

The Modes of C Major and the pentatonic patterns inside them

The seven modes of C major are not seven new scales. They are one set of seven notes heard from seven different roots, and the five pentatonic boxes you already own are the skeleton of nearly all of them.

SEVEN ANCHORS ON ONE SET OF NOTES

Play only the notes C D E F G A B. Which note feels like home decides everything. If the music keeps pulling back to C, you hear C major. If it pulls back to D instead, the same seven notes rearrange themselves around D and the flavor changes completely. That is a mode: not new notes, a new anchor.

Each of the seven notes can serve as that anchor, which gives seven modes. The formula column describes each mode against its own major scale, so you can see at a glance which degrees are lowered or raised.

Mode	Name	Root	Formula	Character
1	Ionian	C	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Bright
2	Dorian	D	1 2 b3 4 5 6 b7	Cool
3	Phrygian	E	1 b2 b3 4 5 b6 b7	Dark
4	Lydian	F	1 2 3 #4 5 6 7	Floating
5	Mixolydian	G	1 2 3 4 5 6 b7	Bluesy
6	Aeolian	A	1 2 b3 4 5 b6 b7	Melancholy
7	Locrian	B	1 b2 b3 4 b5 b6 b7	Unstable

The root is the mode. Nothing about the notes on the page tells you which mode you are in. The bass, the chord, or the drone underneath tells you. Keep that in mind for everything that follows.

THREE NOTE SETS, FIVE BOXES, SEVEN MODES

Here is the insight that lets you keep your pentatonic footing. Build a pentatonic scale from each mode's own root, using only notes from the C major set, and this is what you get.

Mode	Root pentatonic skeleton	Notes	Same notes as
C Ionian	C major pentatonic	C D E G A	A minor pentatonic
D Dorian	D minor pentatonic	D F G A C	itself
E Phrygian	E minor pentatonic	E G A B D	itself
F Lydian	F major pentatonic	F G A C D	D minor pentatonic

G Mixolydian	G major pentatonic	G A B D E	E minor pentatonic
A Aeolian	A minor pentatonic	A C D E G	C major pentatonic
B Locrian	none, use the Bm7b5 arpeggio	B D F A	

Look at the notes column. Seven modes collapse into just **three note sets**: {C D E G A}, {D F G A C}, and {E G A B D}. Each set is the same five-box shape you already know, anchored in a different place. The A minor pentatonic boxes, slid to start on D, become the Dorian and Lydian skeleton. Slid to start on E, they become the Phrygian and Mixolydian skeleton. You did not learn five boxes for one scale. You learned five boxes for six of the seven modes.

Locrian is the honest exception. A minor pentatonic scale needs a perfect fifth above its root, and B has no F sharp available in this note set, only F. So Locrian gets no pentatonic skeleton. The Bm7b5 arpeggio, the notes B D F A, does the same job of outlining home, and the Locrian guide builds on it.

HOW TO PRACTICE A MODE

The skeleton is the map. The practice method is the same for every mode, and it always starts with your ears, not your hands.

- **Hear the root first.** Loop a one-chord vamp or a drone on the mode's root before you play a note. Without a sounding root, every mode of C major collapses back into plain C major or A minor. For E Phrygian and A Aeolian you can simply let the open 6th or 5th string ring; for D Dorian, the open 4th string.
- **Find the skeleton.** Play the pentatonic box built on that root, in whatever position you are in. The fingering is already under your fingers; only the anchor moved.
- **Add the color tones.** Each mode adds two notes to its skeleton. Land them deliberately, on strong beats, and listen to how they change the weather. The next section names them.
- **One mode at a time.** Give each mode a week at minimum; a month is better. Depth beats coverage here.

You already have modules covering modes 1, 2, and 4: Ionian, Dorian, and Lydian. The four companion guides on this site fill the gaps: guide 3 for Phrygian, guide 5 for Mixolydian, guide 6 for Aeolian, and guide 7 for Locrian. Each one follows the recipe above with its own drone, color tones, and a short etude.

WHERE THE COLOR LIVES

Why do two added notes carry so much flavor? Because pentatonic scales contain no half steps. That is exactly what makes them safe and smooth. The notes each mode adds back are the ones that create half steps with their neighbors, and half steps are where tension, pull, and character live.

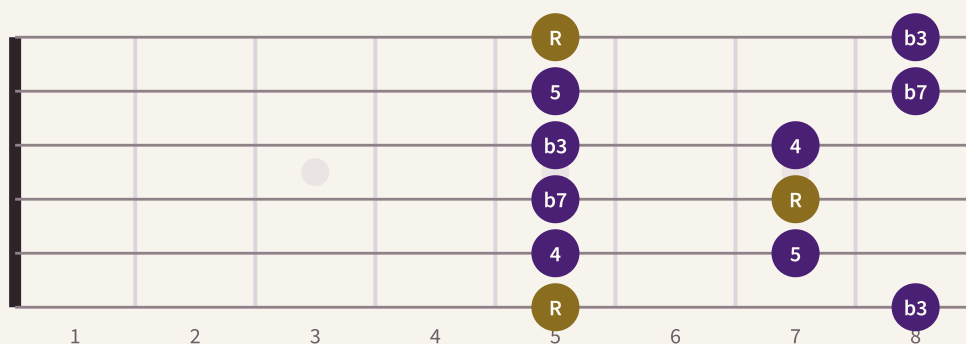
Mode	Skeleton	Added notes	Signature color tone
C Ionian	C D E G A	F, B	F (the 4) and B (the 7)
D Dorian	D F G A C	E, B	B, the major 6
E Phrygian	E G A B D	C, F	F, the b2
F Lydian	F G A C D	B, E	B, the #4
G Mixolydian	G A B D E	C, F	F, the b7
A Aeolian	A C D E G	B, F	F, the b6
B Locrian	B D F A (arpeggio)	C, E, G	C, the b2; F, the b5, is already in the arpeggio

