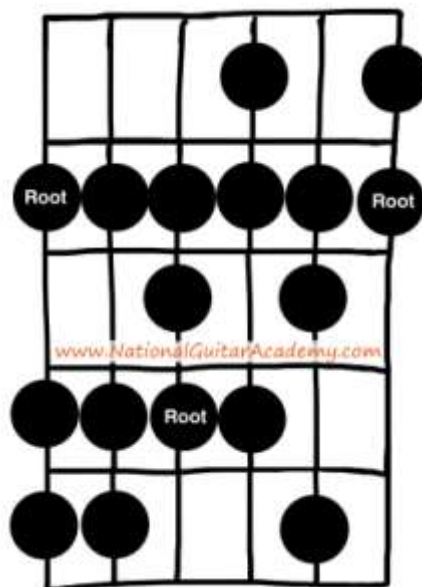
The Harmonic Minor Scale

This is only a little bit different to the **Natural Minor Scale**. Here we sharpen the penultimate note to make the pull back to the root note stronger.

This creates an exotic sounding 3-step interval. Try it!



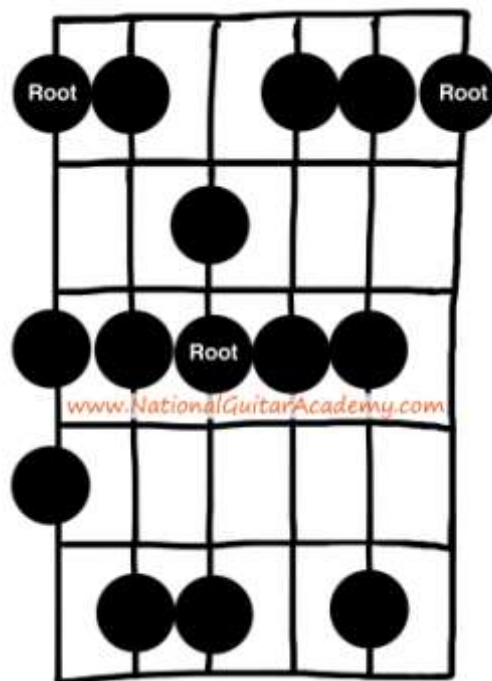
Top tip: When soloing you can blend these two minor scales together and play a 'hybrid' scale like this:





The Melodic Minor Scale

In more traditional forms of music that 3-step interval isn't welcome. So we add an extra note to smooth the ascension. This creates the 'melodic minor scale'. (AKA Jazz Melodic Minor Scale.) It looks like this:



Unless you want to learn jazz this is a pretty niche scale. Most guitarists won't need to know it.

Major and Minor Pentatonic Scales

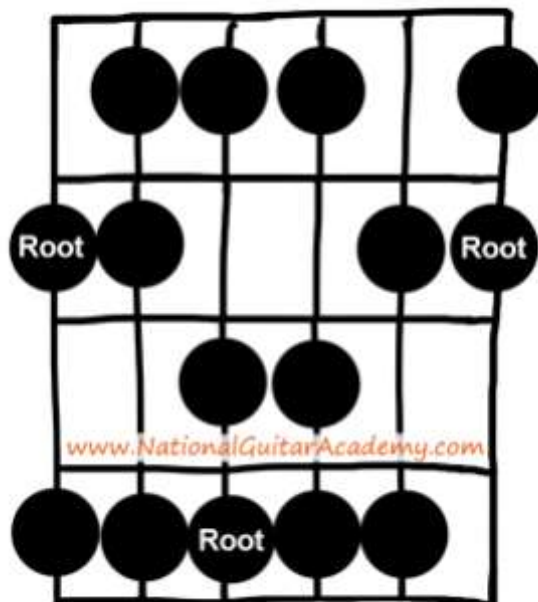
So far we've covered the two pillars of music scale theory: the **Major Scale** and the **Minor Scale**.

These two scales are fundamental and you need to be aware of them, but most intermediate guitarists play these two scales in a simpler and abridged form.

The **Major Pentatonic Scale** is the **Major Scale** in abridged form.

