

Modes of the Major Scale

A “mode” of a scale basically means that you play the scale starting on each note in the scale.

For example, take the C major Scale. It consists of the notes C D E F G A B. To create the modes for the scale, we are going to play these same notes from each note in the scale.

Mode 1	Ionian	plays the scale from C to C.
Mode 2	Dorian	plays the scale from D to D.
Mode 3	Phrygian	plays the scale scale from E to E.
Mode 4	Lydian	plays the scale from F to F.
Mode 5	Mixolydian	plays the scale from G to G.
Mode 6	Aeolian	plays the scale from A to A.
Mode 7	Locrian	plays the scale from B to B.

The question that most commonly arises is “if you are playing the same notes, why does it matter what you call it?” The answer to this question is, “because the interval pattern is different for each mode, which creates a unique sound for each mode.”

That arises second question, “what is an interval?” An interval is simply the distance between 2 notes. The most common intervals you will see are a whole step (2 frets on the guitar) and a half step (1 fret on the guitar).

The major scale interval pattern is Whole, Whole, Half, Whole, Whole, Whole, Half. This pattern is what makes the major scale have its distinctive sound as stated earlier.

So with that knowledge,

C-D is a whole step	D-E is a whole step	E-F is a half step
F-G is a whole step	G-A is a whole step	A-B is a whole step
B-C is a half step		

The next interval pattern we need to understand is the interval of each note from the Root note, (in this case from C for a major scale).

C-D is a major second (or a whole step) - Called a 9th if the D is an octave higher

C-E is a major third (or 2 whole steps) - Called a 10th if the E is an octave higher

C-F is a perfect fourth (or 2 whole steps + a half step) - Called a 11th if the F is an octave higher

C-G is a perfect fifth (or 3 whole steps + a half step) - Called a 12th if the G is an octave higher

C-A is a major 6th (or 4 whole steps + a half step) - Called a 13th if the A is an octave higher

C-B is a major 7th (or 5 whole steps + a half step) - Called a 14th if the B is an octave higher

C-C a register higher is an octave (or 6 whole steps) - Or multiple octaves higher/lower if more than one register apart.

In the case of minor scales:

C-Eb is a minor third (or a whole step + a half step) - also called flat 3 (b3)

C-Ab is a minor sixth (or 4 whole steps) - also called flat 6 (b6)

C-Bb is a minor seventh (or 5 whole steps) - also called flat 7 (b7)

Now that we understand all that, we can begin to analyze each mode’s interval pattern to better understand how each mode functions and why it sounds the way it does. To most easily do this, I recommend learning the 6 fingerings we used for the major scale itself and altering them to fit the mode you what.

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Here is an example of the 2/5 fingerings for each mode in 2 octaves starting on a C root note. The blue circles represent the notes that are different in comparison with the normal major scale fingering. Thinking of each mode as an individual scale will make playing the mode more accessible since you will no longer need to think of what the parent major scale is in order to find the mode you need. You simply just apply the fingerings off of the root note you need to start on.

1. Ionian - Natural Major Scale - works over any normal major chord, and is the scale for normal major key centers.

Ionian (Major)

The diagram shows fingerings for two octaves of the Ionian (Major) scale starting on C. The notes are C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. The fingerings are: C (4), D (6), E (3), F (7), G (5), A (2), B (4), C (R), D (6), E (3), F (7), G (5), A (2), B (4), C (R). The musical notation shows the scale in treble clef with notes C through C and a corresponding bass line with fingerings for Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B) staves.

2. Dorian - a minor scale that is most commonly used in jazz - works over any normal minor chord as long as 6th scale degree isn't specified.

Dorian - b3, b7

The diagram shows fingerings for two octaves of the Dorian - b3, b7 scale starting on C. The notes are C, D, Eb, F, G, A, Bb, C, D, Eb, F, G, A, Bb, C. The fingerings are: C (4), D (6), Eb (3), F (7), G (5), A (2), Bb (4), C (R), D (6), Eb (3), F (7), G (5), A (2), Bb (4), C (R). The musical notation shows the scale in treble clef with notes C through C and a corresponding bass line with fingerings for Treble (T), Alto (A), and Bass (B) staves.

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3. Phrygian - Like the Natural Minor Scale, however also featuring a flat 2 or 9 - Not a commonly used sound, but is useful for certain situations or chord progressions that feature a minor chord followed by a major chord a half step higher.

Phrygian - b2, b3, b6, b7

Diagram illustrating the Phrygian mode on a guitar fretboard. The scale is shown across frets 1-7. Fingerings are indicated by blue circles, and root positions are marked with 'R'. The corresponding musical notation shows the scale in treble clef, with notes: C, Db, Eb, F, G, Ab, Bb, C. Below the staff are TAB lines for guitar with fret numbers: 3, 4, 1, 3, 5, 1, 3, 5, 2, 4, 1, 3, 4, 6, 8.

