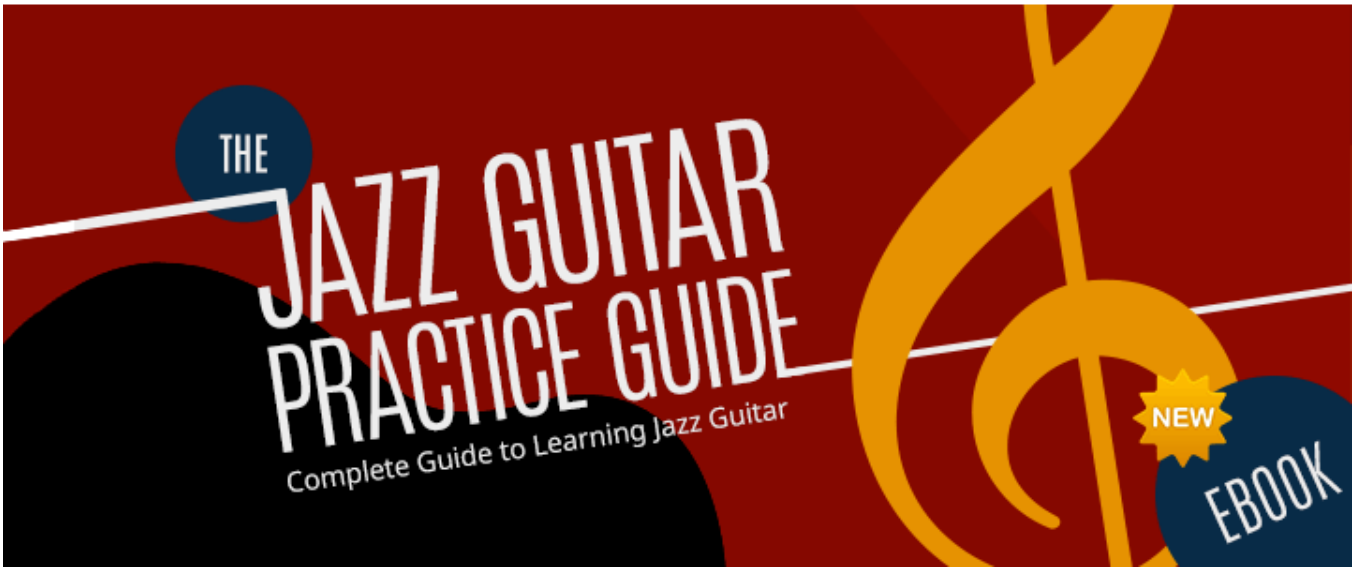
# What Are Guitar Positions? Everything You Need To Know

www.jazzguitar.be/blog/what-are-guitar-positions/

Greg O'Rourke

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Throughout your guitar journey you may have seen the term **'guitar positions'** crop up here and there. Confused about it's meaning? You aren't alone – it's one of those guitar terms that causes a lot of misunderstanding for guitar students. And it's often not explained correctly either.

In this lesson you'll learn exactly what the term 'guitar position' means.

By the end of the article you'll have a clear system so that you can confidently **play major scales over the entire fretboard**, laying the foundation for being able to **improvise** anywhere on the guitar neck.

Let's get started!

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## Defining the Meaning of 'Guitar Positions'

The confusion about the term 'guitar positions' arises because it can actually refer to *two entirely different guitar fretboard concepts*.

For the sake of this article I've created my own terms for these two meanings, which are:

- **Meaning #1: Fret Position** – where the left hand is located on the guitar fretboard
- **Meaning #2: Scale Pattern –** the notes of a scale on the fretboard if you stay in the same *fret position*.

**Meaning #1: Fret Position**

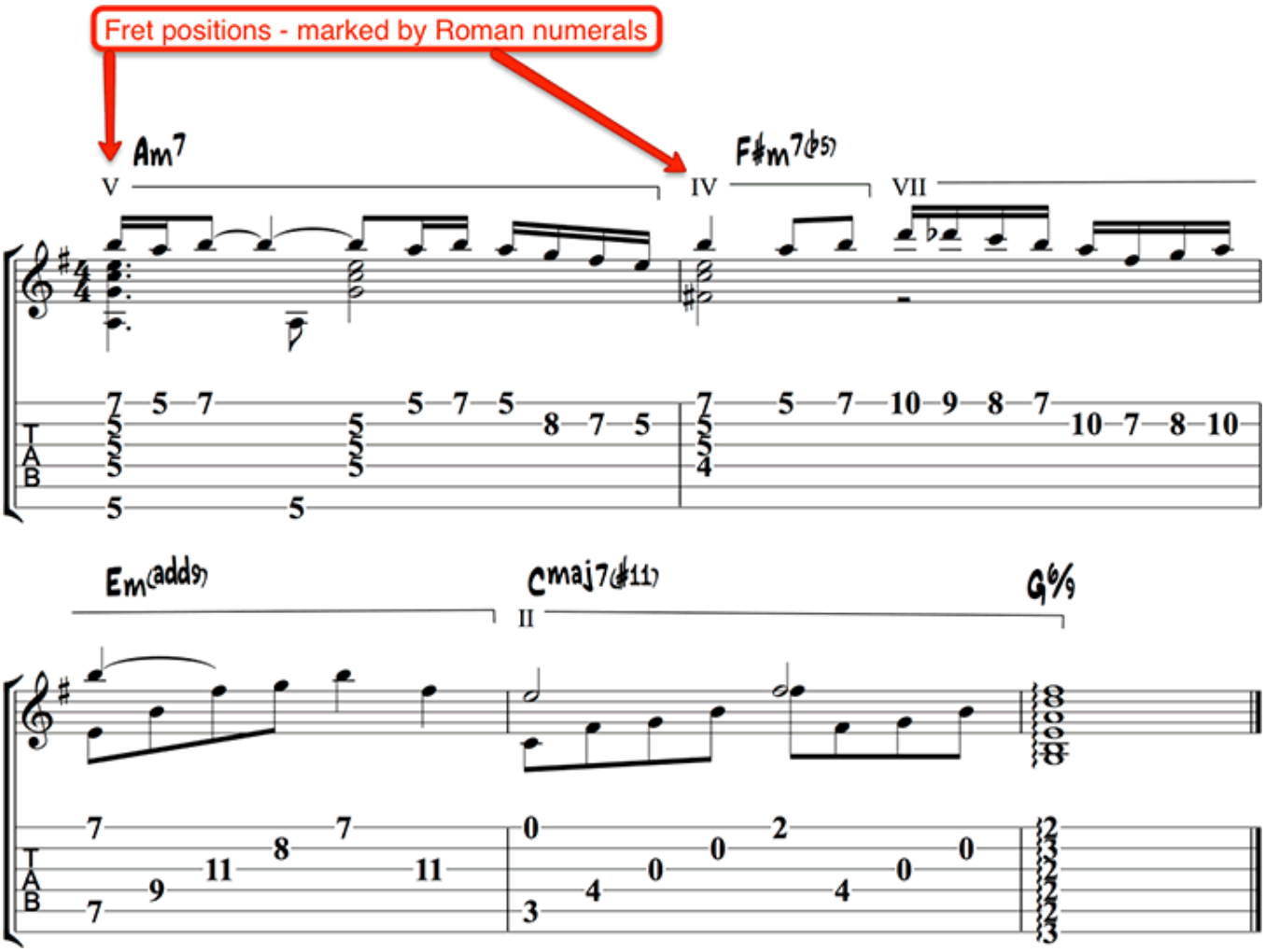
This is probably the more intuitive way people think of guitar positions, and it's pretty easy to understand too.

In this case, you're referring to where the hand is located on the guitar neck in relation to the frets.

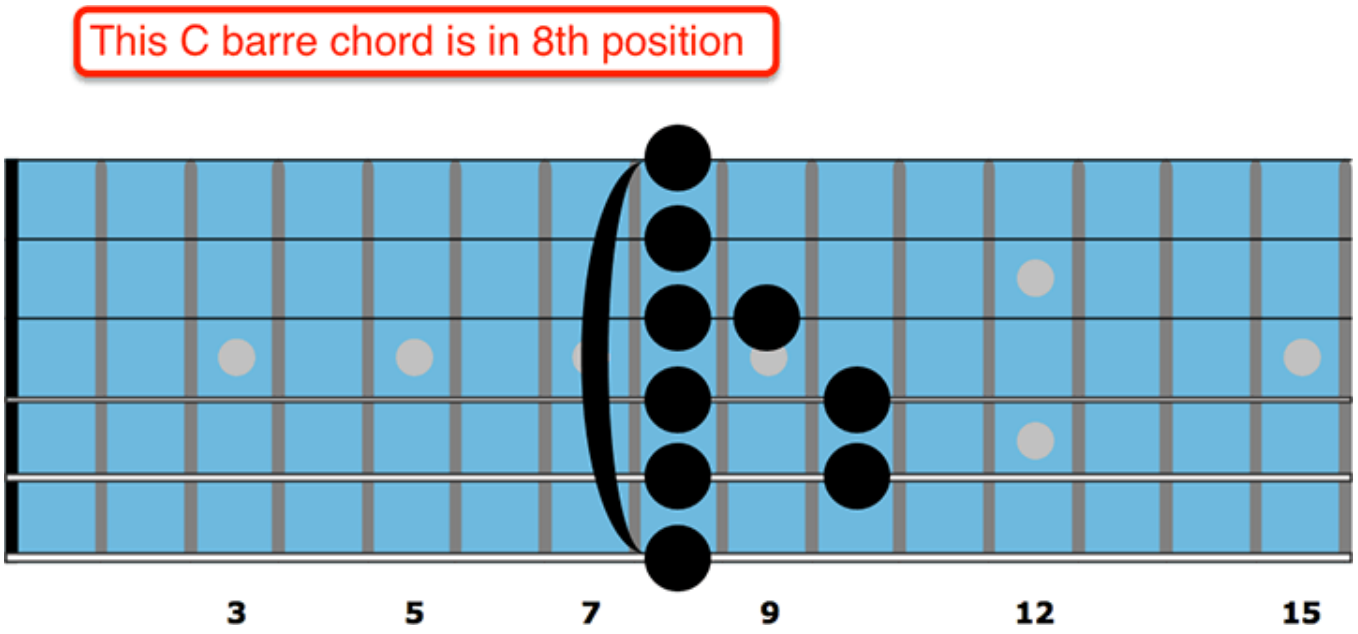
A fret position is designated with a number, e.g. 5th position, 7th position, etc, and the number is based on *what fret the first finger would naturally lie on depending on where you are on the neck.*

