

Guitar Scales Demystified

 zinginstruments.com/guitar-scales-demystified/

WARNING: This is serious beginner guitarists only. In this one article you have everything you need to learn ALL the basic guitar scales. Enjoy.

Scales get a pretty bad rap sometimes.

Tedious. Difficult. Impossible to remember. There are countless reasons why not to bother.

This article is here to change that negative perception and to demystify them for you. I want make them easy to understand so you can incorporate them into your playing.

Guitar scales are the foundation of [chords](#). They are like letters are to words. Think about the word 'house' for example. It's made up of 5 letters that when brought together in a certain way (in this case 'h' then 'o' then 'u' and so on) form the word 'house'.

Well music works in exactly the same way.

Let's take the 'C' chord as an example. Most beginner's start with basic [chords](#) when they learn the guitar.

They learn them without needing to know which guitar scale they come from (in the same way that we learn how to say words before we can spell them).

The 'C' chord is made up of musical notes and these notes belong to a musical scale. The 'musical alphabet' if you like.

And remember that chords and scales are two different aspects of the same thing: groupings of notes that sound good together. Chords are scales stacked up and played all at once. Scales are chords stretched out and played one note at a time. Whichever one you start with, you'll wind up studying the other.

Don't be scared of learning scales. Once you learn the basic building blocks all those scary sounding scales like the 'Mixolydian' or 'Dorian' scale are just the basic patterns plus or minus a note or two.

So let's quickly look at the benefits of learning scales...

7 Benefits Of Learning Scales

I know many guitarists who never bothered learning scales. They have played for years getting by without learning any. But here's the thing - underlying their playing is an insecurity that they can't explain what they're doing! Admirable as it may be to play from the heart, I think they're missing out in not learning guitar scales.

Here are some benefits:

1. Develops your understanding of music

Learning guitar scales improves your understanding of music in general. Once you learn scales you appreciate how notes go together, and therefore how [chords](#) are made, and ultimately how songs are structured.

2. Helps to train your ear

Learning scales helps your listening skills in general, helping you discern, among other things, the sound of major and minor scales.

3. Helps to understand the fretboard

I found it really hard to navigate the fretboard until I learnt scales. Once you've learn the basic scales you'll find it much easier to work out where all the notes are.

4. Easier to identify chords

There are many ways to play the same [chord](#) on the guitar. Learning guitar scales will make it much simpler to work out how to play any chord in any position.

5. Improves finger dexterity

From a pure technique point of view, playing scales are a great work out for your fingers. In fact a lot of [practice routines](#) include playing scales.

6. Helps you with writing songs

When it comes to [composing your own songs](#), some knowledge of scales is really useful, especially when you are working out chord structure and melodies. I find song ideas (especially melodies) often come from just practicing scales.

7. Helps you create guitar solos

Many famous [guitar solos](#) are a run of notes from a guitar scale with a few embellishments (pull off, hammer ons, etc) thrown in for good measure! A solid understanding of scales gives the soloist a great platform to work from.

Now let's turn our attention to the best guitar scales to learn for the beginner...

Which Are The Best Beginner Guitar Scales?

Beginners are often confused with which scale to learn first. It's true, there are many, many scales you could learn. The best way to learn guitar scales for beginners is to pick the following and learn them inside out, rather than going after all guitar scales to begin with.

It's simple, you should start with the following five, yes just five, scales:

- The minor pentatonic
- The major pentatonic
- The minor scale
- The major scale
- The blues scale

With these you have the foundation for playing pretty much any scale. Most scales are embellishments of these scales, with an added (or removed) note here or there.

Feeling better? Good, let's crack on:

THE FIVE SCALES YOU HAVE TO LEARN

The Pentatonic Scales (Major and Minor)

The foundation of a lot of blues and rock music, 'pentatonic' literally means 'five notes'.

The major and minor pentatonic guitar scales are the first scales I recommend to learn because they sound great and relatively easy to play.

The guys over at all-free-guitar-lessons.com agree that the pentatonic scales "are also extremely forgiving scales because you can almost hit any of the notes within the scale and it will sound pretty good over any relative chord or chord progression".

We like the sound of that!

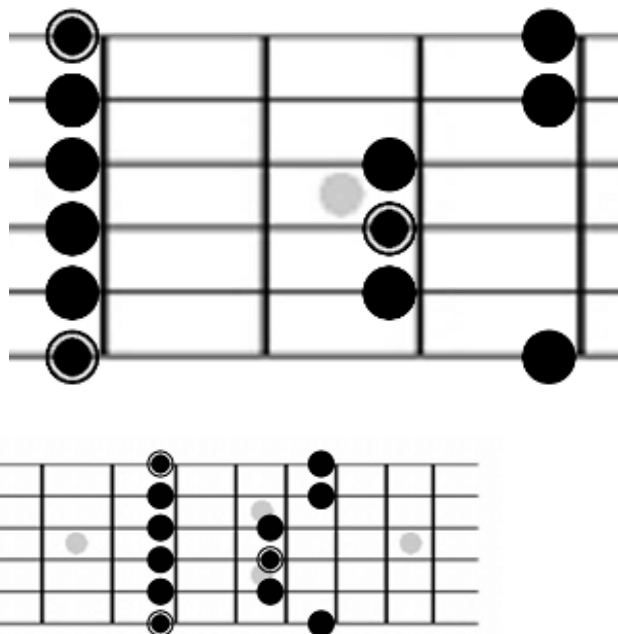
Ok let's learn them...

