This lesson assumes that you are using a ukulele tuned to the notes G, C, E and A.

Notes

There are only 12 musical notes. At least there are only 12 note names, which repeat again and again as the notes go higher in pitch. For example, play the open third string, the lowest note on your ukulele.

This isn’t the only C. If you play the first string at the third fret, that’s another C, higher than the first. Listen to them, they definitely sound similar don’t they?

If you play the low C and then a different note, like this one, which happens to be called D, they don’t sound at all similar.

If you play a low D and then a high D, they do sound similar.

That’s why we only need 12 note names, because those 12 notes repeat as you get higher. So we’ve already seen that some of our note names come from letters of the alphabet. They go from A to G.

The first string is tuned to A. B is played at the second fret. So what about the first fret? Well, that note has two names. It’s called A sharp, and it’s also called B flat. The word sharp in music means “higher than”, and is written with a hashtag symbol (#). The note at the first fret on the first string sounds slightly higher in pitch that the A at the open first string, so that’s why it is called A sharp (A#). That same note also sounds slightly lower in pitch than B at the second fret. In music, we use the word flat, which means “lower than”. We use a lower-case b as a symbol for flat. So A sharp is also called B flat.
Here’s a sequence of notes on the first string, but only the notes named after letters of the alphabet – skipping the sharps and flats. We say that the A at the twelfth fret is one octave higher than the open A. Octave comes from the Latin word for eight. Count the notes (ignoring the sharps and flats) from low A to high A, and you get the number 8.

Can you see that some of these notes are two frets apart, while other are one fret apart? We already know that B is two frets higher than A, because A#/Bb is between them. But look at this – C is one fret higher than B. That means that there is no such note as B# or Cb. Also, The note E at the seventh fret goes straight to F at the eighth fret. Once again, there is no E# or Fb.

We can see this a lot more clearly on the piano keyboard. The white keys are the notes named after letters of the alphabet, from A to G. The black keys are the sharps and flats. Notice the gap in the black keys between B and C, and also the gap in the black keys between E and F. This gives the piano keyboard a distinctive pattern of a group of two black keys followed by a group of three black keys, and that pattern repeats up and down the octaves.

You might have heard the terms semitone and tone. These are used to describe the difference in pitch between notes. If we take any note as our starting note, then the next note up is one semitone higher than the first note. On the ukulele, this is easy to demonstrate, as you can move up a semitone simply by moving up one fret. Similarly, you can move down a semitone, by moving down one fret. If you move up or down two notes, or two frets on the ukulele, then we say that the second note is a tone higher or lower than the first note. Obviously, a tone is equal to two semitones.
Scales

A scale is quite simply a sequence of musical notes, which rises in pitch. A scale can start on any of our twelve musical notes. By far the most popular scale is the **Major Scale**. Most of our tunes come from this scale. If we start a major scale on the note C, then we call it the C major scale. It so happens that when we play a C major scale, there are no sharps or flats. The note are C – D – E – F – G – A – B and another C. If we were to play these notes on the piano, then we’d only need to play the white keys.

What sets a scale apart from any different kind of scale, is the gaps in between the notes. We measure these gaps in tones and semitones. The gaps between the notes of a major scale go like **this tone tone semitone, tone tone tone semitone**. We can prove this with our C major scale. We start by playing C. A tone above C gives us D. Then another tone above D gives us E. A semitone above E is F. A tone above F is G. A tone above G is A. A tone above A is B. Finally, a semitone above B is C.

So that sequence gives us the major scale formula. To make it easier to remember, many people say **two tones semitone, three tones semitone**.

If we apply this formula to D, then we get the D major scale. We start on D. Then a tone above D is E. A tone above E is F# (remember the gap in the black keys, there is no E# between E and F). A semitone above F# is G. A tone above G is A, a tone above A is B, a tone above B is C# (there’s another of those gaps in the sharps and flat there between B and C). Finally a semitone above C# is D, an octave above the D that we started on. So the notes of the D major scale are D – E – F# - G – A – B – C# and D.
There’s another kind of scale that’s closely related to the major scale. We call it the **Natural Minor Scale**. All 12 major scales actually have a natural minor scale related to it. We call this the relative minor. To find the relative minor of any major scale, simply find the sixth note. For example the sixth note of the C major scale is A. If we play the exact same notes as the C major scale, but starting on A (remembering not to play any of the sharps or flats), then we get the A natural minor scale, which is the relative minor of C major.

Scales are really important to musicians, because that’s where tunes come from, everything from simple nursery rhymes, to popular songs.

**Chords**

A chord is a three or more notes that sound good together. On the ukulele we have four strings, so it’s an ideal instrument to play chords. Strumming chords is a good way to provide a musical accompaniment for a melody, for example when somebody is singing. The notes that sound good together come from scales.

Here’s an example taken from the C major scale. If we take the **first**, **third** and **fifth** notes from the C major scale, that gives us the notes C, E and G. We can also call this the **C major triad**. Those three notes sound nice when played together. Now it doesn’t matter how many of each of the three notes we play, and since the ukulele has four strings, we can double up on one of the notes.

To play a chord, you simple hold down whichever strings you need to, to raise the pitch to the required notes. So if we want to play the C major chord, the first string needs to be held down at the third fret, to raise it from A to C. The other three strings are all OK for this chord because when played open, they give us the notes G, C and E. So here is the **C major chord**, which we call C for short.

Minor scales also give us chords. Once again, we take the **first**, **third** and **fifth** notes. Let’s say we do that to the A natural minor scale. That gives us the A **minor triad**, which is A, C and E. The C, E and A strings are OK to play open, but the fourth string has to be played at the second fret to raise it from G to A. So here is the **A minor chord**.