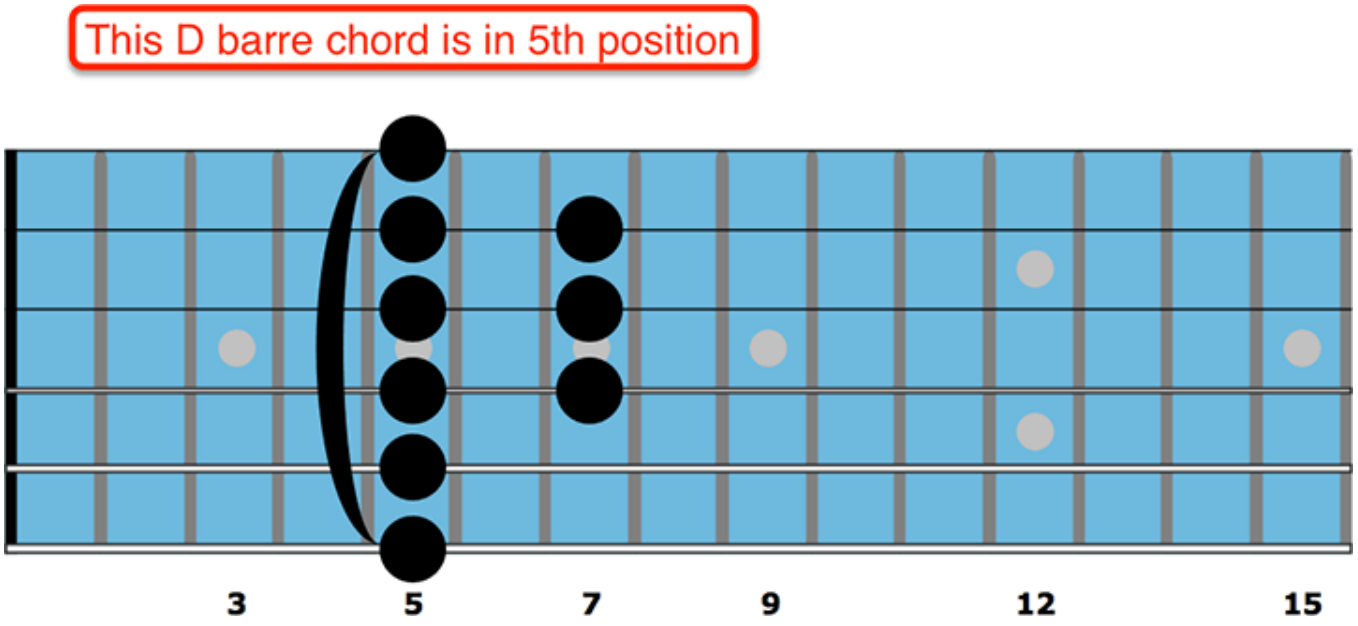
On sheet music, fret positions are often notated with Roman numerals.

To illustrate a fre position, here's an example of a piece that moves through several different fret positions.



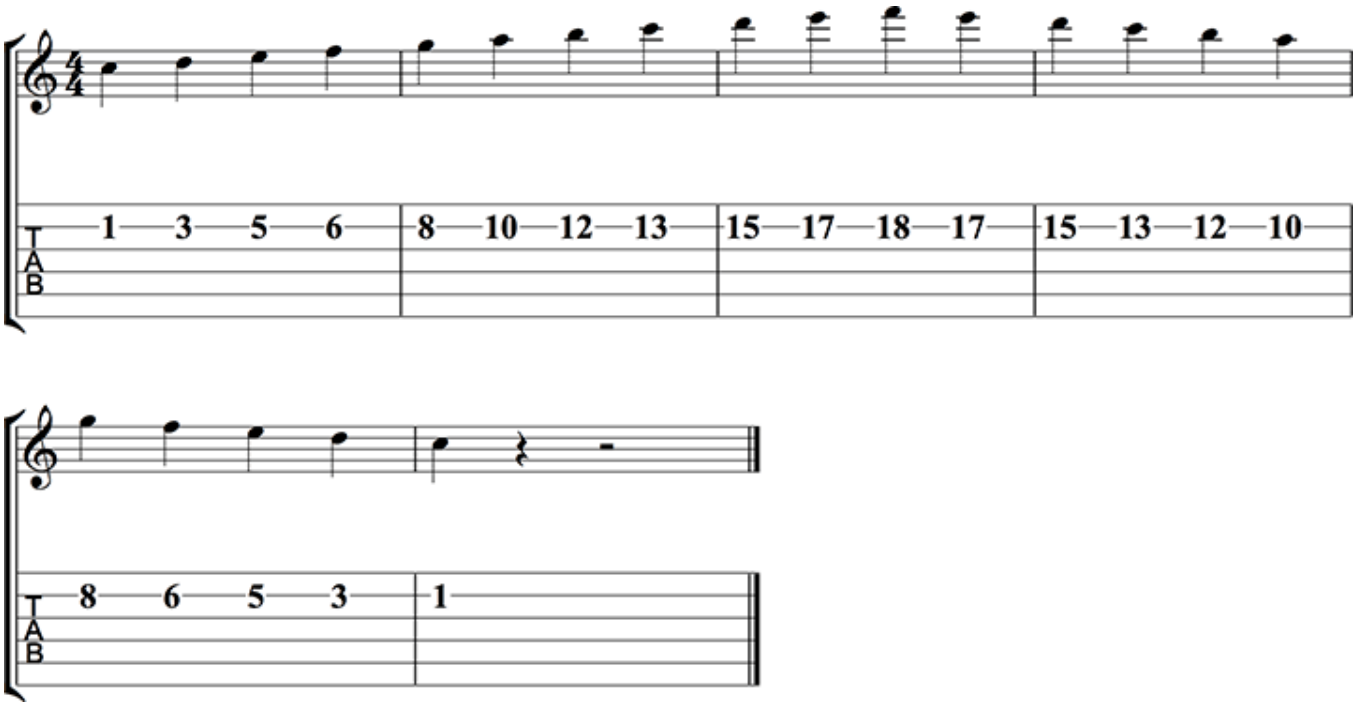
Barre chords are another good example of fret positions, for example:




Practicing a scale up one string is a good way to gain proficiency in mastering fret position shifts – see the video below.

*Watch & Play*




Ok – that's cleared up one meaning of 'guitar positions'.

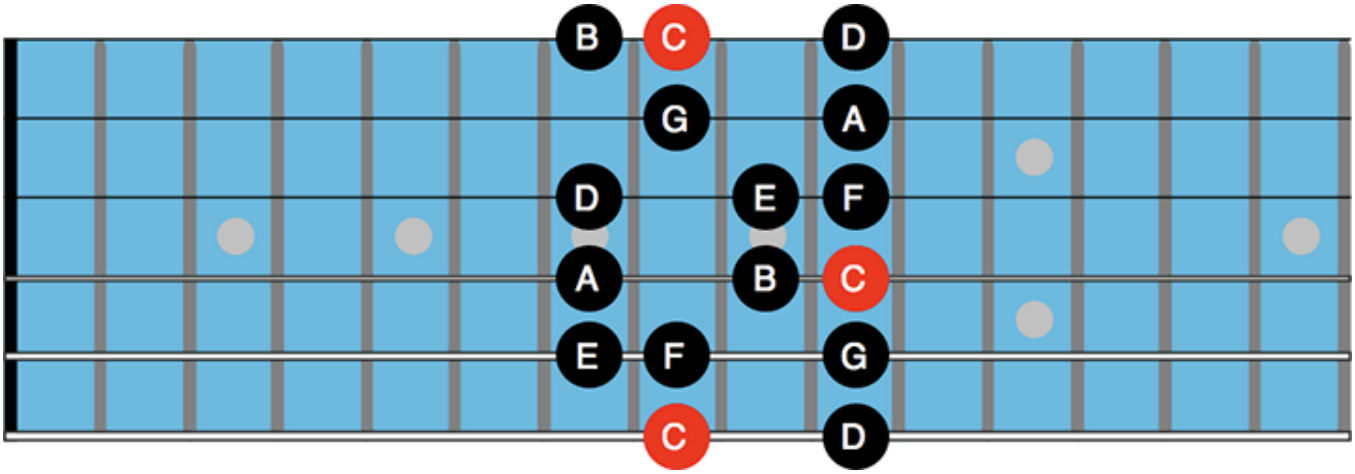
Now let's look at the other meaning of the term…

**Meaning #2: Scale Patterns**

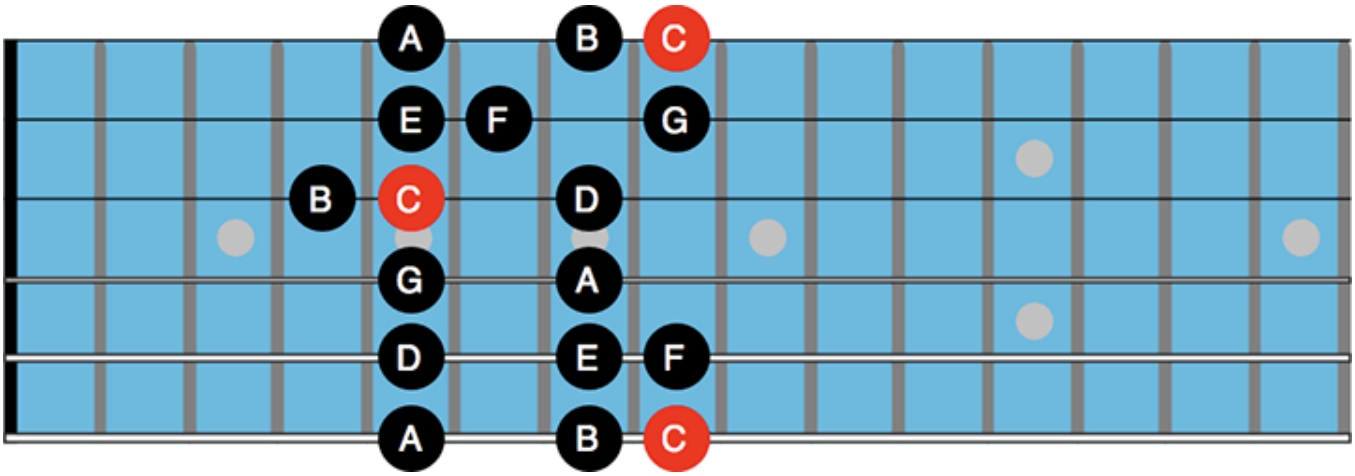
The term 'guitar position' can also refer to the shapes that a scale makes on different areas of the guitar fretboard.

