

Unlock Your Music

A HANDY GUIDE TO KEY SIGNATURES

■ It is essential to understand key signatures in order to read music properly; otherwise, you could end up playing a lot of incorrect notes! That's because, in addition to a note's placement on the staff, the key signature is a vital step to identifying the note.

For something so important, the key signature can be easy to miss at first glance. But take a closer look, and you'll notice one or more small symbols on the staff at the very beginning of your music, after the clef. These symbols are either sharps (#) or flats (b). (See examples below.) Alternatively, if you do not find any sharps or flats, this means the key signature is "empty" and every note should be natural.

A major (F# minor)



E♭ major (C minor)



A sharp raises the pitch of the note by a half-step, while a flat lowers the pitch of the note by a half-step. Simply look at the key signature and determine which line or space of the staff each sharp or flat symbol is placed on. The corresponding note will be played a half-step higher or lower accordingly, each time it occurs in the music. Any notes not indicated in the key signature are assumed to be natural.

Sometimes the key signature will change during the course of the piece. In this case, you will see a double bar line followed by a new set of sharps or flats. You also may see naturals (♮) that cancel out sharps or flats from the previous key signature. If you find any key signature changes in your music, it's a good idea to circle them with a pencil so that you don't forget to make the switch!

Each key signature corresponds to two possible keys, one major and one minor. For example, a key signature with two sharps may either indicate the key of D major or B minor. That is because both the D major scale and B minor scale use two sharps (F# and C#).

Empty Key Signature

Sharps and Flats	Key
None	C major or A minor

Sharp Key Signatures

Number of Sharps	Sharp Notes	Key
One	F	G major or E minor
Two	F, C	D major or B minor
Three	F, C, G	A major or F# minor
Four	F, C, G, D	E major or C# minor
Five	F, C, G, D, A	B major or G# minor
Six	F, C, G, D, A, E	F# major or D# minor
Seven	F, C, G, D, A, E, B	C# major or A# minor

Flat Key Signatures

Number of Flats	Flat Notes	Key
One	B	F major or D minor
Two	B, E	B♭ major or G minor
Three	B, E, A	E♭ major or C minor
Four	B, E, A, D	A♭ major or F minor
Five	B, E, A, D, G	D♭ major or B♭ minor
Six	B, E, A, D, G, C	G♭ major or E♭ minor
Seven	B, E, A, D, G, C, F	C♭ major or A♭ minor

A NOTE ABOUT ACCIDENTALS: Occasionally, you will find sharp, flat, and natural signs within the music, right next to individual notes. These are called "accidentals," and they override what is indicated in the key signature. For example, even if C# is indicated in the key signature, a natural sign next to a C in the music tells you to play that particular note, and any other C's in that same measure, natural rather than sharp.

