

How to Remember Key Signatures



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Do you ever struggle to remember key signatures? Are you learning them from scratch? Or do you know most of them, but have to think and work out those rather awkward keys with five or six sharps or flats?

This light-hearted blog might help you take away some of the pain of learning by rote.

In this age of instant information on our phones (or watches) we are becoming ever less reliant on our memories, sadly. Memorisation seems to be out of fashion now, and even

somewhat discredited, yet it still remains the only way we learn languages, for example. Or pieces of music, or a part in a play.

As a theory teacher (which I do in addition to my editing and proofreading) I encourage students to learn their key signatures bit by bit, but sometimes they just won't do it.

There are some basic things you can do to save time. If you know your major keys, it's easy to work out the relative minors by just dropping down a minor 3rd, e.g. A major – F# minor.

Another useful shortcut is what I call the 'bookends':

C major and A minor have no signature

C# major and A# minor have all 7 sharps

Cb major and Ab minor have all 7 flats

That should be easy to remember! But it's only a drop in the ocean so far. There are 30 'official' keys in total, 28 with sharps and flats consisting of 14 major keys and 14 minor. Yes, there are horrible keys continuing along the circle of fifths past C# and Cb, which don't have key signatures but are chocka with double sharps and flats. These crop up in Tchaikovsky and Scriabin, amongst others, but they are not worth learning!

Time to simplify the process then. My system for learning the normal keys is indebted to memory world champion Dominic O'Brien, whose books I thoroughly recommend. (You can find a link for them at the end of this blog.) The system comprises mnemonics in the form of (hopefully) memorable phrases always in a specific order as follows:

Major key letter	No. of sharps/flats	Rel. minor key letter
G	1#	E minor
Subject	Verb phrase	Object

So think of your memorable phrase subject as *always* major, your object as *always* minor, and the actual key signature is a verb phrase that connects them.

To make these phrases easier to remember and personal to you, I suggest you change some of my named subjects to people you know or celebrities you like. By all means, improve on my suggestions, some of which are deliberately bizarre.

I'll explain the first one, so you can see how the derivations work:

G	I chose 'Grandpa' as my subject.
1#	I flipped this to #1 (sharp one) and, using alliteration and assonance, came up with the verb 'shuns'.
Em	The object 'emails' then came to mind.

Grandpa shuns emails!

So, if you're asked what's the relative major of E minor – think 'emails', then you should then be able to recall the whole phrase in a flash and work out the key of G from Grandpa, and one sharp from 'shuns'. Simple!

It shouldn't take long to commit these 14 crazy phrases to memory. Test yourself as you go along. It will be quicker than learning all 28 key signatures, believe me, as those are very

abstract! I've tried to use alliteration and rhyming to keep the sounds close to the key names and accidentals. However, there's one rule if you tinker: don't use any noun, name or verb more than once, otherwise you risk getting confused!

THE SHARP KEYS		
MAJOR	SIGNATURE	RELATIVE MINOR
G <i>Grandpa</i>	#1 <i>shuns</i>	E minor <i>emails</i>
D <i>Donald</i>	#2 <i>shoots</i>	B minor <i>[in] Birmingham</i>
A <i>Alice</i>	3# <i>threshes</i>	F# minor <i>fish meat</i>
E <i>Emma</i>	4# <i>foreshortens</i>	C# minor <i>[the] seashore for miles</i>
B <i>Brian</i>	5# <i>finds shards of Shakespeare</i>	G# minor <i>[in] Jesus' sharp mind</i>
F# <i>Fascists</i>	6# <i>[eat] Sichuan</i>	D# minor <i>[with a] dishmop</i>
C# <i>Caesar should [have]</i>	7# <i>several shapes</i>	A# minor <i>[in the] Ashmolean Museum</i>

THE FLAT KEYS		
MAJOR	SIGNATURE	RELATIVE MINOR
F <i>Fiona</i>	b1 <i>flunks [it]</i>	D minor <i>[with] dim miners</i>
B_b <i>Beef lands [up]</i>	2_b <i>[on the] tooth</i>	G minor <i>[of] Jemima</i>
E_b <i>Ethan [had]</i>	3_b <i>three freezing flights</i>	C minor <i>[precede his] seminar</i>
A_b <i>Alfred feels [he can]</i>	4_b <i>afford flats</i>	F minor <i>if minded</i>
D_b <i>Devour Flanagan's</i>	5_b <i>filo flan</i>	B_b minor <i>before mine</i>
G_b <i>Giblets flabby [with]</i>	6_b <i>sick fluid</i>	E_b minor <i>[and] effluent muck</i>
C_b <i>Celia flags [up]</i>	7_b <i>several flirts</i>	A_b minor <i>[with] affluent men</i>

More techniques and memory-sharpening tips (sorry about such a flat pun) can be found in these excellent resources:

www.amazon.co.uk/Books-Dominic-O'Brien

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(Written without using ChatGPT)

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