The Minor Pentatonic Scale

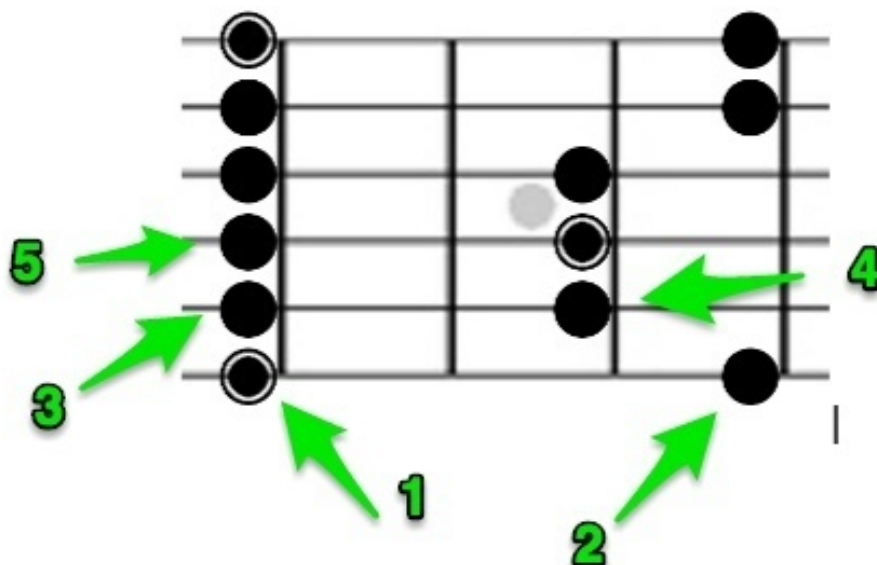
This is what the minor pentatonic scale looks like - very 'boxy' and quite symmetrical, making it one of the easiest scales to remember.

Each of the dots is a note on the fretboard. Where you see the circles round the dots, this is where you find the 'root' note. There are three root notes in the diagram below.

This scale can be moved up and down the fretboard to create pentatonic scales in other keys. In the example below you see it on the 10th fret, playing D minor pentatonic scale

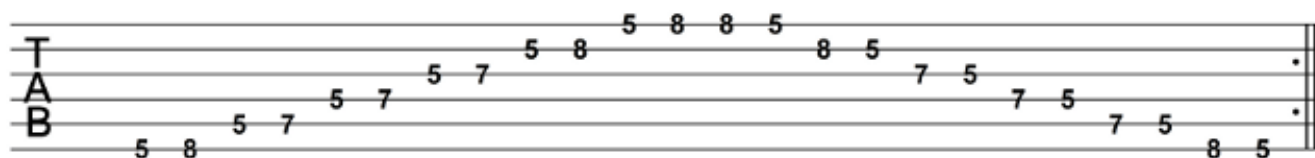


Ok, now let's look at where the five notes of the minor pentatonic scale are.



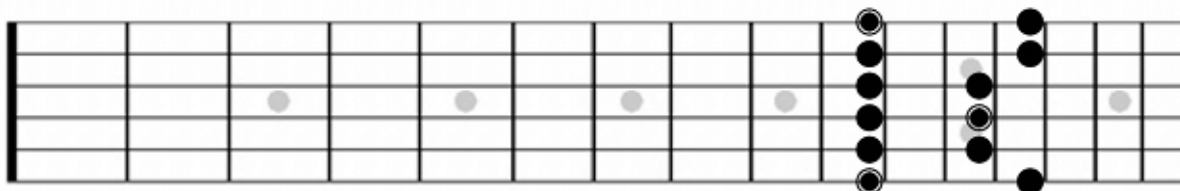
Now grab your guitar and try playing the five notes. To help you here is the guitar tab for the A minor pentatonic.

Notice you have ALL the notes in this guitar tab, not just the five I've mentioned above. I suggest you just focus on the first five to get started, then once you get those down try playing the rest.



Play the scale slowly up until it starts to feel comfortable. Don't rush it, it's better to play it cleanly (but correctly) than to play it fast (and make mistakes).

