

Pentatonic & blues scales

Take the two notes out of a scale that can clash, and five are left. That is the pentatonic — the most forgiving set of notes there is, and the backbone of folk song, gospel, rock and the blues.

THE FOUR SCALES

Major pentatonic
C major scale, without the 4th and 7th

C D E F G A B

1 2 3 - 5 6 -

Open and cheerful. Removing the 4th and 7th removes every semitone, so nothing can sound wrong.

Minor pentatonic
A natural minor, without the 2nd and 6th

A B C D E F G

1 - b3 4 5 - b7

The same five notes as C major pentatonic, started on A. Darker, and the first scale most guitarists learn.

Minor blues
Minor pentatonic plus the b5

A C D Eb E G

1 b3 4 b5 5 b7

Six notes. The added b5 is the blue note — passed through rather than landed on.

Major blues
Major pentatonic plus the b3

C D Eb E G A

1 2 b3 3 5 6

The b3 slides up into the major 3rd. Country, gospel and rock and roll all lean on this rub.

Dotted boxes are the notes left out; gold is the note added back in.

WRITTEN OUT IN COMMON KEYS

KEY	MAJOR PENTATONIC	MINOR PENTATONIC	MINOR BLUES
C / A minor	C D E G A	A C D E G	A C D Eb E G
G / E minor	G A B D E	E G A B D	E G A Bb B D
D / B minor	D E F# A B	B D E F# A	B D E F F# A
F / D minor	F G A C D	D F G A C	D F G Ab A C
Bb / G minor	Bb C D F G	G Bb C D F	G Bb C Db D F
E / C# minor	E F# G# B C#	C# E F# G# B	C# E F# G G# B

Each major pentatonic and the minor pentatonic three semitones below it hold the same five notes — the relative-minor relationship, exactly as in the full scales.

Why nothing clashes. A pentatonic has no semitones and no tritone, so the five notes cannot grate against any chord in the key.

Bending the blue note. On a guitar or a voice the b5 and b3 are bent, sitting between the two pitches a piano can give. That in-between is the sound.

Where to hear it. Auld Lang Syne and most nursery tunes are pure major pentatonic; nearly every blues and rock solo is minor pentatonic.

The black keys. The five black keys of a piano are a Gb major pentatonic. Play only those, in any order, and it will sound like music.