Notice the pattern in the last column: in this key, every signature tone is either F or B. Those two notes form the single tritone in C major, and the entire key's tension is concentrated in them. So the practical summary of this whole page fits in one sentence: **play the box you know, then reach for F or B on purpose.**

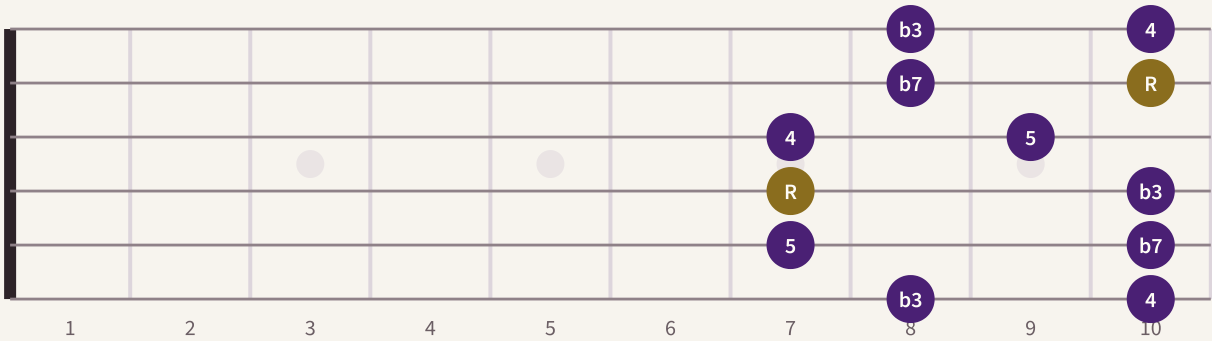
THE FIVE BOXES, ONCE

The five diagrams below are the A minor pentatonic boxes exactly as you learned them in the fretboard explorer, covering the note set {A C D E G}. Every skeleton in this guide is one of these five shapes: keep them anchored here for Ionian and Aeolian, slide the whole system to a D root for Dorian and Lydian, and to an E root for Phrygian and Mixolydian.

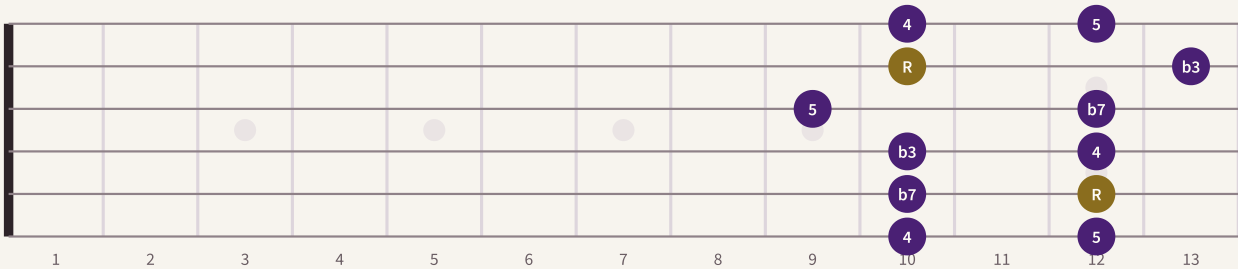
A MINOR PENTATONIC, POSITION 1



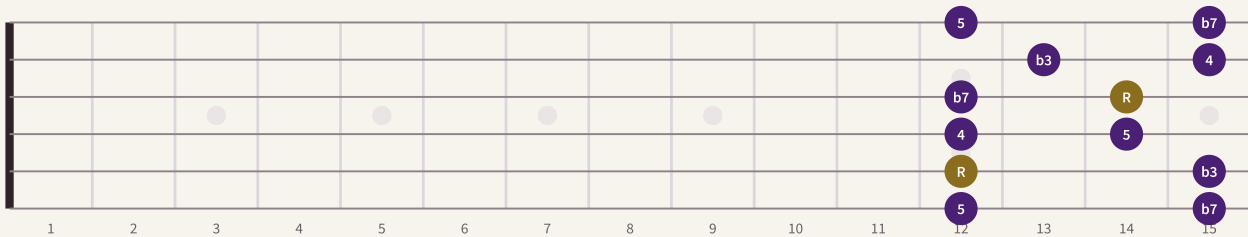
A MINOR PENTATONIC, POSITION 2



A MINOR PENTATONIC, POSITION 3



A MINOR PENTATONIC, POSITION 4



A MINOR PENTATONIC, POSITION 5

