

# Learning Your Scales for Keeps

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For most students, learning their major scales is a yearly ritual made necessary by failing to retain them in the first place. Trying to memorize note names, key signatures and specific sharps and flats overtakes the brain. All this can simply be solved by playing the scale correctly and repeatedly.

This E major scale looks nice and neat with all its sharps provided by the key signature, but most players run into their first problems trying to remember the fact that every F, C, G & D is sharp.



The first step in effective memorization is to **remove mistakes from the process**. By marking the sharps and flats, and practicing along to the written music, we build up experience in how the scale should feel.



Clarinetists, note the "R-L-R" finger markings, which indicate your pinkie alternation. By practicing from the music, and memorizing by repetition, you also nail down your correct fingerings and other technical issues.

Our next step is to **build the scale note-by-note**, checking each new note for correctness and finding our way back down to the beginning.



**Nailing down the memorization:** Once you have built up your octave of scale, play it 10 times from the music, slow enough that you make no mistake of notes, rhythm or fingering. Then cover or turn over your music so that you can't see it. Try to play the scales 3 times in a row from feel. If you can do this, you have passed the first round of memorization. [NOTE: If you don't quite have it, don't repeat this same process during the same practice session--at least not with the same scale. Move on to something else and try this again tomorrow. It's not about how *long* you work something--it's about how *often*!]

**Maintaining the memorization:** Play your scale at least once each day. If you make mistakes, slow down and repeat this process. In a few days, you should be pretty solid on that scale.

**Using your scale in real-life situations:** Use your scale to play songs by ear, figure out arpeggios, etc. When reading music which has a key signature marked, run the scale which matches the key signature and use its feel to help you hit all the sharps and flats that the key signature indicates.