The best way to illustrate this is with some neck diagrams. Let's take C Major as an example.

If you start with the root note on the 8th fret of the 6th string, and then play *across* the strings all the way to the first string, as opposed to playing *up* one string like in shifting exercise above, you end up with this pattern on the fretboard (root notes in red):




Likewise, if you play C major but play all of the notes of the scale around fret position 5, you'll get this pattern instead:




So in this instance, the term 'guitar position' refers to **the patterns the notes of a scale makes on the fretboard if you stay in the same *fret position*.**

You might have seen this 2nd meaning of 'guitar positions' defined in various ways, such as 'scale positions', 'scale shapes', 'fretboard areas', and 'patterns'.

For this article, you'll refer to this meaning as ***scale patterns***.

Phew! Glad we got that cleared up.

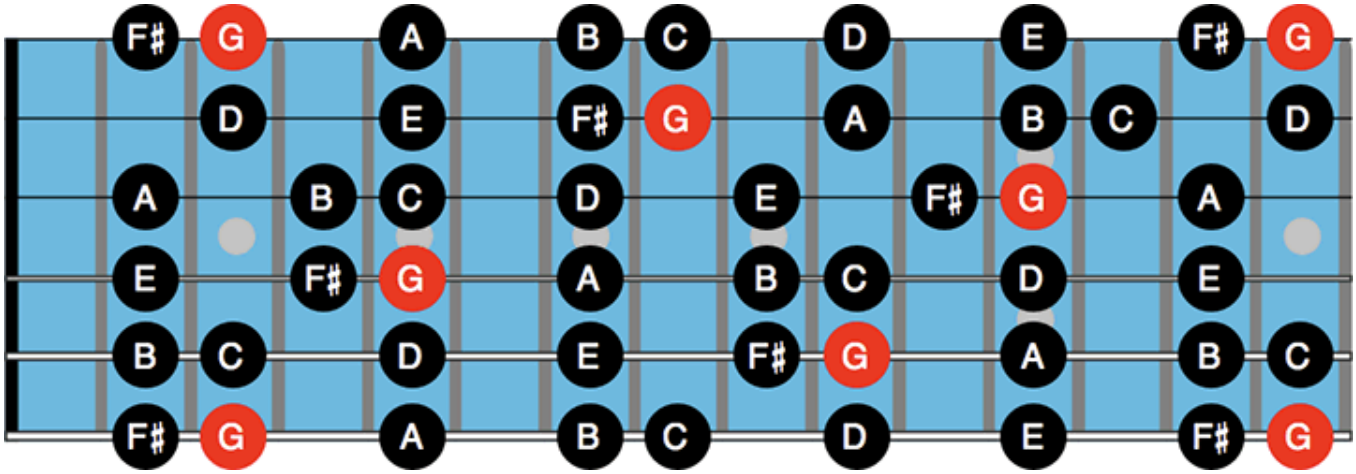
This article is now going to focus on using these two concepts of **fret positions** and **scale patterns** to learn the notes of the major scale over the entire fretboard, so that you can improvise with this scale anywhere on the guitar neck.

Let's take a look.

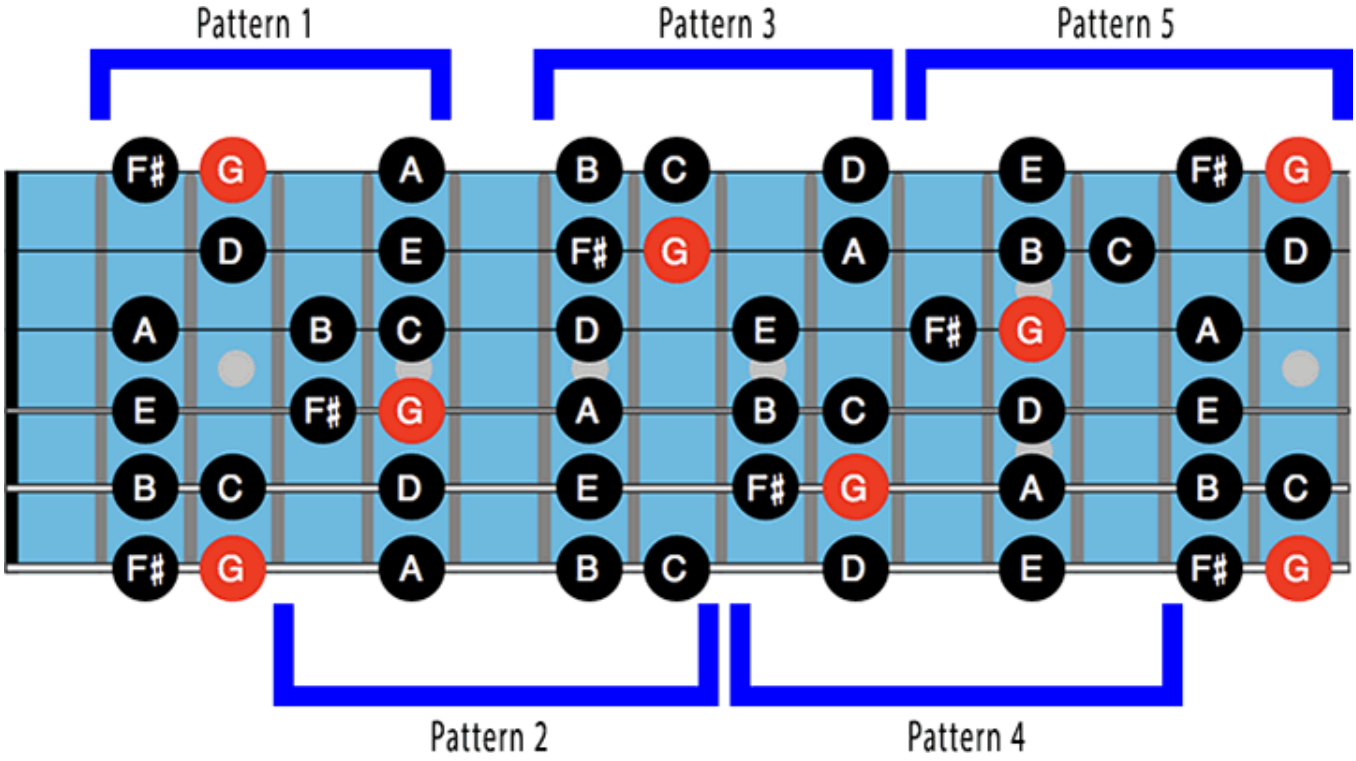
## Major Scale Patterns

There are various different ‘scale pattern systems’ you can learn, however the best one to learn initially is known as the **Five Pattern System**.

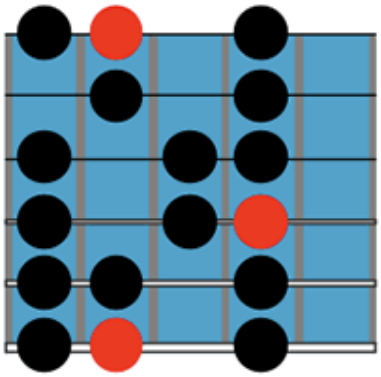
To put it in context, here is a neck diagram of a G Major scale over the first 12 frets on the guitar.



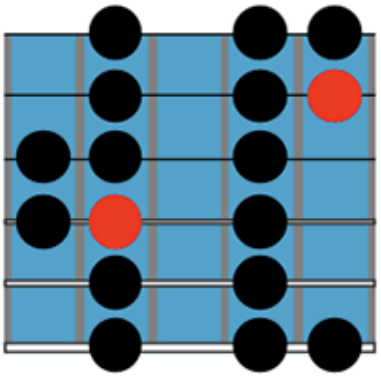

The 5 pattern system splits this up into 5 discrete scale patterns on the guitar:



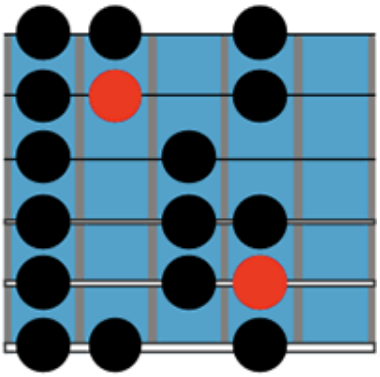
Pattern 1



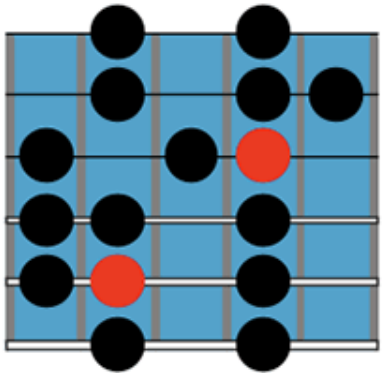
Pattern 2



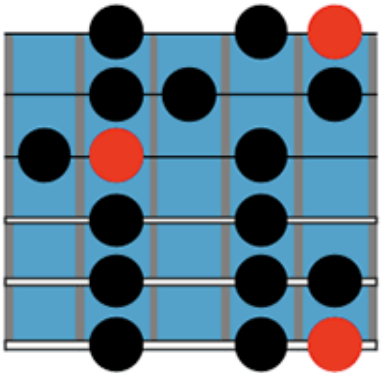
Pattern 3



Pattern 4



Pattern 5



Yes, I know what you're thinking – how do you remember which **pattern** is which?

