

How to Place the Scales

Step 1: Working Out The Key of the Song

There are a few ways to do this. We will look at three of the easier methods.

(i) Ask!

If you're playing with other musicians, ask them what key they're in.
Proceed to Step 2.

(ii) By Ear:

If you're not with other musicians (e.g. jamming to a CD), don't know what chords are being played (e.g. the person accompanying you is on piano) or need to work out the key on the fly (e.g. impromptu playing at a BBQ) then doing it by ear may be the best way.

Simply play the notes on the top string from open up to the 11th fret and listen for a note that seems to fit no matter what chord is being played.

Next go through the full Major and Minor Scale shape starting with your first finger on the 'good sounding' note (your in the Minor position) and listen for any notes that are obviously disharmonious to the key... if you find any, that placing is wrong. Next place your little finger on the 'good sounding' note and try the full scale there (your in the Major position)... if you find any off notes then that placing is wrong as well. Keep trying 'good notes' until you find a position that fits.

The 'good note' that eventually fits is the root of the key... now you just have to listen to the music to see if its 'sad' or 'melancholy' in which case the key is Minor, or 'happy' and 'bright' in which case it's Major. So now you know the key... for example, if the root note is on the 5th fret then it's A, and if the music is happy and bright then it's Major. Your key is *A Major*.

Proceed to Step 3.

(iii) By finding the chord that 'resolves' the song:

One chord will 'resolve' a piece of music. 'Resolve' simply means that it will emotionally complete the piece... make it feel finished.

This chord will tell you the key of the song because it will have the same name! For example, if the chord that resolves a song is A (or, given its full name, *A Major*) then the key of the song is *A Major*!

Equally, if the chord that resolves the song is E Minor... the key is E Minor! How easy is that?

To make it even easier, 99% of songs use the chord that resolves the song as the first chord of either the Verse, or the chorus... or sometimes both. So there's a massive clue.

All you need to do is play the last few chords of the song and then try a chord to finish, do this with a few different chords and you'll be able to tell which one resolves the music.

Warning: Don't assume that the chord the artist finishes the song with is the one that resolves it... some artists like to leave a song feeling 'unfinished'.

Proceed to Step 2.

Step 2: Finding the Note of the Key on the Top String

If in step 1 you used method (i) or (iii) then you know the key of your song.
Take the note out of the key name (e.g. A# from A# Minor, G from G Major)
and find the note on the top string.
Proceed to step 3.

Step 3: Deciding Which Scale to Use and then Placing it Correctly

Minor Keys:

Play in the full Minor Scale or the Minor Pentatonic (5 notes from the full Minor Scale). You can also add the Blue Notes (of the Blues Scale) for effect.

Place your first finger on the note of the key on the top string and go for your life!

Major Keys:

You have a choice between a sweet sounding, Major solo or an edgy Blues solo.

If the song you're playing over is rock, blues or anything with that kind of flavour, you can use the Blues Scale... but... you could also use the Major Scale... what sound are *you* after?

If the song is almost anything else (pop, country, ballad etc) then play in the Major Scale.

If you've chosen the Blues Scale then place your first finger on the note of the key on the top string and play using the Blues Scale shape... you're off!

If you need the Major Scale then place your little finger on the note of the key and use either the full Major Scale or the Major Pentatonic to charm the birds from the trees!

Note: Even when in the Major Scale, you can still use the Blue Notes (of the Blues Scale) to add something extra... bending to a Blue Note at the right moment can be very effective.

Happy improvising!