

The Nashville Number System

Intermediate Acoustic Course

Step 1 – The Major Scale Notes

An easy way to get started and understand the major scale is to hear it. A great way to hear it is to play it on one string.

We're starting on the 3rd fret of the A string. This is called C, or the key of C. Here's how it looks in TAB...

Musical notation for the C major scale on the A string, starting at the 3rd fret. The staff shows a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notes are C4 (3rd fret), D4 (5th fret), E4 (7th fret), F4 (8th fret), G4 (10th fret), A4 (12th fret), B4 (14th fret), and C5 (15th fret). The tablature below shows the fret numbers: 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15.

Each one of those numbers on the line is a note. Here's the notes we're playing:

Musical notation for the C major scale on the A string, starting at the 3rd fret. The notes are labeled with their letter names: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. The staff shows a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tablature below shows the fret numbers: 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15.

So the C major scale is the notes of **C D E F G A B C**

Step 2 – The Major Scale Formula

Now we know the major scale let's look at the distance travelled between each fret. This gives us the Major Scale Formula. Every scale has a formula.

When we travel up one fret we call this a **Half** (or half tone).

When we travel up two frets we call this a **Whole** (or whole tone)

Musical notation for the C major scale on the A string, starting at the 3rd fret. The intervals between notes are labeled: Home (3rd fret), W (5th fret), W (7th fret), H (8th fret), W (10th fret), W (12th fret), W (14th fret), H (15th fret). The staff shows a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tablature below shows the fret numbers: 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15.

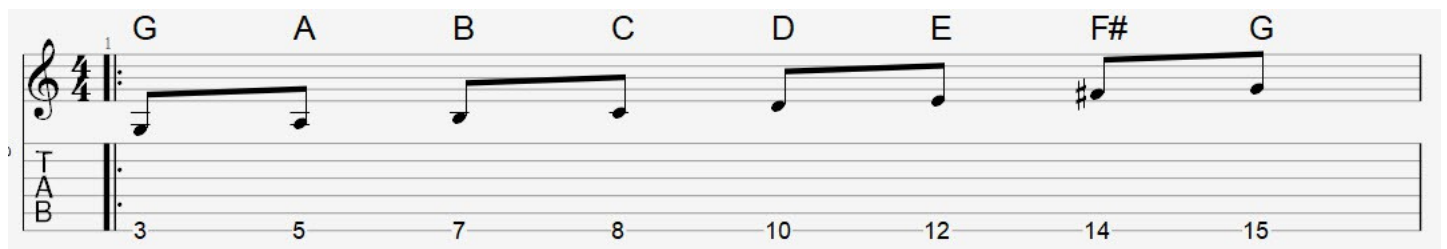
So the Major Scale formula is **W – W – H – W – W – W – H**

Step 3 – Applying The Formula To A New Key

Now we know the major scale formula and the movements involved we can play the major scale in any of the 12 keys in music.

All we have to do is start with our home (or key) and move up with the formula we've learnt.

Let's look at the key of G (3rd fret on the thickest string)



The image shows a musical staff in 4/4 time with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notes of the G major scale are written as quarter notes: G (3rd fret), A (5th fret), B (7th fret), C (8th fret), D (10th fret), E (12th fret), F# (14th fret), and G (15th fret). Below the staff is a guitar tablature (TAB) with six lines. The fret numbers 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, and 15 are written under the corresponding frets on the bottom string.

You can see it's exactly the same journey up the frets but it gives us different notes.

If you like start at a random string below fret 5 and apply that formula. It will sound the same everytime. You can now play the major scale in any key and you know it's formula.

Step 4 – Moving Into Nashville – Each Movement Has A Number

The Nashville system uses numbers for each movement up the major scale. Here's what it looks like back in the key of C.



The image shows a musical staff in 4/4 time with a treble clef and a key signature of no sharps or flats. The notes of the C major scale are written as quarter notes: C (3rd fret), D (5th fret), E (7th fret), F (8th fret), G (10th fret), A (12th fret), B (14th fret), and C (15th fret). Above the staff, the numbers 1 through 8 are placed above each note. Below the staff is a guitar tablature (TAB) with six lines. The fret numbers 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, and 15 are written under the corresponding frets on the bottom string.

So if I said we're in the key of C and I want you to move to number 2. You'd know this was a whole step (2 frets) and you'd know we're moving to D.

Now this does presume you know the notes. But one day I'd like you to know all the notes on the guitar strings without too much effort.

So whatever key we're in each step up the major scale has a number. And because you know the major scale formula you know how to get to that number.

Step 5 – All That Movement Isn't Practical In The Real World

Playing the major scale on one string is great to learn how it sounds and the formula. However it's a lot of fret movement. We can actually play the major scale without all that movement on 3 strings. Here's how...

Diagram illustrating the "boxed pattern" for the C major scale on the E and A strings. The scale is shown in 4/4 time, with notes C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. The fret numbers for the strings T, A, and B are 3, 5, 2, 3, 5, 2, 4, 5 respectively.

This is called a “boxed pattern” and once you learn the major scale this way you can play it in any key starting on the E and A strings. This is a very useful pattern to learn as it helps us find the relevant notes for each movement of the scale.

Step 6 – Each Number In Nashville Has A Chord Associated

The final step is understanding that each number in the Nashville system not only has a note associated with it but also a chord.

The system is as follows:

1 = Major 2 = Minor 3 = Minor 4 = Major 5 = Major 6 = Minor 7 = Diminished 8 = Major

Here's how it looks going back to our C major scale on one string with the notes and the chords written above.

Diagram illustrating the Nashville system for the C major scale on the E and A strings. The scale is shown in 4/4 time, with notes C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. The fret numbers for the strings T, A, and B are 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15 respectively. The chords associated with each note are C, Dm, Em, F, G, Am, Bdim, C.

If I asked you to play number 1 in the key of C you would play a C major

If I asked you to play number 2 in the key of C you would play a D minor.

And we can do this with any key... Here's the key of G with the chords above.

Diagram illustrating the Nashville system for the G major scale on the E and A strings. The scale is shown in 4/4 time, with notes G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G. The fret numbers for the strings T, A, and B are 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15 respectively. The chords associated with each note are G, Am, Bm, C, D, Em, F#dim, G.