How do we remember what each shape **looks like**?

And how do you remember the **order** of the shapes as you go up the guitar neck?

For the solution to these problems, you need an *effective naming convention* for these 5 patterns.

**Common Naming Conventions for the 5 Patterns**

Unfortunately there's no standardized naming convention for these patterns – which adds another layer of confusion when trying to understand guitar positions.

Later on in this article I'll explain in details my preferred method for naming and understanding them, but feel free to use one of the other methods if you find it makes more sense to you.

Here are the options:

**‘Position Number/Pattern Number’**

This is the simplest way to label the five patterns.

Each shape is given an ascending number based on the order of the shapes listed above.

A disadvantage of this method is that the pattern number could easily be confused with *fret number* (and you have enough number systems on guitar as it is).

It also won’t help very much for you to remember the patterns, as it doesn’t describe what the pattern looks like or how it functions.

**Modal Names**

This system derives it’s labels from the lowest note of each pattern.

Taking Pattern 2 as an example, the lowest note is an ‘A’ on the 5th fret, so the scale starting from the first note will be ABCDEF#GA, which is the A Dorian mode – hence the name ‘Dorian’ for the pattern.

(For those of you familiar with modes, you may notice that **Lydian and Locrian** modes are missing. The Lydian pattern is on the same fret position as Phrygian, and the Locrian pattern is at the same fret position as Ionian, which is why they’re omitted in this system.)

You may think that this would be a good way to learn the patterns, especially as a jazz guitarist with the emphasis on modes in jazz theory – but I disagree.

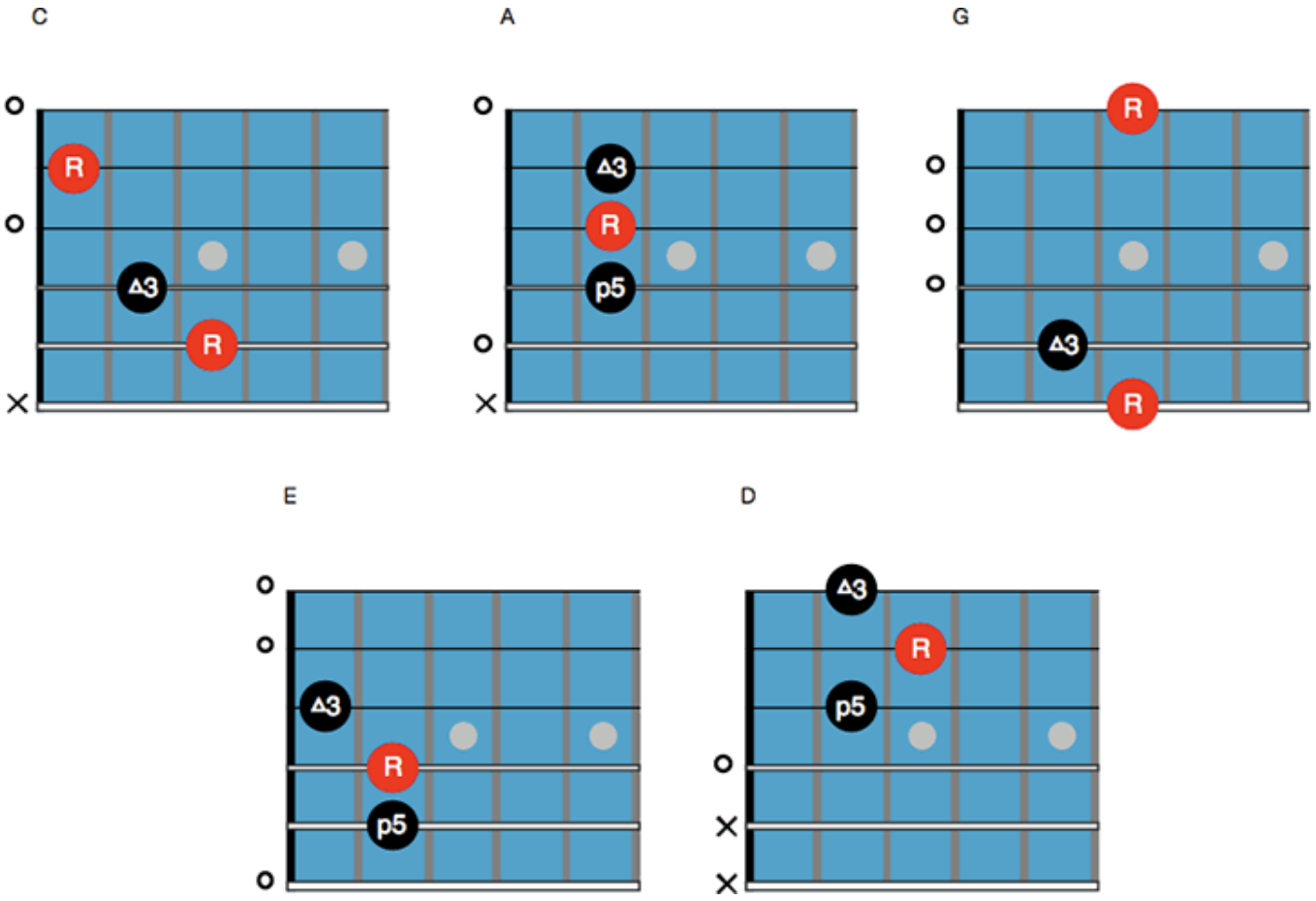
Each scale pattern essentially has *all* the modes in each pattern depending on what note you start on, so it’s misleading to label a shape as just a single mode like ‘Dorian’ or ‘Aeolian’’.

A confession – this is how I actually learnt the scale patterns back in the day during my university studies in jazz guitar, but it did cause a bit of confusion when it came to soloing – the only time it has helped much is when I’m playing modal jazz tunes.

The best way to learn these shapes is by using the **CAGED system**, a very clever acronym that can unlock the entire fretboard. Let’s take a look.

## The CAGED system

The CAGED system is a great way to label and remember the five patterns. The 5 letters – C, A, G, E, D – refer to open major chords that you learnt on the guitar as a beginner:




Because these chords are familiar to nearly every guitarist on the planet, they're a great tool to help remember the scale patterns and to also remember the **order** of the scale patterns as you go up the neck.

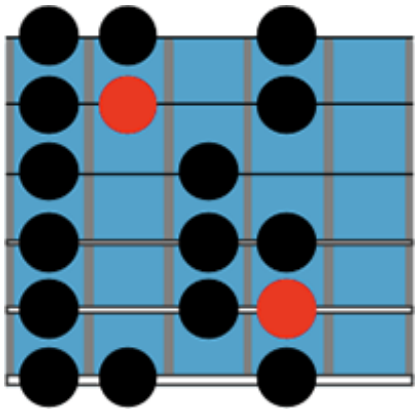
Let me show you how to use them.

**How To Play the Major Scale in Any Key Over The Entire Fretboard with CAGED**

Let's take a look at Pattern 3 from the grid above:

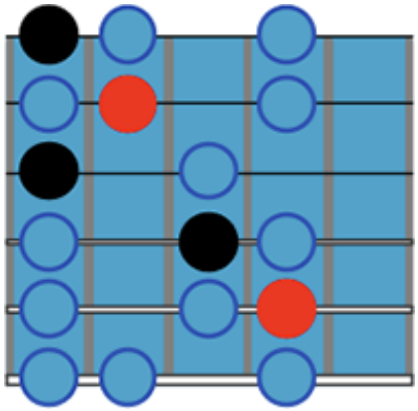
**Scale Pattern 3 = CAGED Pattern 'C Shape'**

Out of this pattern, you can plot out a shape that matches the same shape as the open C chord above – as if it is 'hiding' in the scale pattern.



Note that I'm also including the open strings from the C chord as part of the shape:

So rather than calling this 'Pattern 3', you now refer to this pattern as the **'C Pattern'**.

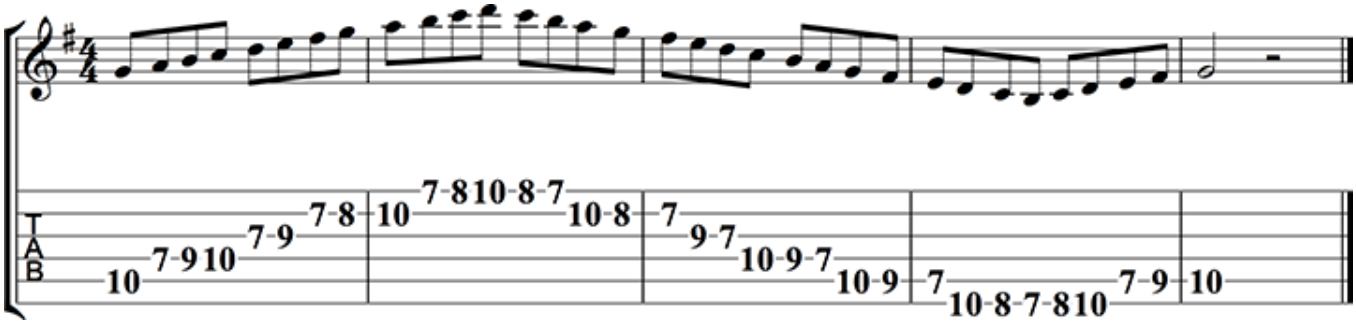


Let's now get familiar with this pattern.

First, place the pattern up on the 7th fret.