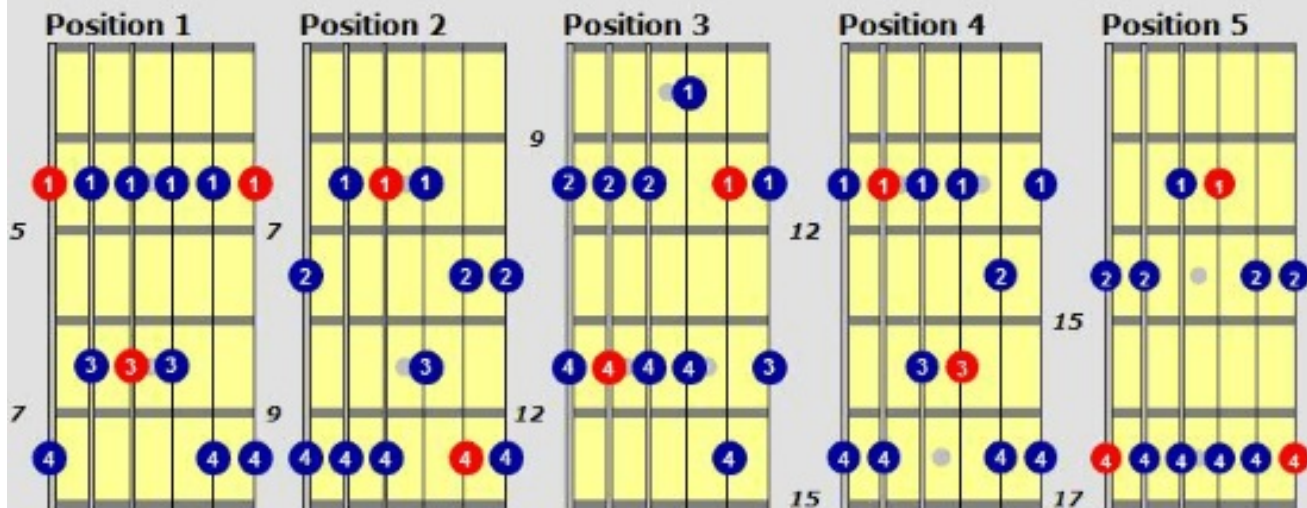
The good news is once you've cracked this position, you can play it in any key by just moving it up and down the fretboard. So if we want to play it in D for example, you just play it on the 10th fret below:



The above is just one position for playing the minor pentatonic scale.

There are five positions that you need to learn below (we've already covered position 1 above). Now learn the other four and practice them as part of your [guitar practice routine](#).

'A MINOR' PENTATONIC SCALE

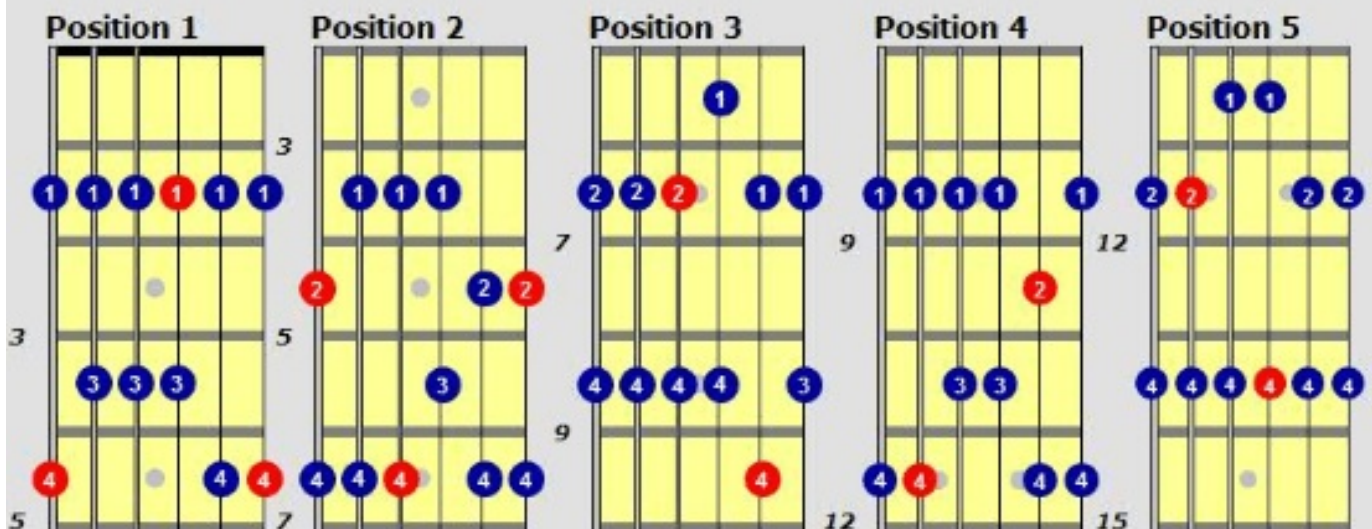


Now you've just got your head around the minor pentatonic scale and you're thinking "no, not another scale to learn".

Well, I've got some good news for you. To play the major pentatonic scale you just play the same scale as above but change the note you start and finish on! So you already know it, bingo!

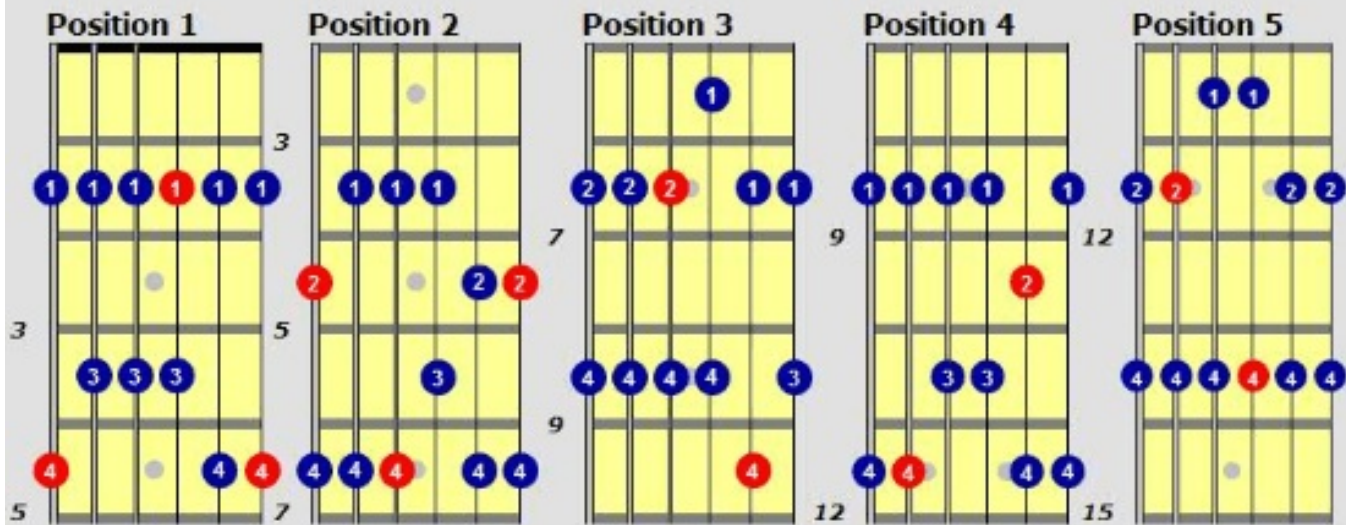
Take a look below, the red dots signify root notes. To play the A Major Pentatonic scale you need to start the scale from one red dot and finish on the next.