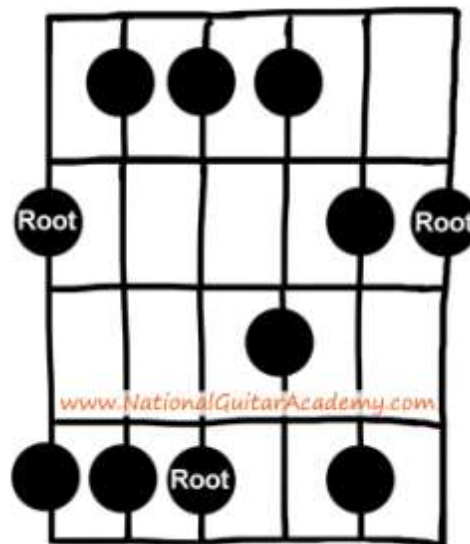
So instead of playing the full major scale pattern like this:

The Major Scale



We play a simpler version, like this:

The Major Pentatonic Scale



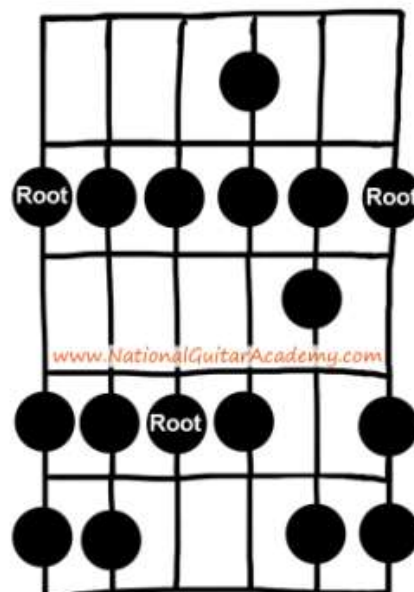
Can you see that we simply removed two notes from each octave? (4 notes in total.)

I often see guitar learners make the mistake of thinking the **Major Scale** is a totally different scale to the **Major Pentatonic Scale**. No, the **Major Pentatonic Scale** IS the **Major Scale**, just in a simpler form.

Similarly, the **Minor Pentatonic Scale** is the **Minor Scale** in abridged form.

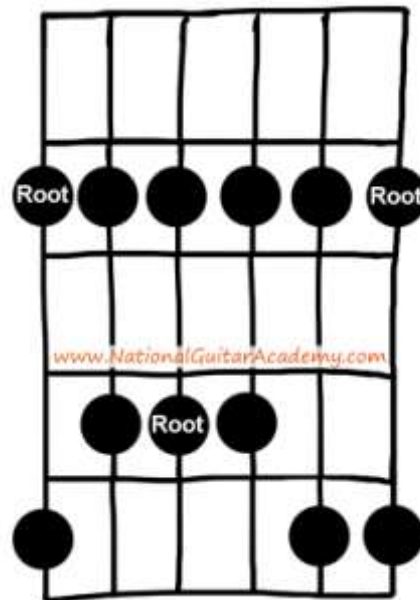
So instead of playing this:

The Natural Minor Scale



We play this:

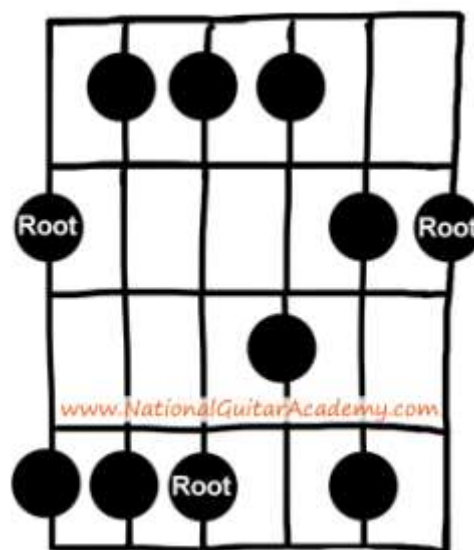
The Minor Pentatonic Scale



Can you see how all we've done here is remove two notes from each octave? (4 notes removed in total.)

So if you learn how to play the **Major Scale** and the **Minor Scale** you already 'know' how to play their pentatonic versions. You just need to get accustomed to leaving those two notes out in each octave.

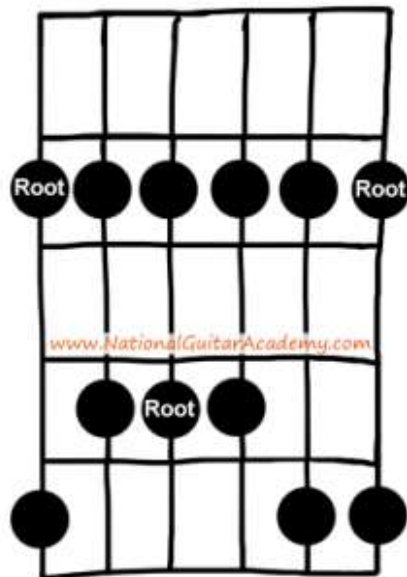
Box 1 of the **Major Pentatonic Scale** looks like this:



This isn't the easiest scale to solo with, so the vast majority of intermediate guitarists use box 1 of the **Minor Pentatonic Scale** for the majority of their lead guitar work.