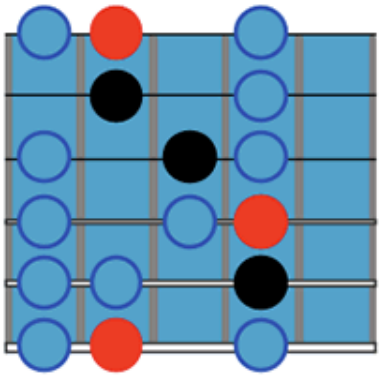
Then, start from the lowest root note (in red) and play the scale all the way up to the highest note of the pattern, then all the way down to the lowest note in the pattern, then finally finish on the note you started, like this:

*Watch & Play*

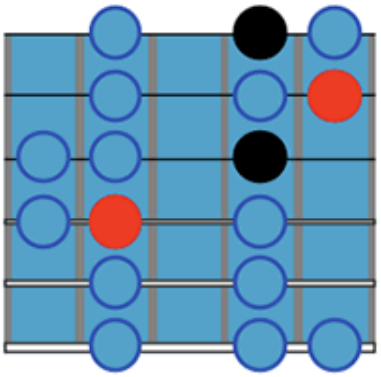



If you look at each of the patterns in turn, likewise you can see that there's the relevant open chord shape that 'lives' in each one:

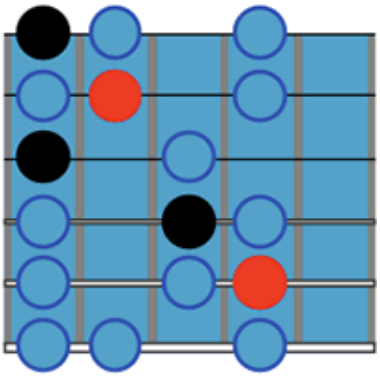
Pattern 1 = 'E' Pattern



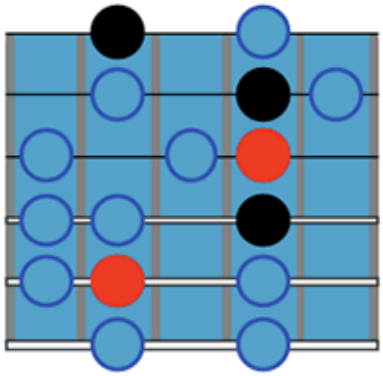
Pattern 2 = 'D' Pattern



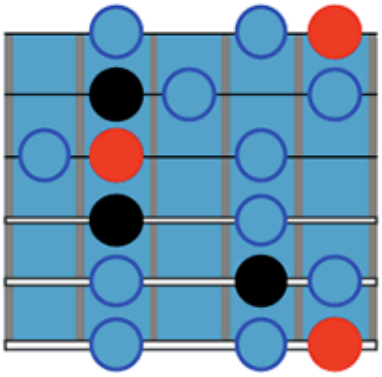
Pattern 3 = 'C' Pattern



Pattern 4 = 'A' Pattern



Pattern 5 = 'G' Pattern

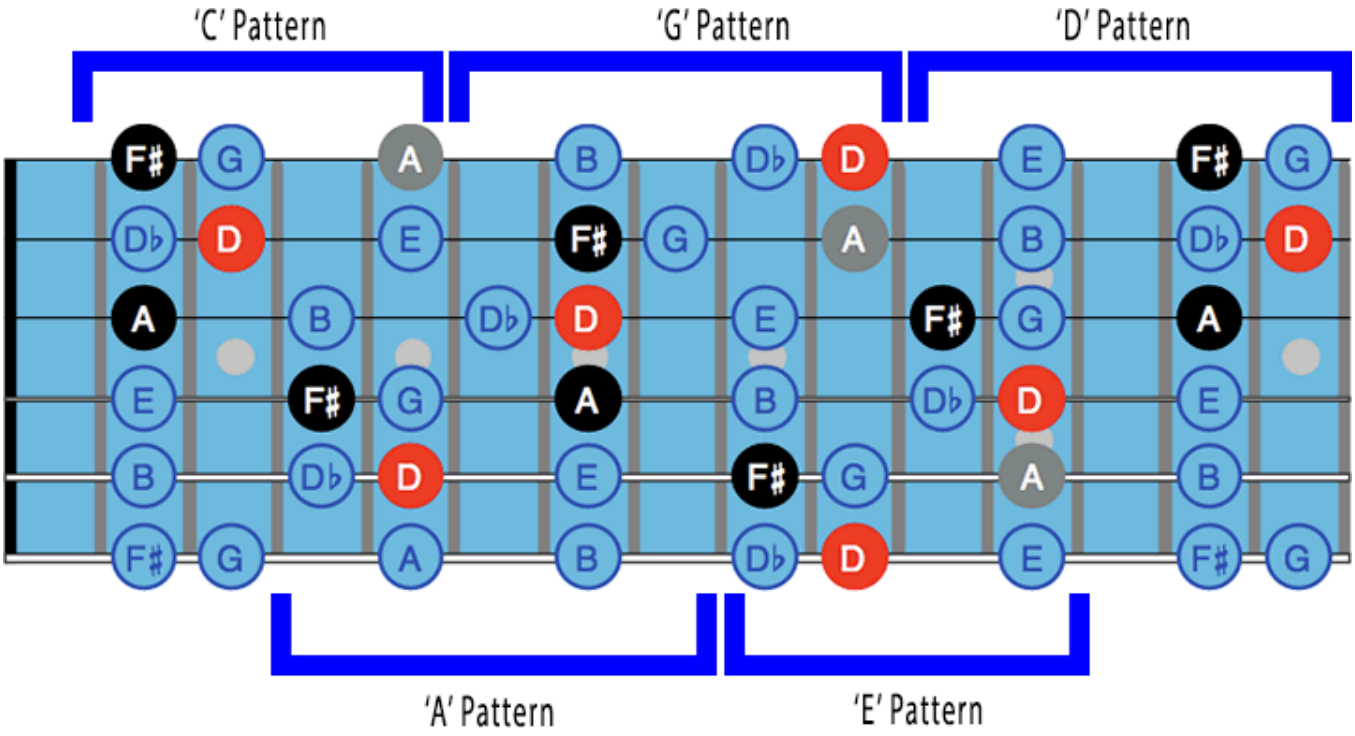


**How the CAGED Patterns are Ordered on the Guitar Neck**

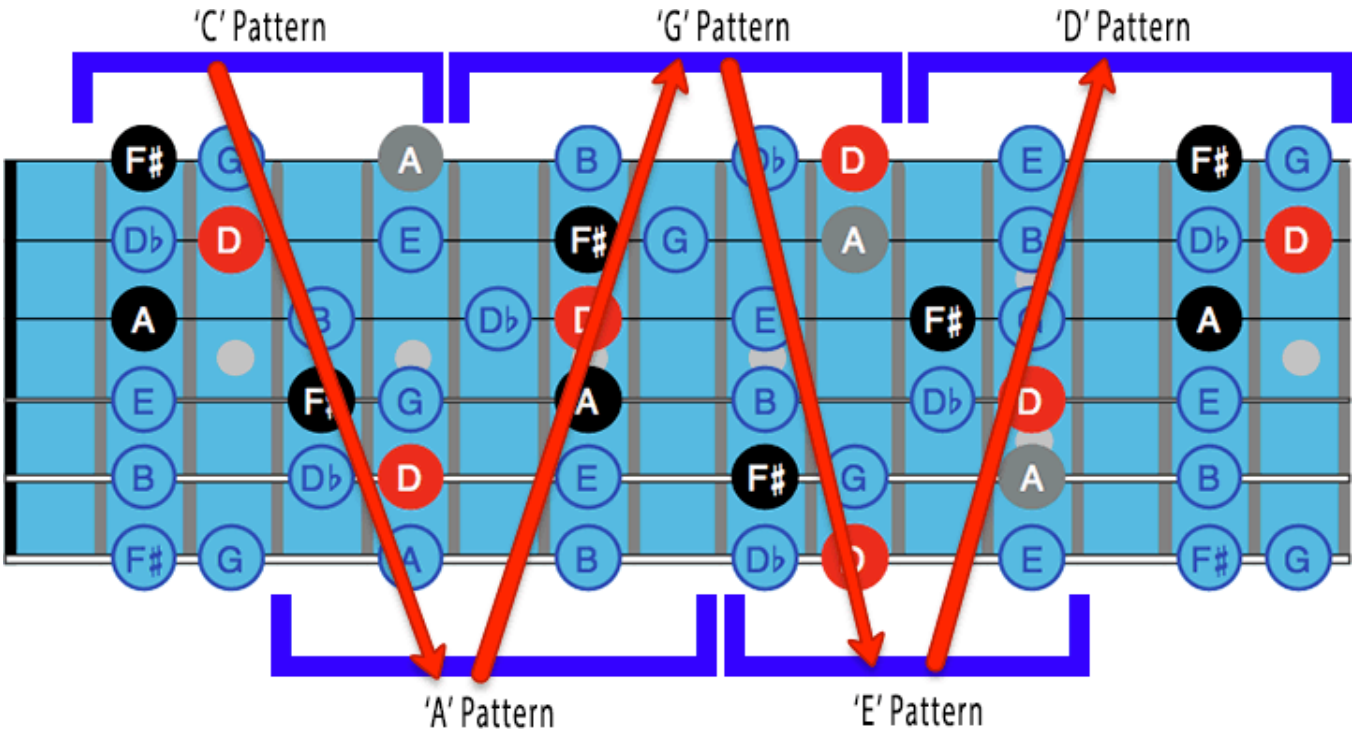
The ordering of the CAGED patterns is really nifty.