'A MAJOR' PENTATONIC SCALE

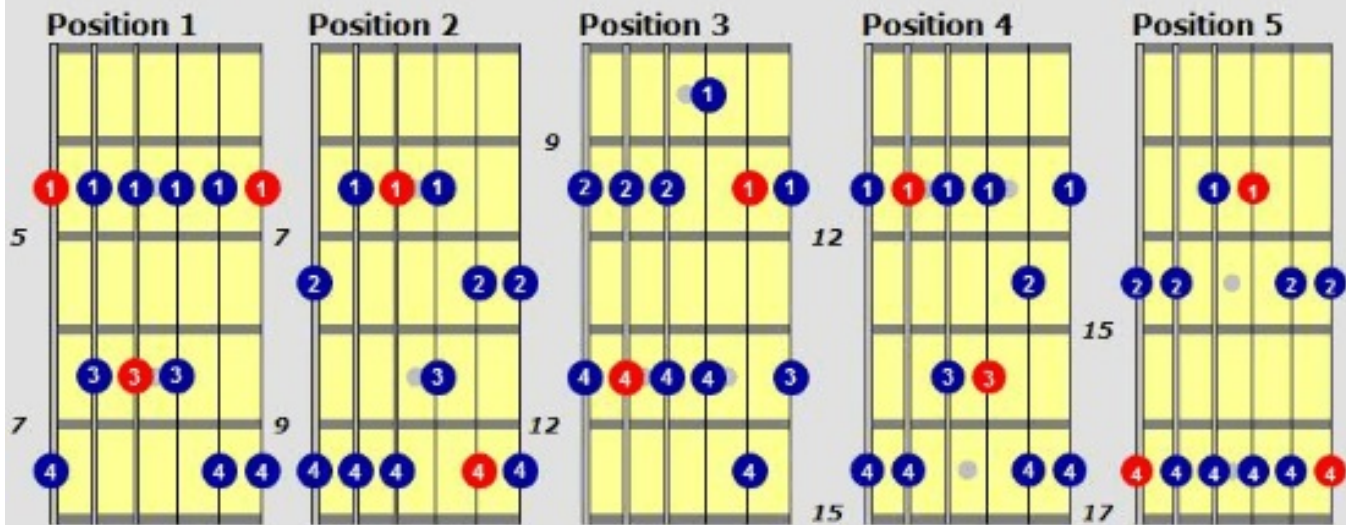


Below are the scales side by side. The patterns are EXACTLY the same, the only difference is the position of the red dots. To get the minor or the major pentatonic scale, just start from the respective red dots...

'A MAJOR' PENTATONIC SCALE



'A MINOR' PENTATONIC SCALE



The Minor Scale

Let's look at the minor scale now.

There are actually a few minor scales: the 'melodic minor', the 'harmonic minor' and the 'natural minor'. The one we'll look at here is 'the natural minor' as that's the commonly associated with the 'minor scale'.

The sound of all the minor scales are typically a bit sadder than the jubilant major sound.

In terms of structure, the minor scale is easy. Ok let's take a look...

minor scale



Image use thanks to discoverguitaronline.com

Further reading:

guitarhabits.com - 5 natural minor scale positions you must know

Justinguitar.com Demystify Minors

The Major Scale

Now you've understood the minor scale, the major scale is super easy.

In the same way that the pentatonic scale works (see above), once you've learnt the minor scale structure all you need to do switch the note you begin and end on, and voila you have the major scale!

Take a look at the scale chart below. Look at the first minor diagram, and notice the blue 'A' dots. That's where you start the minor scale from.

Now, to play the major scale you use exactly the same scale, but just start your root note from the 'C' dots. Same scale, just where you start and end it from are different.

Really Useful Pattern



This pattern is the minor scale (Aeolian mode)



Start on the 3rd note and its the relative major scale (Ionian mode)

The Blues Scale

The 'blues scale' is simply the minor pentatonic scale with an additional note thrown in, called the 'blue note'.

Ok let's take a look...

Here is the Blues scale in the first position. Look familiar? It should. It's exactly the same but notice the big difference - those B letters. They stand for 'blue note' and they're the additional note that I just mentioned.