If you take only one thing away from this lesson it should be to learn this pattern:

Minor Pentatonic Scale (Box 1)



The **Minor Pentatonic Scale** is the best scale to learn if you want to learn guitar scales to play solos and lead guitar.

In a moment we'll look at one of the coolest scales of all, the **Blues Scale**. Before we do, let's have a quick chat about 'boxes'. (If you want to learn guitar scales you need to know this.)

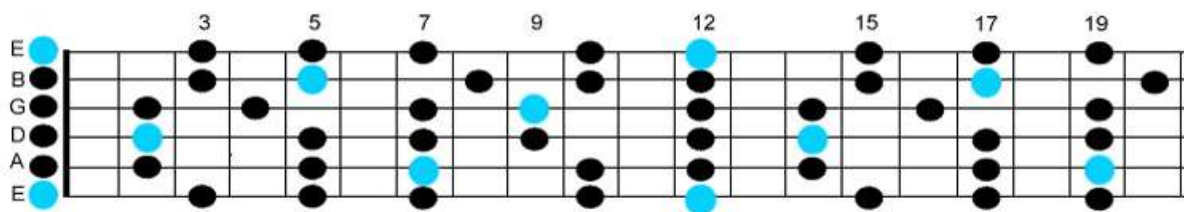


A quick note on 'boxes'

The guitar neck is long and the notes overlap from one string to the next. There is no way we can memorise all the patterns in one go.

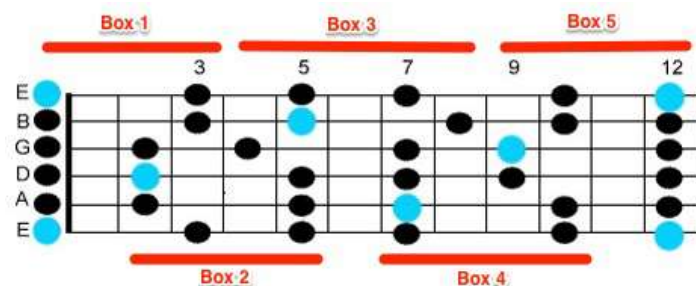
- To make life easier for ourselves we divide all scales on the neck into 5 segments to make things more manageable.
- You can play every scale in each segment. We call these segments 'boxes'.

For example, with no boxes, this is what the full neck diagram looks like for the **E Minor Pentatonic Scale**.



- This is overwhelming! So we do what we always do. We simplify.
- We break this long pattern into 5 shorter patterns. These 5 smaller patterns are called 'boxes'.

So for each scale, we have box 1, box 2, box 3, box 4 and box 5. (After the 12th fret, the 5 box patterns repeat again.)



As you can see, the boxes overlap. The right side of box 1 is the left side of box 2. And so on.

- From a music theory point of view, the notes in all 5 boxes follow the same musical pattern. **They are the same scale.**
- But when these notes are laid out across the guitar fretboard the five boxes look very different from one another.
- They all share the same musical 'DNA', but their appearance is different.

That means we have to learn multiple patterns to play the same scale in different positions on the guitar neck.

Don't worry about learning boxes 2, 3, 4 and 5 right now. Just focus on box 1 for each scale.

Master box 1 of each scale before attempting others

In this article, to keep things simple, we've just used box 1 for each scale. This is how you should approach this too.

This is by far the best way to learn guitar scales. Just learn box 1's for now, but know that there are 4 more boxes for every scale. You can move onto these in the future!

Ok let's look at my favourite scale of all, the **Blues Scale**. This is why we learn guitar scales!

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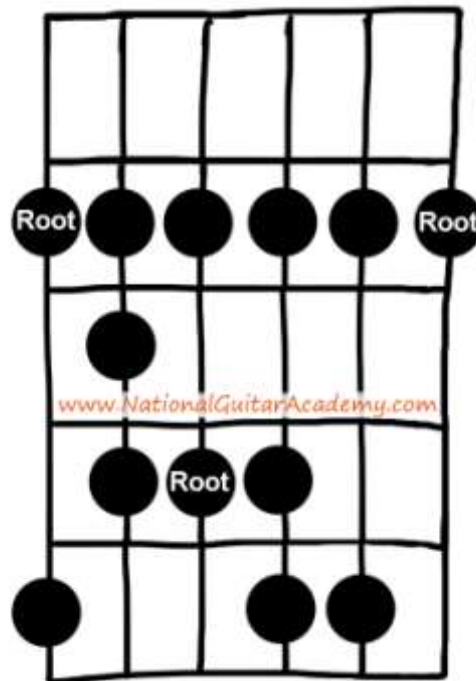


The Blues Scale

The **Blues Scale** is a very close relative of the **Minor Pentatonic Scale**. It sounds awesome in most rock, indie, country and blues scenarios.

