

Music Theory Roadmap

When you study music theory in school, you learn from a professor, from a book, in a specific order, which means you don't miss any steps. It's more challenging to learn theory on your own.

Many guitar players fall into the trap of jumping from topic to topic and making things harder than they need to be, but music theory really isn't that hard if you take it step by step.

This a roadmap for learning music theory. Not everybody will fully agree with this timeline, and there are good arguments for changing the order, especially as you get further down the list. But if you're learning theory on your own, keep this checklist on hand so you don't get ahead of yourself. If you are interested in music theory from a guitarist's perspective, check out my book [Guitar Theory Modules](#).

The Roadmap

- **Read Standard Notation**

You can learn theory without reading music, but it's a **lot** easier if you can read standard notation.

- **Notes on the Fretboard**

As you learn to read standard notation, you should also learn the notes on the fretboard.

- **Half Steps and Whole Steps**

If you understand half steps and whole steps – and how to play them on the guitar – you'll understand scale construction more easily, and it'll be easier to learn your scales from both a theory standpoint and as a player.

- **Major Scales**

Most non-classical guitarists learn pentatonic scales first because they're easy on the guitar. If you're studying music theory, you should learn how major scales are built because the major scale serves as a point of reference for everything else.

- **Key Signatures**

At the most basic level, a key signature tells you which notes to play as flats or sharps. Beyond that, you can use some simple key signature rules for learning what key you're playing in...first major keys and then their relative minor keys, which come later in this list.

- **Circle of 5ths**

The Circle of 5ths isn't absolutely necessary, but it is a useful tool for understanding how key signatures relate to each other.

- **Intervals and Their Inversions**

An interval is the distance in pitch between two notes. Understanding intervals is key to understanding how chords are built.

- **Triads**

After you understand intervals, you're ready to learn how to build triads. The two most common triads are major and minor triads, so start with those. Then learn diminished triads, and save augmented triads for last. When studying triads, you should learn to label the parts of the chord: root, 3rd, 5th.

- **Chord Inversions**

At first, you'll learn chords in root position, meaning that the root of the chord (the note the chord is built on) is written and played as the lowest note. In chord inversions, some note other than the root of the chord is written as the lowest sounding note.

- **Common Major Key Chord Progressions**

After you're comfortable with triads, it's time to learn some common chord progressions. You can put chords in any order you like, but it's useful to learn the most common progressions first.

○ **7th Chords**

There are several types of 7th chords, but the most common is the Dominant 7. After that, check out the Major 7, Minor 7, Minor 7b5 chords, and Diminished 7 chords. In classical theory, Minor 7b5 chords are better known as Half Diminished chords, and Diminished 7 chords are better known as Fully Diminished chords.

○ **Add 7th Chords to Progressions**

As you learn 7th chords, start adding them to the major key progressions mentioned earlier. You'll find that major 7 and minor 7 serve the same function as major and minor – they're just more colorful.

○ **Relative Major and Minor**

You can learn about relative major and minor earlier in this timeline – possibly right after major scales and key signatures if you like. This important concept will help you understand the relationship between major and minor keys.

○ **Natural, Harmonic, and Melodic Minor Scales**

As you become familiar with relative major and minor, you can learn to construct and play natural, harmonic, and melodic minor scales. You can learn these scales before learning relative major and minor, but they'll make more sense if you learn about relative minor first. Learn the natural minor scale first, then harmonic minor, then melodic minor.

○ **Common Minor Key Chord Progressions**

While you learn minor scales and keys, you can start exploring common minor chord progressions the way you learned common major progressions.

○ **Color Chords, Extensions, and Altered Dominants**

Color chords are chords like Major 6 or Minor 6, suspensions, and “add” chords. Extensions are chords like 9, 11, and 13 chords. In altered dominant chords, you will often see a dominant 7 with a raised or lowered 5th or 9th.

- **Secondary Dominants**

The dominant chord is based on the 5th scale degree and leads strongly to the tonic, or the “1” chord. A secondary dominant is a chord that has been altered to sound like a dominant 7 chord, and it leads strongly to a note **other** than the tonic.

- **Modes**

Many guitar players fall into the trap of trying to learn modes too soon, like it’s a magic pill for better soloing. There’s nothing wrong with learning modes earlier in your theory journey, but you’ll gain a deeper understanding of modes and how to use them if you have more knowledge under your belt.

There are plenty of other theory topics you can get into after all of this, such as modulations and chord substitutions, but if you’ve gone through this checklist in order (or at least close to this order), you’ll be ready to tackle deeper subjects.