Why are there three notes though when you said it's just one note?

Well spotted! It's actually the same note repeated three times! The blue note always appears between the 4th and 5th note (known as the 'flat 5' note).

Here is the blues scale in the 2nd position. Notice the 'B' (or Blues notes) again.

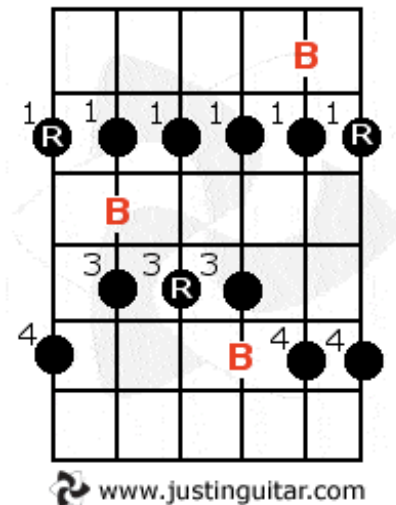
ADDITIONAL SCALES WORTH LEARNING

With the five scales we've already covered you're well on your way to learning guitar scales. Here are some more popular scales that are worth building into your repertoire.

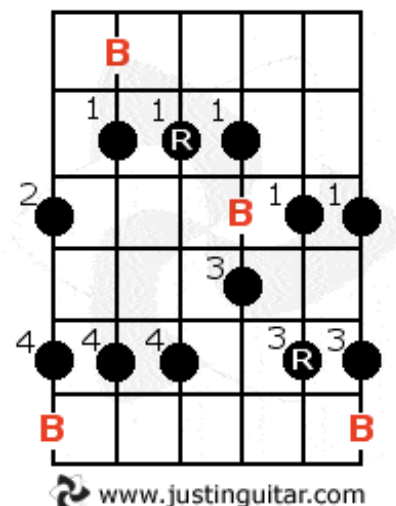
Next up is the chromatic scale. What on earth is that I hear you saying. Well the word chromatic actually means two (or more) notes played consecutively that are a half step (to you and me that's 1 fret) apart. You find what are called 'chromatic runs' in many popular solos. Chromatic scales are basically 12-note scales containing all of the possible notes between octaves.

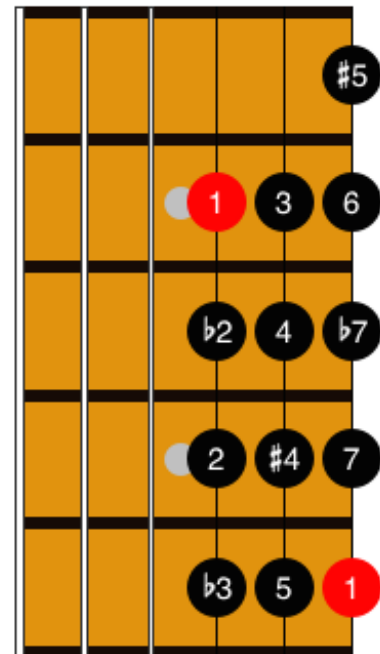
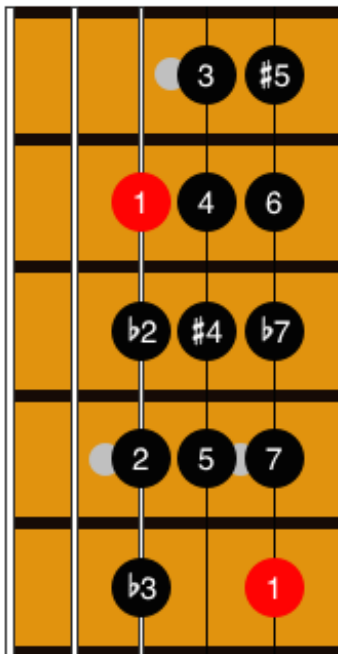
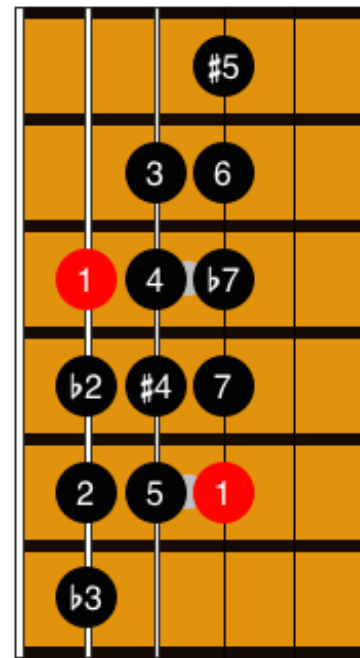
Here are four chromatic scales to get you started - these are called 'one-octave shapes' as they only cover one octave (an octave is a series of 8 notes). Notice the structure - each one covers four strings. Once you've learned these scales you can move on to [two-octave shapes](#).