It looks like this:

The Blues Scale



One of the coolest things about the **Blues Scale** is that you can often play it over both major and minor keys.

It won't work over *every* chord progression, but it does work over lots. It's a versatile scale.

If you're trying to learn guitar scales this is a huge boost, because it makes everything easier.



Keys

If you want to learn guitar scales because you intend to play lead guitar you need to know this:

The easiest way to play lead guitar that will sound “good” is to play notes from a scale that matches the song’s key.

This is so important I’m going to re-type it!!

The easiest way to play lead guitar that will sound “good” is to play notes from a scale that matches the song’s key.

So if the key of a song is **C Major**, you will sound awesome if you play a riff or solo with notes from the **C Major Scale**. In this example, the key and the scale match. Voila! We have *harmony*.

How to work out the key of a song

The easiest way to work this out is to look at the first and last chord of the song. (They’re often the same chord.) 99% of the time the key of the song will be one of those two chords.

A key-finding example

So for example, let’s say the first chord of the song is A minor.

This means that you can play any note from the **A Minor Scale** (or the **A Minor Pentatonic Scale**) and it will sound good. Some notes will sound better than others, but none of them will sound ‘bad’.

Let’s look at another example

Let’s say the first chord of the song was E major. You could play any note from the **E Major Scale** (or the **E Major Pentatonic Scale**) and it would sound good.

Depending on the track, you may also be able to play the **E Minor Scale**, or the **E Minor Pentatonic Scale** too. If it’s a rock track, the **E Blues Scale** might also work.

NINJA TIP: You can often play a **minor scale** over a **major key**. This will often sound good. This does not work as well the other way around! Try it and you’ll HEAR the difference.



How to practice scales

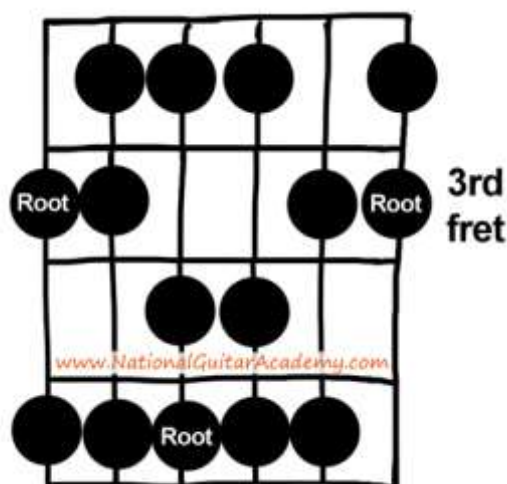
When we learn guitar scales the first thing we need to do is commit the scale pattern to memory.

- The easiest way to do this is to break the scale into bite-sized chunks. So first of all, focus only on box 1 for the scale.
- The notes of all boxes cover two octaves. So we can make things even easier by just focussing on the first octave of box 1.

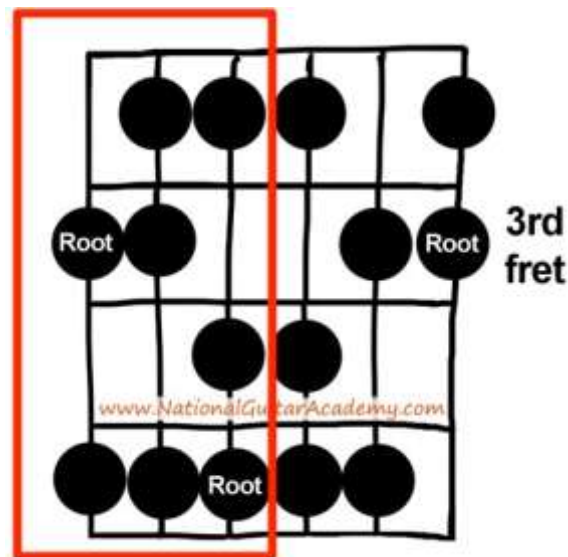
So the easiest way to learn guitar scales is to 'split' the scale boxes into octaves 1 and 2.