4. Lydian - Like the Natural Major Scale, however features a sharp 4 or 11 - Works over any normal major chord with a #4 or #11 specified.

Lydian - #4

Diagram illustrating the Lydian mode on a guitar fretboard. The scale is shown across frets 1-7. Fingerings are indicated by blue circles, and root positions are marked with 'R'. The corresponding musical notation shows the scale in treble clef, with notes: C, D, E, F#, G, A, B, C. Below the staff are TAB lines for guitar with fret numbers: 3, 5, 2, 4, 5, 2, 4, 5, 3, 5, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8.

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5. Mixolydian - The go to Dominant 7th scale! This is heavily used in blues and jazz, but also in most Western Music you will hear over the 5 chord in a major key center.

Mixolydian (Dominant) - b7

C D E F G A B \flat C D E F G A B \flat C

T
A
B 3 5 2 3 5 2 3 5 3 5 1 3 5 6 8

6. Aeolian - Natural Minor Scale - more commonly used in rock/pop/classical - works over any minor chord with the 6th scale degree not specified, and is the scale for normal minor key centers.

Aeolian (Minor) - b3, b6, b7

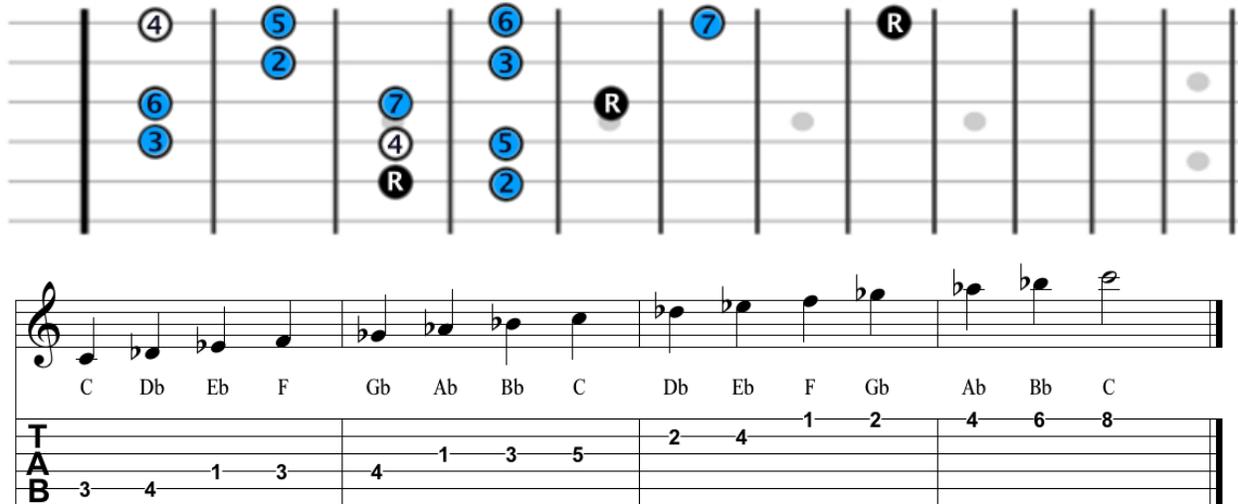
C D Eb F G Ab B \flat C D Eb F G Ab B \flat C

T
A
B 3 5 1 3 5 2 3 5 3 4 1 3 4 6 8

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7. Locrian - Like the Phrygian Scale, but also features the flat 5th. Because of this, it is most commonly used in jazz music over half diminished chords (m7b5). Again, not commonly used outside of jazz.

Locrian - b2, b3, b5, b6, b7



The diagram illustrates the Locrian mode on a guitar fretboard. The notes are C, Db, Eb, F, Gb, Ab, Bb, and C. Fingerings are indicated by numbers in circles: 4 for C, 5 for Db, 2 for Eb, 6 for F, 7 for Gb, 4 for Ab, 3 for Bb, and 2 for C. The root note C is marked with 'R'. The musical notation shows the scale in treble clef with notes C, Db, Eb, F, Gb, Ab, Bb, C. Below the notation are guitar tablature lines for Treble (T), Middle (A), and Bass (B) strings with fingerings: T (1-2, 4-6, 8), A (3-4, 1-3, 5), B (3-4, 1-3, 5).

Again, be sure to apply each of these modes over all 6 fingerings that we used for the major scale to get the maximum amount of fretboard coverage for each scale you'd like to use. I like to think of each of these scales as their own unique sound, so when you are hunting for a specific sound, you can apply the mode that matches the sound you are going for. These fingerings are also completely movable to any position on the fretboard. So find the root note you need, and apply the fingerings!

Try to learn them all in every key and in multiple spots on the fretboard!