Blues Scale P1



Blues Scale P2





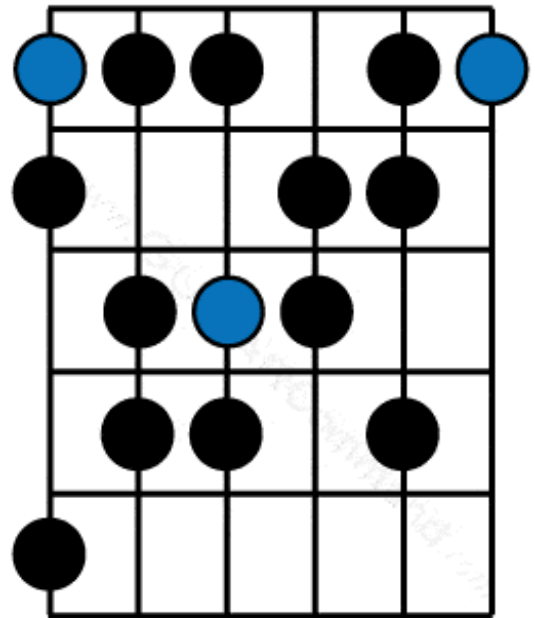
People often confuse classical guitar with spanish guitar styles, but they're actually quite different. Spanish guitar is a very unique sound and has a number of scales used predominantly in this style. A guitarist of any style should check out these scales to add some variation to their playing.

Let's take a look at the two primary choices, the Spanish Gypsy scale and the Phrygian modal scale.

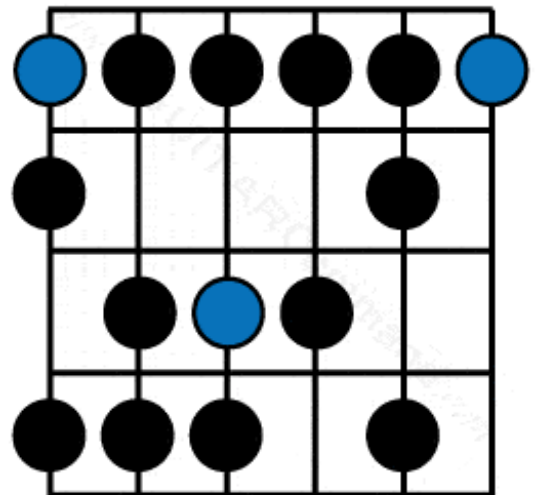
The Spanish Gypsy Scale has a distinct Eastern sound reflecting the Moorish influence on Spain and looks like this. You're going to love playing it, and it instantly evokes an exotic sound.

Another fantastic sounding, evocative scale is the 'Phrygian modal' scale and is often used to improvise when a Spanish sound is desired. Give it a try and see what you think

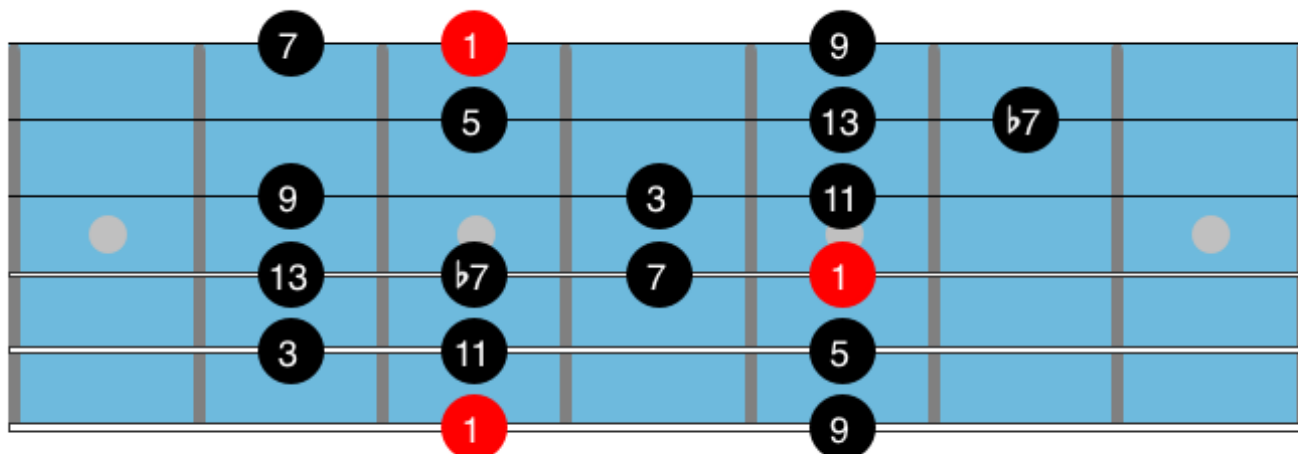
You can of course play any of the scales we've looked at in Jazz, but let's look at some guitar scales which are particularly popular in Jazz music. The dominant bebop scale is one such scale that any Jazz musician has under his or her belt. Let take a peek...