An example of how to learn a guitar scale

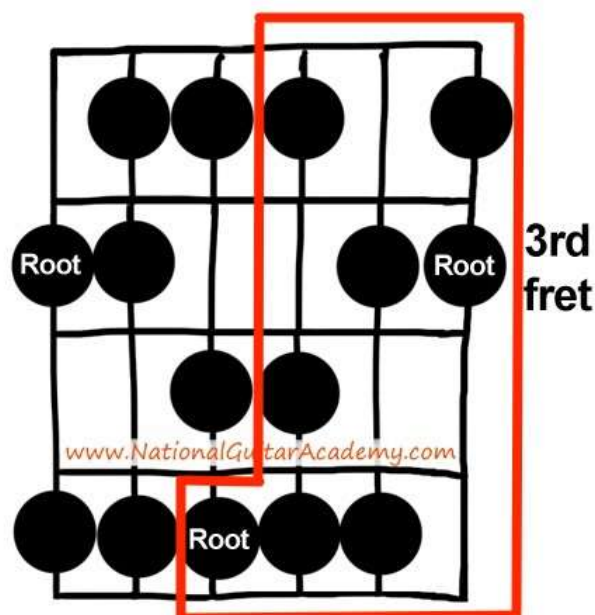
Let's use the **G Major Scale** as an example. Box 1 looks like this:



To begin with, focus on learning the first octave. This is the distance from the first to the second root note. In this box, for this scale, the first octave spans strings 6, 5 and 4:



After you've memorised this, move onto the second octave, which spans strings 4 to 1:



Important point: Note that the last note of octave 1 is also the first note of octave 2. There are 8 notes in each octave, but there are not 16 notes in total across two octaves. There are only 15.

Why learn this way?

To learn guitar scales we have to break things into bite-size chunks. It just makes things faster.

This octave-splitting method might not seem necessary for box 1 of easy patterns like the **Minor Pentatonic Scale**, but for more complicated scales/boxes with more elaborate patterns this approach can make things a lot more manageable and allow us to learn guitar scales quickly and more reliably.

Here's an important piece of technique

Remember to use one finger per fret, like this:



It's ok to use the pads (the fingerprints) to play notes when you play lead guitar.

This is something that should be avoided at all costs when playing chords, but when we're trying to learn guitar scales it's ok to adapt our fretting technique.

In fact, it's flat out beneficial!

Learn slowly and correctly to embed good muscle memory

When we learn guitar scales it's very important to learn slowly AND correctly. **You must resist the urge to play fast.** Playing slowly and correctly is the best way to embed muscle memory. Playing quickly leads to mistakes, frustration and twitchy muscle memory. That's not what we want.

Practice ascending and descending the scales, but also try doubling back on yourself in different amounts.

- For example: ascend two notes, then descend one, ascend two, then descend one (and so on).
- Then try ascending 3 and descending one.

These are useful ways to learn the scales rote, but of course let's not lose sight of the final aim here which is to develop a sense of musicality.

Nothing will improve your ability to learn guitar scales and play lead guitar more than jamming.

It is essential that you play the scales over MUSIC.

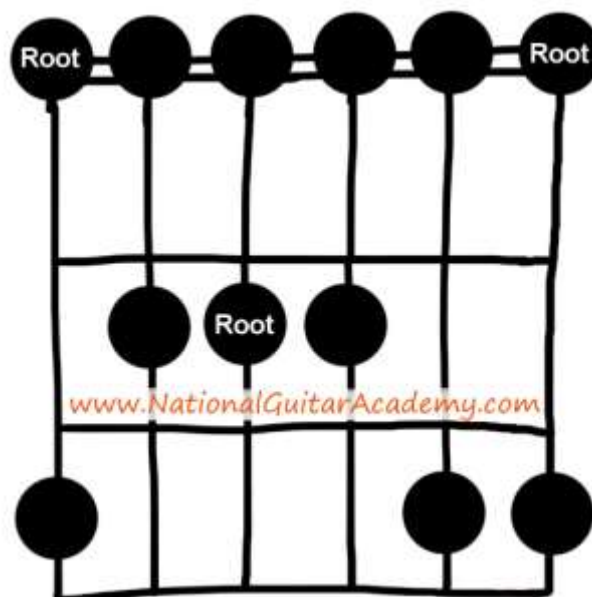
Don't become the classic bedroom guitarist. The type of people who simply learn guitar scales and patterns in **isolation**. No!

You need to develop a **feel** for these patterns. Play the scales over backing tracks (YouTube is filled with them) and reach out and connect with other musicians who live locally to you.

Playing with other musicians is transformative for your progress as a guitarist.

Jam exercise – Try this backing track

Hit play on the backing track below and play jam with some notes from the **E Minor Pentatonic Scale**:



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