To illustrate this let's now play each position in the key of D Major (the notes in grey are where the patterns overlap):

**D Major:**



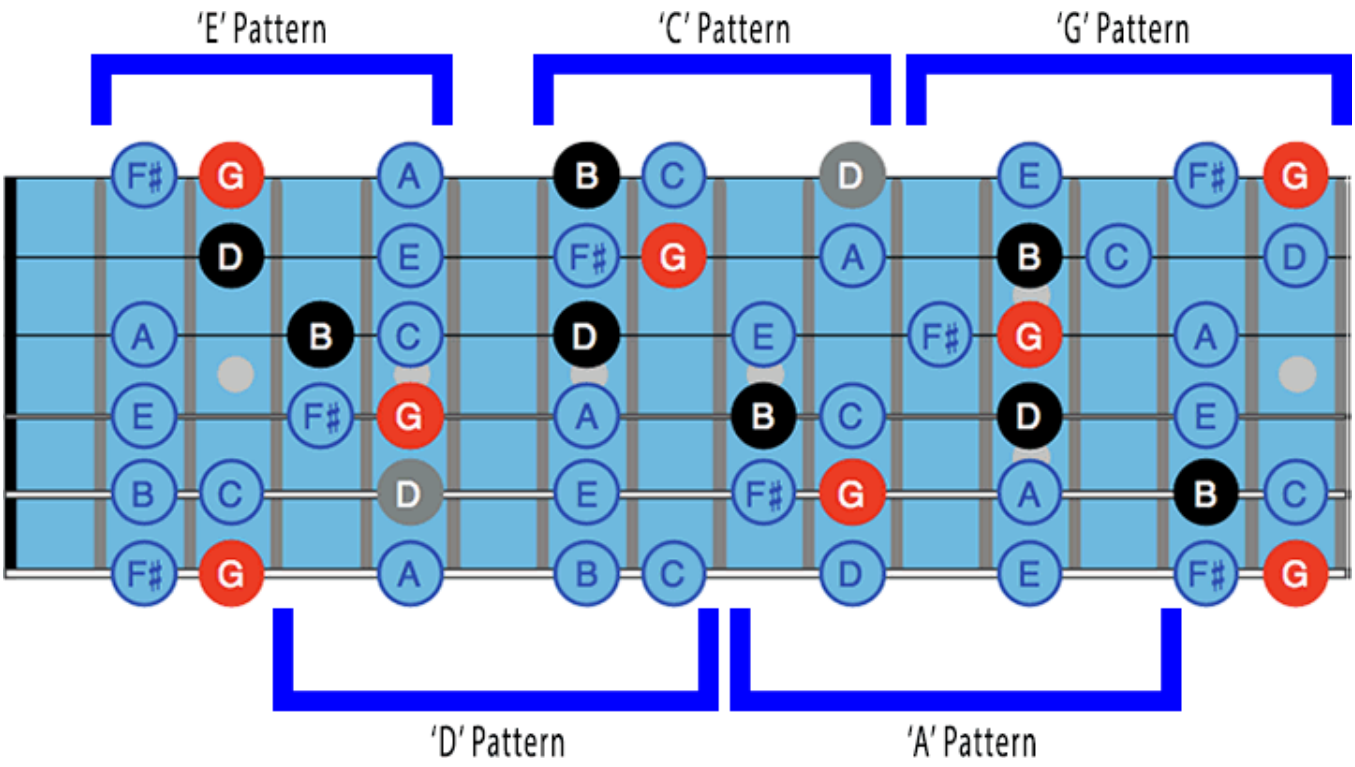

As we move up the neck from pattern to pattern, the names of the patterns spell – you guessed it – **CAGED**!




As you play the sequence of patterns up the guitar neck in other keys, a good rule of thumb is to drop the first pattern that is beyond the 14th fret down the octave, in order that the patterns all fit on the most useful area of the guitar neck.

A good example of this is when we play the CAGED patterns in G Major:

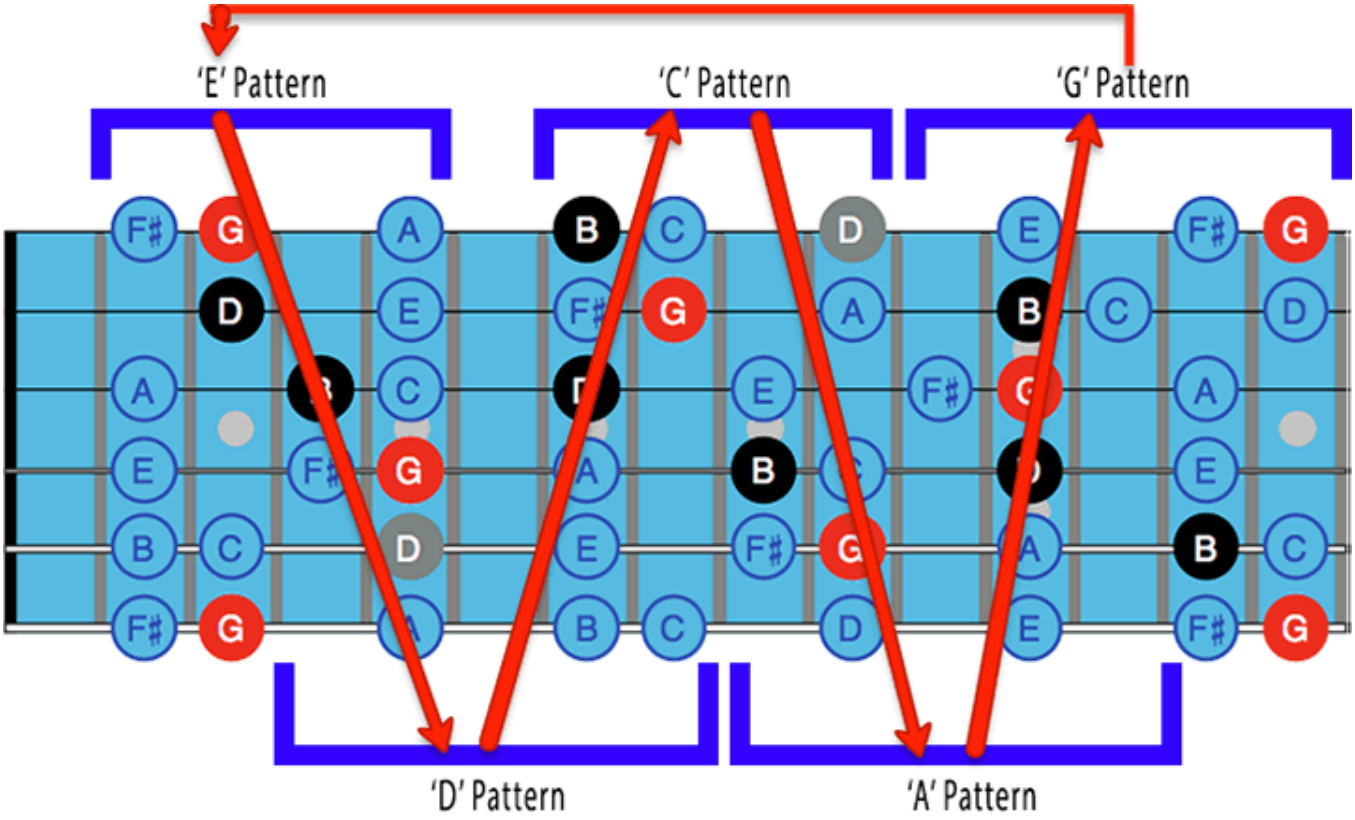
**G Major:**




In the CAGED system, the next pattern following the ‘C’ pattern will always be the ‘A’ pattern, following this will be ‘G’ and so on.

Notice the ‘E’ pattern is dropped down to the 2nd fret.

Once you get to the ‘D’ pattern the sequence then goes back to the start – to the ‘C’ pattern.




As you can see, the CAGED system is an excellent method for quickly learning what the shapes **look like**, and also remembering the **order** of the patterns as you move up the guitar neck.

**Result**?

As long as you know the note names of the lowest 3 strings, you can now find any major scale key in *any position*!

## Exercises To Learn And Memorize the 5 CAGED Patterns

The following exercises will help you to easily remember the 5 CAGED patterns:

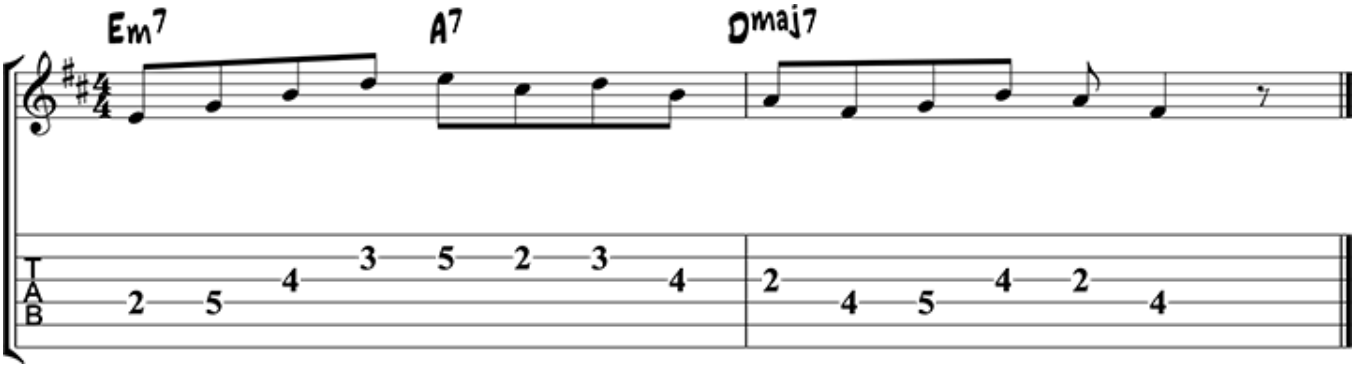
- Play each pattern starting from the lowest root note and ascend through the scale. Visualize not only the relevant chord shape in your mind as you play but also all of the root notes – which can be thought of as 'anchor points' for the pattern.
- Play from the highest root note and play descending through the scale – visualizing the relevant open chord shape and roots.
- Play the scales using melodic sequences to build familiarity with the pattern, e.g. by using the 'C' pattern on the 7th fret (giving a G Major scale):

*Listen & Play*




Learn these simple major scale licks in each of the 5 CAGED patterns (you may need to move them up or down an octave depending on what pattern you are playing):

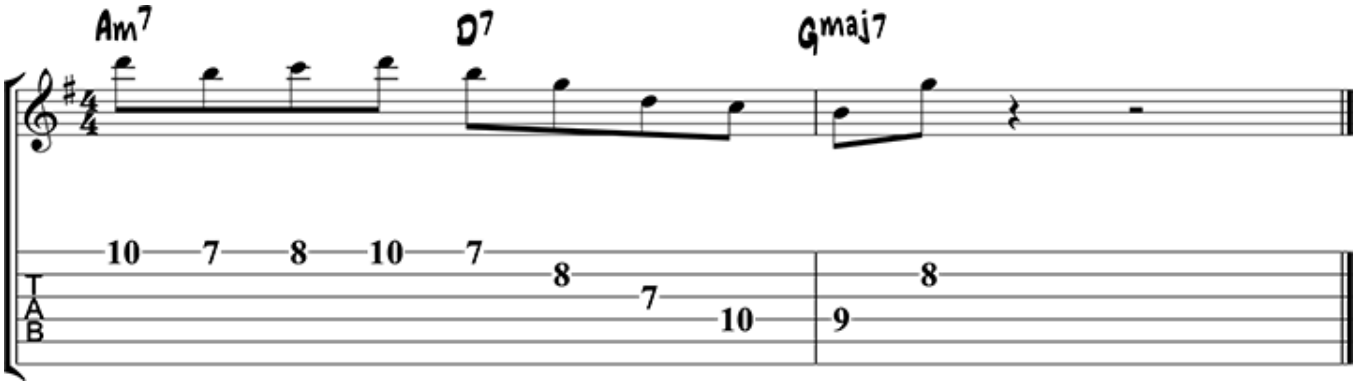
*Listen & Play*




*Listen & Play*




*Listen & Play*




Improvise using each of the 5 patterns one at a time in G Major using this backing track.

