

The modes

Play the white notes from C to C and you have a major scale. Start on D instead and play the same seven notes – the pattern of tones and semitones has shifted, and so has the mood. Those seven starting points are the modes.

THE SEVEN MODES OF THE MAJOR SCALE

MODE	DEGREE	ON THE WHITE NOTES	COMPARED WITH	TONIC CHORD	CHARACTER
Ionian	1st	C D E F G A B	The major scale	Cmaj7	Plain daylight – the sound of home
Dorian	2nd	D E F G A B C	Minor, $\sharp 6$	Dm7	Minor but hopeful; folk tunes and sea songs
Phrygian	3rd	E F G A B C D	Minor, $\flat 2$	Em7	Dark and Spanish; the flat second leans down
Lydian	4th	F G A B C D E	Major, $\sharp 4$	Fmaj7	Brighter than major – floating, wide-eyed
Mixolydian	5th	G A B C D E F	Major, $\flat 7$	G7	Major with the edge off; blues and bagpipes
Aeolian	6th	A B C D E F G	The natural minor	Am7	Settled sadness – the ordinary minor
Locrian	7th	B C D E F G A	Minor, $\flat 2 \flat 5$	Bm7 $\flat 5$	Unstable; no perfect fifth to stand on

All seven use exactly the same notes. What changes is which note feels like home – so play a low, insistent D underneath and the white notes turn Dorian.

THE SAME SEVEN MODES ALL STARTING ON C

Lydian	C	D	E	F $\sharp$	G	A	B	C
Ionian	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
Mixolydian	C	D	E	F	G	A	B $\flat$	C
Dorian	C	D	E $\flat$	F	G	A	B $\flat$	C
Aeolian	C	D	E $\flat$	F	G	A $\flat$	B $\flat$	C
Phrygian	C	D $\flat$	E $\flat$	F	G	A $\flat$	B $\flat$	C
Locrian	C	D $\flat$	E $\flat$	F	G $\flat$	A $\flat$	B $\flat$	C

Gold marks every note that differs from C major. Read down the list and one note flattens at each step – brightest at the top, darkest at the bottom.

Finding one quickly. To play E Dorian, ask which major scale has E as its second degree – D major. Play D major, but treat E as home.

Aim at the tell-tale note. Lydian's $\sharp 4$, Mixolydian's $\flat 7$, Dorian's $\sharp 6$, Phrygian's $\flat 2$. Land a melody on it and the mode announces itself.

Hold the tonic down. A mode only sounds like itself over a drone or pedal bass; without one the ear hears the parent major scale.