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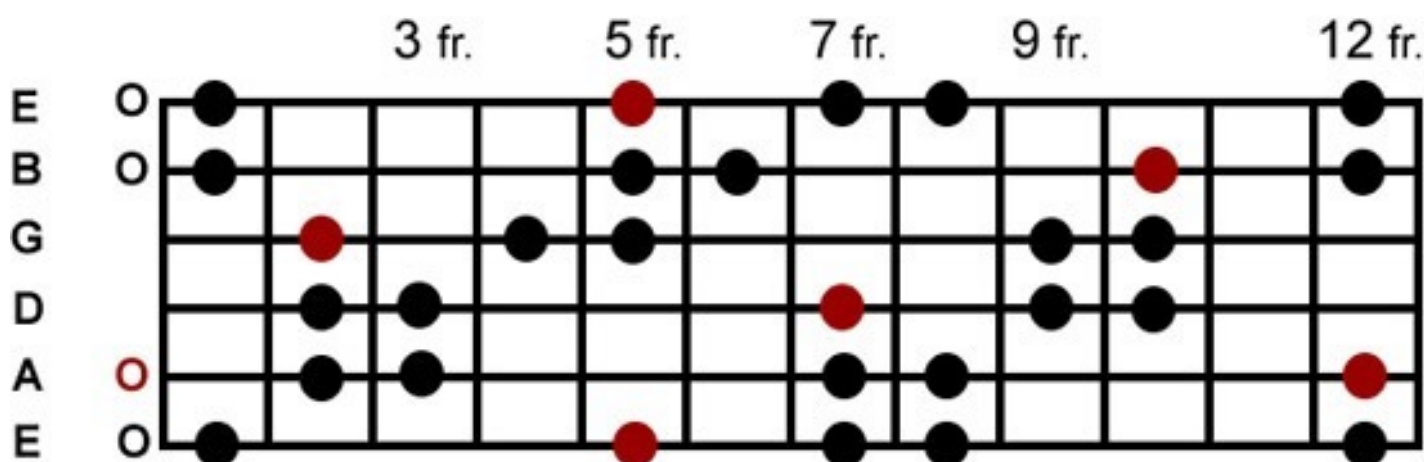


You'll notice immediately that it looks a lot like the major scale with the addition of the flattened 7th note.

We've looked at some of the most popular major and minor scales used in western music. Have we covered all the scales out there? Not a chance! Many exotic instruments don't conform to a fixed 12 note scale.

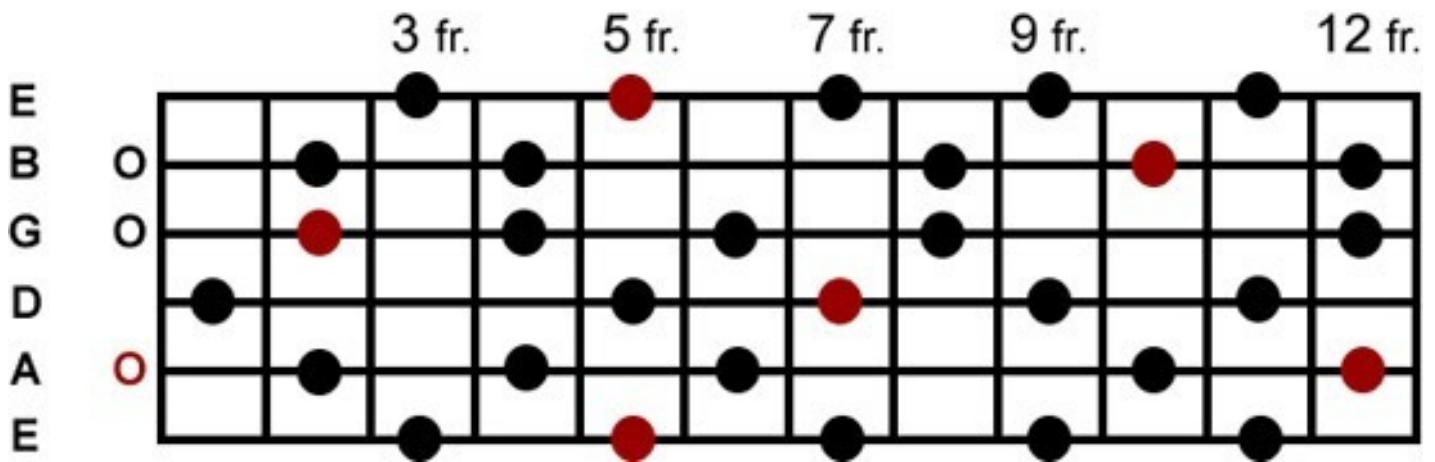
The Hirajoshi scale has a distinct exotic Japanese sound, here it is played in the key of A

Hirajoshi



The Prometheus scale has a Greek sound, again in the key of A.

Prometheus



Certain genres have a preference for which scales they use.

Classical guitar doesn't have its own scales per se, but classical guitarists do have a preference for the scales they play. You wouldn't expect to find many pentatonic scales in a classical piece. A guitarist of any genre should at least have an appreciation of the guitar scales that classical guitarists play.

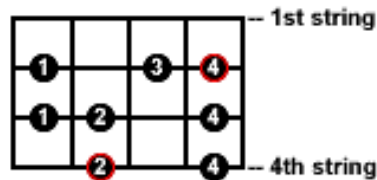
Classical guitarists often start with major scales, especially the E shape we looked at above. Check out this [great guide here](#) including some great tips on what to do with your strumming hand.

The country music genre has its own preference for guitar scales too. According to [learncountryguitar.net](#) the three main scales to learn are:

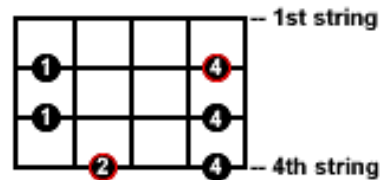
- The major pentatonic (with some chromatic tones thrown in)
- The minor pentatonic (which is the same as the major pentatonic just viewed from a different angle)
- The major scale

While we're talking about guitar scales, seems appropriate to quickly cover bass guitar scales and how they differ from guitar scales. The good news is once you've learned guitar scales, bass scales are pretty much the same (but on an over-sized fretboard with bigger strings!).

