

Key Signatures



Read the signature. Apply its sharps or flats. Play the motif.

What is a key signature?

A key signature is the group of **sharps (#) or flats (b)** at the beginning of a staff. It tells you which letter names are normally raised or lowered by a semitone. Its alterations apply to those notes **in every octave**, until the signature changes or a local accidental overrides them.

The examples in this note use **major keys**. Each signature also belongs to a relative minor key, so the signature alone does not prove whether music is major or minor.

Where it appears

At the start of a piece, the order is **clef → key signature → time signature → notes**. Each sharp or flat occupies the correct staff position for its letter name in that clef. The time signature controls rhythm; the key signature controls pitch alterations.

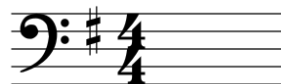
The same G-major signature in four clefs

Each staff below has one sharp: **F#**. Its vertical position changes with the clef, but it still sharpens every F. The diagrams include 4/4 to show the correct order.

Treble clef



Bass clef



Alto clef



Tenor clef



The fixed order of sharps and flats

Sharps: F# C# G# D# A# E# B#

Flats: Bb Eb Ab Db Gb Cb Fb

Local accidentals: a sharp, flat or natural written beside a note overrides the signature for that pitch in the same octave through the rest of the bar. At the next bar, the key signature applies again.

Reading tip: do not add a sharp or flat beside every affected note. The key signature already supplies it. C4 means middle C; numbers identify octaves.

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C major

No sharps or flats. All notes are natural.

Two-bar motif: Flute | Treble clef | 4/4



Sounding pitches: C4 D4 E4 F4 | G4 E4 C4

Relative minor: A minor

G major

One sharp: F#. Every F is played as F#, in any octave.

Two-bar motif: Flute | Treble clef | 4/4



Sounding pitches: G4 A4 B4 C5 | D5 F#5 G4

Relative minor: E minor

E major

Four sharps: F#, C#, G#, D#. These four letter names are sharpened in every octave.

Two-bar motif: Flute | Treble clef | 4/4



Sounding pitches: E4 F#4 G#4 A4 | B4 D#5 E5

Relative minor: C# minor

Rhythm in every motif: bar 1 = four quarter notes (4 beats); bar 2 = two quarter notes and one half note (1 + 1 + 2 = 4 beats). Read the listed pitches with the key signature applied.

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F# major

Six sharps: F#, C#, G#, D#, A#, E#. B is the only natural letter name in this key. E# sounds like F natural on a piano.

Two-bar motif: Flute | Treble clef | 4/4



Sounding pitches: F#4 G#4 A#4 B4 | C#5 E#5 F#5

Relative minor: D# minor

Bb major

Two flats: Bb, Eb. Every B and E is flattened, in any octave.

Two-bar motif: Cello | Bass clef | 4/4



Sounding pitches: Bb2 C3 D3 Eb3 | F3 D3 Bb2

Relative minor: G minor

Eb major

Three flats: Bb, Eb, Ab. Every B, E and A is flattened, in any octave.

Two-bar motif: Viola | Alto clef | 4/4



Sounding pitches: Eb4 F4 G4 Ab4 | Bb4 G4 Eb4

Relative minor: C minor

Rhythm in every motif: bar 1 = four quarter notes (4 beats); bar 2 = two quarter notes and one half note (1 + 1 + 2 = 4 beats). Read the listed pitches with the key signature applied.