Start by doing a few rounds on the C shape and then try on each of the rest of the CAGED patterns:
*Backing Track*

*Listen & Play*




Don’t worry if your solo doesn’t sound particularly interesting – that’s not the point of this exercise.

This is simply a method to gain familiarity with each of the 5 patterns.

**‘Threading’ The Patterns Together**

Imagine as if you’re stitching together a quilt. The 5 patterns are like 5 separate pieces of cloth.

Now that you’ve gained familiarity with the 5 patterns, it’s now time to learn how to ‘thread’ the patterns together so you can switch between them during your solos, enabling you **improvise anywhere on the fretboard at your will.**

Cool huh?

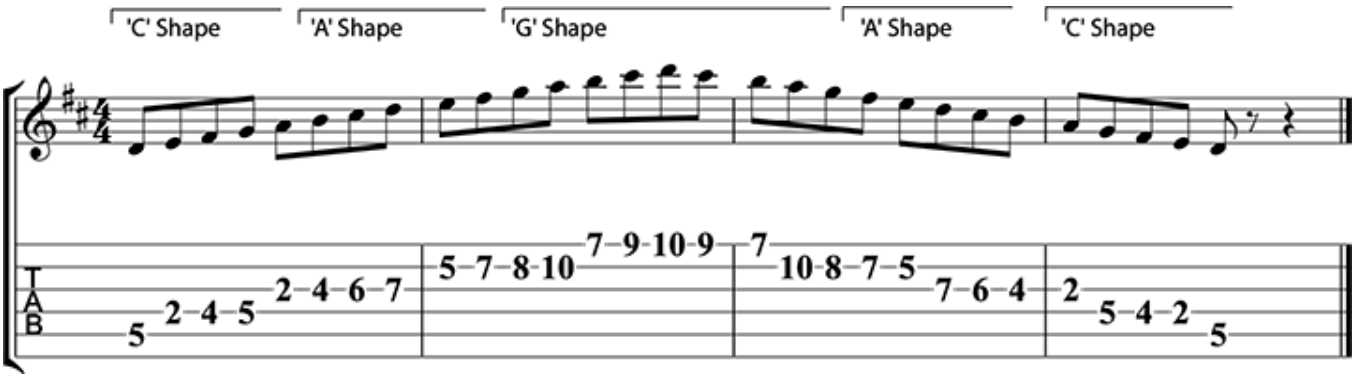
The process involves using **fret position shifts** to move to and from each scale pattern as you move up up and down the neck.

Let’s start by using D Major again.

**Pattern Threading Exercises**

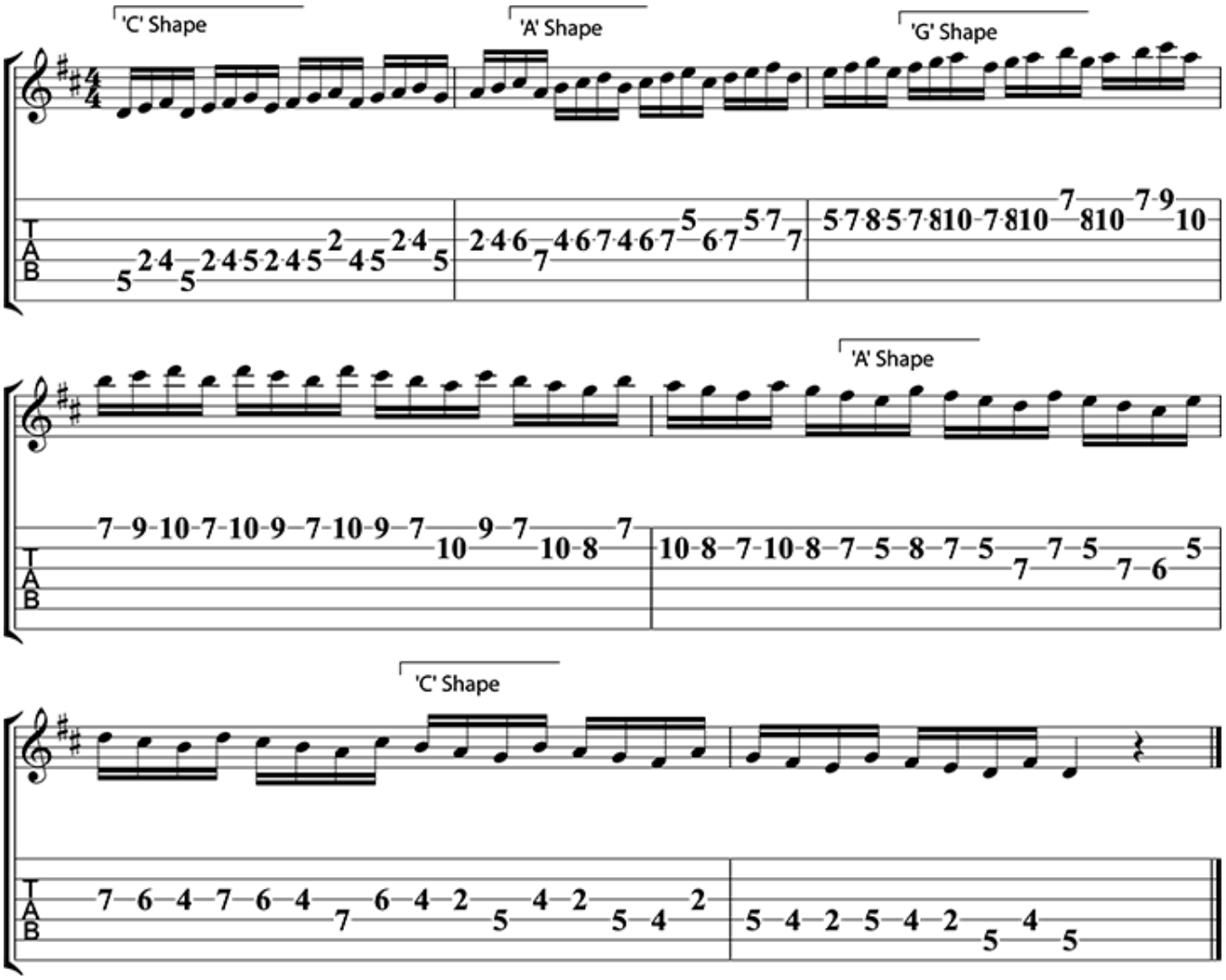
You'll start by simply playing the D Major scale across CAGED patterns C, A, and G (see video):

*Watch & Play*




Now use this simple melodic sequence to highlight each CAGED pattern as you move through it (note – some of the fingering is different on the way down to make it more playable) :

*Watch & Play*




Now see if you can do it on your own.

Try to shift from one pattern to the other, starting from a root note in one pattern to end up in the root note of another.

Just experiment – there are millions of possible **fingering combinations**, so it's good to be able to shift spontaneously between patterns using different fingerings.

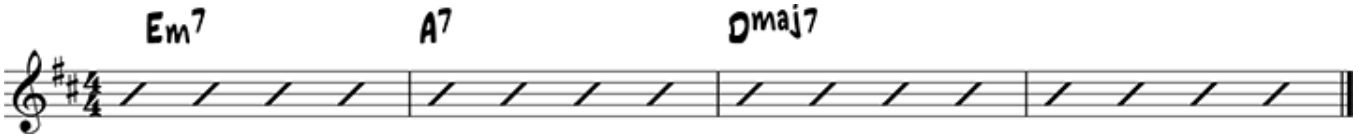
It helps to keep firmly in mind the root notes of each pattern as a reference point to go by as you move up and down the neck.

If it helps, visualize the relevant open chord shape as you play each pattern.

Finally, try to improvise over this backing track in D Major whilst moving from pattern to pattern.

Improvising is not only a great way to create music but also an **excellent tool** to learn scale patterns.