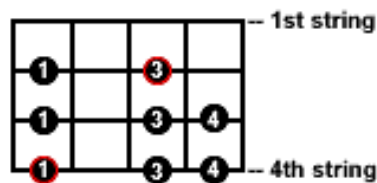
Major



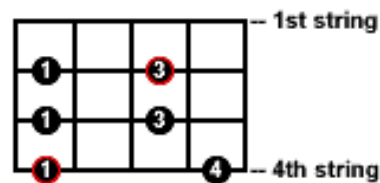
Major Pentatonic



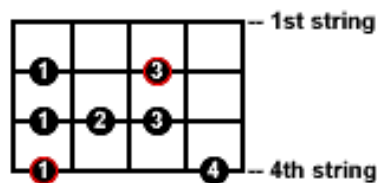
Minor



Minor Pentatonic



Blues



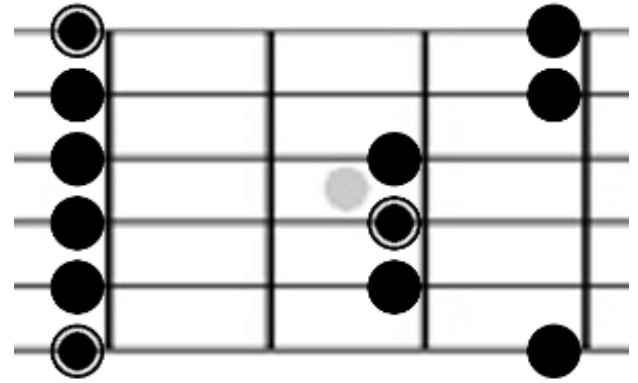
One of the reasons why scales have a reputation for being hard work is because people go about learning them in the wrong way. Learning how to play scales is super important, and will be the difference between consistently improving your playing or giving up on them at the first hurdle. Here are my top tips for learning guitar scales...

With any scales you have the root note, often abbreviated with an 'R' on scale diagrams. This is where you should start the scale. Remember that scale patterns often cover more than one octave, so you'll have more than one 'R' in any scale.

Let's take an example. Look at this guitar scale for A minor pentatonic again. You see there are three roots (the dots that are circled). You can start on any of these notes to play the A minor pentatonic. Playing from one circled dot to the next is what's called an 'octave'.

Beginners often learn one scale pattern and leave it there. So they'll learn the A minor pentatonic in the first position and think they know it. No, that's a big mistake. You need to learn all the patterns for every scale. So for the pentatonic you need to be able to play A minor in all five positions. It's more work, but ask any guitar teacher and they'll tell you the same: learn your scales in all positions.

"The above is analogous to starting to read a book, stopping after reading only one chapter, picking up another brand new book, reading only the first chapter and then moving on. It's obvious that by continuing to 'read' books in this fashion you will learn nothing." Source: Guitarnoise.com



Another beginner's trap is just to learn the scale going downwards, from lower to higher strings because that's how they appear in scale charts and tabs. To begin with, sure going from top to bottom is fine, but don't leave it there! Practice coming back up again. If you are proficient already with playing downwards, try ONLY practicing the upwards for a while.

Stay focused on one scale and only move on when you've mastered them.

The mind can wander when you [practice guitar](#) and before you realise you've playing another scale entirely. It's only natural. If you're struggling with a certain scale, it's much easier to move to something more familiar, or just to start belting out a song. Look, playing guitar is a lot of fun, and you don't want it to become a grind, but there are times when you need to knuckle down and grind it out.

That means choosing a scale, and playing the life out of it until you can play it in your sleep.

This way you're building what we call 'muscle memory'. Once it's in your muscles, you don't need to remember it anymore, it'll be just 'programmed in'.

A slightly more unorthodox way of learning a scale, but effective nonetheless is learning a scale on one single string. Using a single string illustrates clearly what a scale is, how it works, and even how it's constructed

"Most musicians are comfortable with playing scales vertically (from the low E string to the high E string). Even though this is an important foundation of all playing of scales on guitar, it is equally important to learn how the scales are laid out on each of the 6 strings of the guitar from the first fret to the last fret (by playing side to side across the guitar neck). Training in this way will help to picture scale shapes in every position of the guitar more easily, even if you are starting to play a phrase from a string other than the 6th string."

Find a song you really like. Then figure out what key it's in and learn the scale so you can use then expand and improvise. More importantly that scale now has 'context' and it will make a whole lot more sense to you and you'll be able to apply it elsewhere.

In addition to the points I made in the how to learn scales section, you're going to need some decent guitar scale exercises. A good guitar scale exercise is a drill that helps you learn the scale. So of course you can play the scale from top to bottom and back up again, but in addition there are some great techniques to fast-track the learning. Here are some of my [favourite 'guitar scale hacks' that I've come across](#)

There are tons of sites with guitar scales charts, but so many of them are terrible. I've hand selected some of the best for you in the [Resources](#) section.

We've discussed the benefits of learning guitar scales, we've looked at the main guitar scales used by 99% of the

guitarists out there, and also covered a load of top tips around how to learn scales. Ok, deep breath. That was intense!

Well I hope I've demystified scales for you and you're now totally into playing them and see them in a completely different light. Not so bad after all!

Drop me a line below, would love to hear how you're getting on....