*Backing Track*




## Using CAGED Patterns with Key Changes

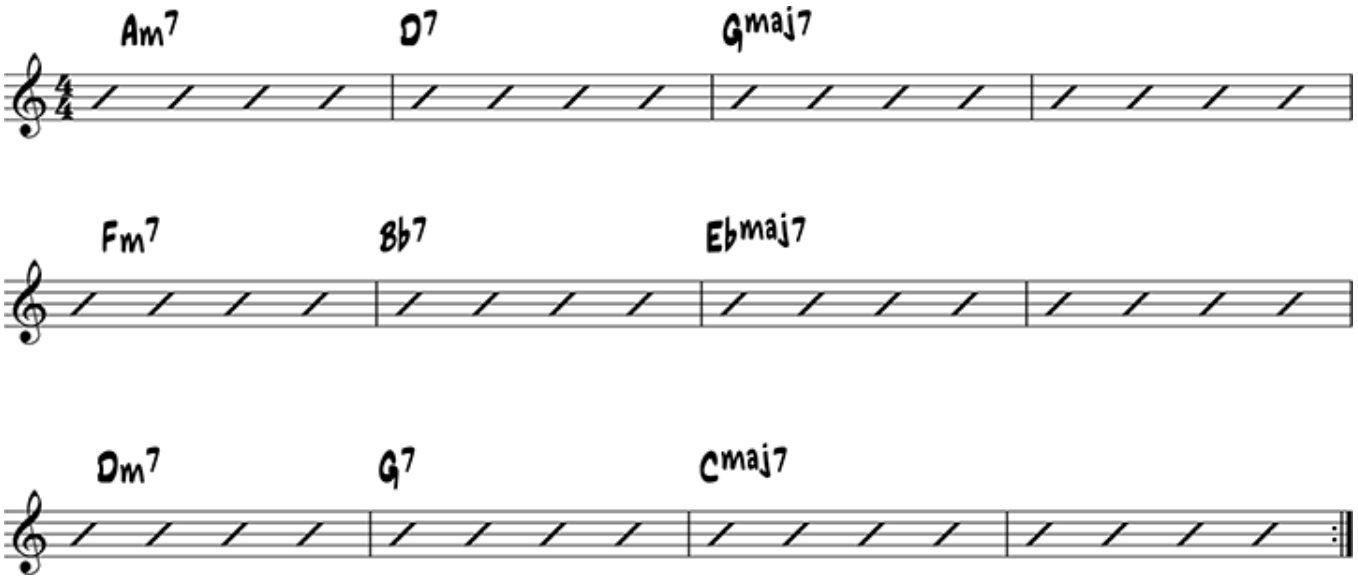
Now you're ready to practice changing keys.

This is especially relevant for jazz, as the key changes in jazz are thick and fast – in pop or rock there are usually very few key changes to deal with.

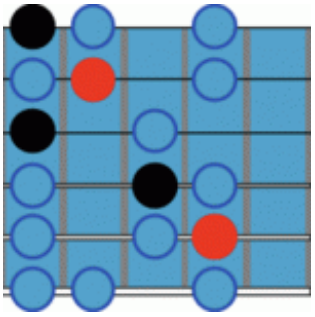
For this exercise, start with one of the CAGED patterns in G Major and then move to each new key using the relevant pattern *on or near the fret position you are currently at*.

As an example, take this key progression that moves from G Major, to Eb Major, then finally to C Major.

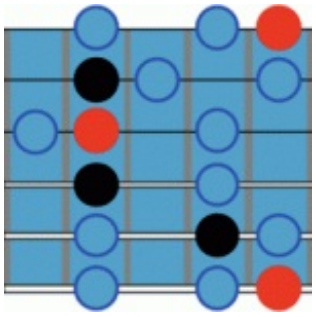
*Backing Track*



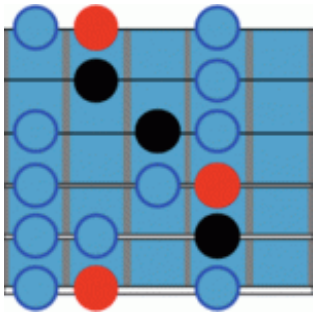

Here's an example of one combination of the patterns you could use to navigate these chord changes:



‘C’ Pattern on 7th fret for G Major



‘G’ Pattern on 6th fret for Eb Major



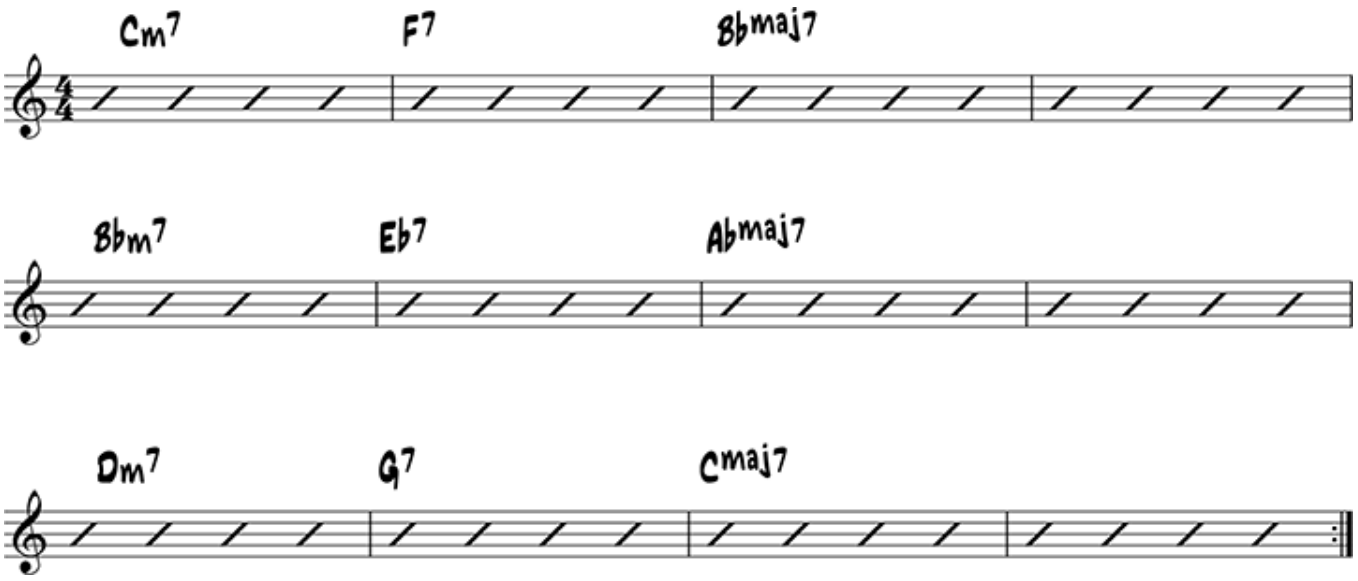
‘E’ Pattern on 7th fret for C Major

Once you’ve mastered the above starting with one of the CAGED patterns, repeat the exercise with a different one until you can easily change keys with all of the five CAGED patterns.

Here’s another chord progression you can practice in a similar manner, starting in the key of Bb Major, then moving to Ab Major before finishing in C Major.

Choose a spot on the guitar neck and see if you can figure out which patterns to play over this progression.

*Backing Track*



## Conclusion

Well done – you have successfully learned how to play a scale in any key, over the whole fretboard.

Give yourself a pat on the back!

Starting out initially with the **5 CAGED scale patterns** as outlined in this article is a very good initial step to mastering the fingerboard.

**However**…

This article only dealt with the **major scale.**

Each of the other scale types, such as harmonic minor, melodic minor and pentatonic minor, also have 5 patterns you need to learn (that are really just alterations of the CAGED patterns).

It's been great to have had this opportunity to delve deep into this often misunderstood topic of guitar positions.

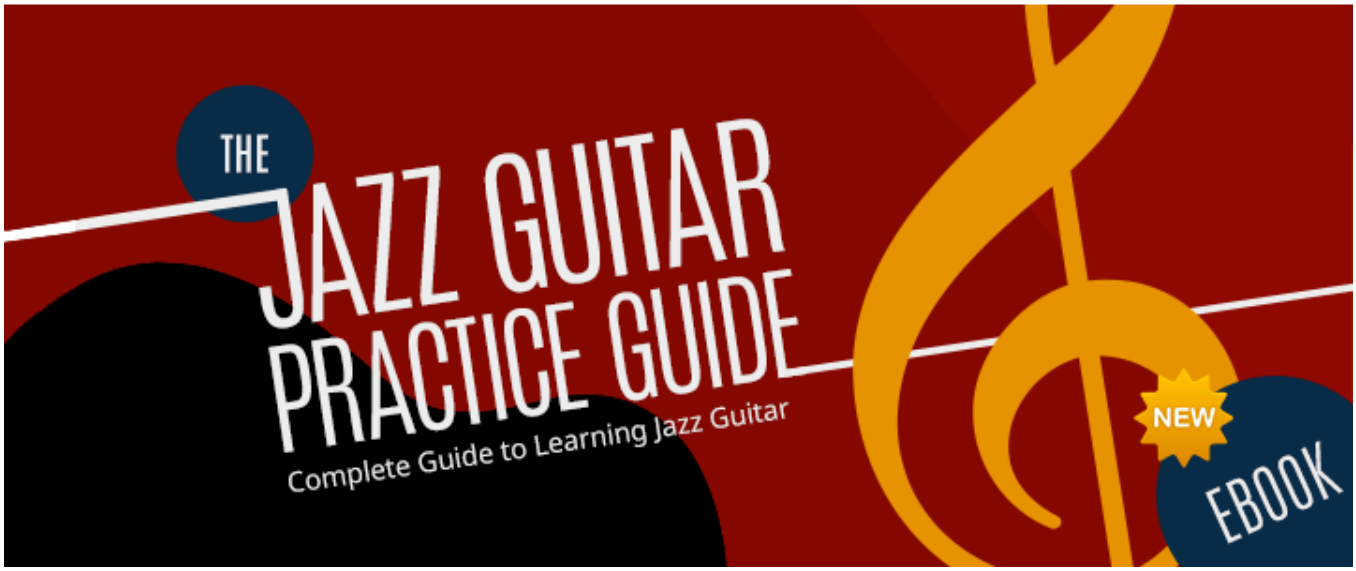
Understanding the two different meanings of the term is very important, and by using the 5 pattern CAGED system you now have a secure and elegant method to understand how guitar positions work, so you can navigate the guitar fretboard with confidence.

## About the Author

*Greg O'Rourke is an Australian guitarist, specializing in jazz and fingerstyle guitar. His website www.fretdojo.com provides online resources for developing fingerstyle guitar technique and also chronicles Greg's explorations in jazz guitar playing.*

As an exclusive bonus to Jazz Guitar Online readers, he's offering the eBook, *'Essential Scale Patterns for Guitar'*, that includes Major, Harmonic Minor, Melodic Minor, and Pentatonic Minor/Major patterns, as well as suggested fingerings for all the patterns for **free**.

Click Here to Learn How to Organize a Jazz Guitar Practice Routine for Maximum Efficiency!




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