Relative Keys

With the *'Three-Chord Method' (previous lessons)*, a basic three-chord progression can be arranged on guitar for any major or minor key. The next step will be to expand the amount of chords for songwriting with a ***'Relative Keys Method'***. Not only will this method double the amount of chords to write a song with, it will also introduce the concept of harmonizing major and minor keys.

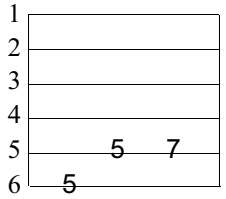
Relative Minor Keys

Every major key (*three primary chords*) has a ***relative minor key*** (*three minor chords*) that will harmonize with it, producing six potential chords to write a song with. A ***'Relative Key Method'***, which uses the guitar and expands the *'Three-Chord Method',* is explained in the next section.

Relative Keys Method

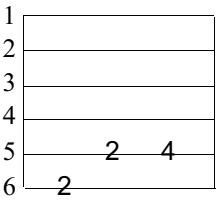
The *'Three-Chord Method'* that determines the three primary chords is simply repeated ***three frets lower*** to determine the ***relative minor key***. In the Key of 'A', for example, the three primary chords are found starting from 'A' on the sixth string (*fifth fret*). To determine the relative minor key, simply shift three frets lower (*sixth string/second fret*) and apply the same 'Three-Chord Method' to determine the ***three relative minor chords*** (*shown right*).

Major Key



Key of 'A'
('A'-'D'-'E')

Relative Minor Key

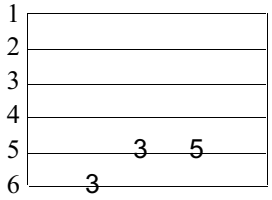


Key of 'F♯m'
('F♯m'-'Bm'-'C♯m')

The Method Works For Any Key

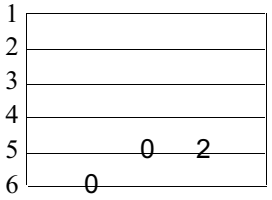
The *'Relative Keys Method*' can be used to determine the three primary and relative chords of ***any key.*** In the Key of 'G', for example, simply use the same method starting from the 'G' note on the sixth string/third fret (*below*). The 'Relative Keys Method' can also be applied to either the fourth or fifth strings, which can save time from having to 'count-up' the sixth string for certain keys. In the Key of 'C', fo example, the method can be applied to the fifth string.

Major Key



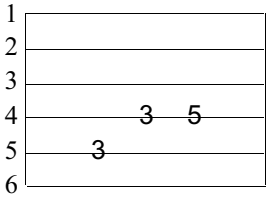
Key of 'G'
('G'-'C'-'D')

Relative Minor Key



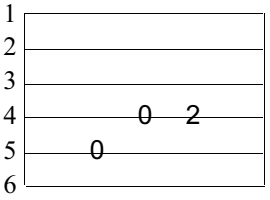
Key of 'Em'
('Em'-'Am'-'Bm')

Major Key



Key of 'C'
('C'-'F'-'G')

Relative Minor Key



Key of 'Am'
('Am'-'Dm'-'Em')

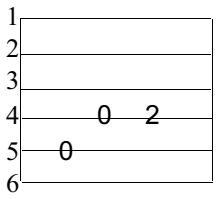
Any Chord Combination Works

Understanding relative keys is an introduction to shifting tones or moods within a song without compromising its harmonic structure. For example, any six-chord combination from the above keys will be exclusive to that key, therefore ***any combination or arrangement*** of these six chords will harmonize within that key. Knowing this allows for strumming countless variations of six-chord arrangements without sounding out of key. When strumming these chords, try to intentionally alternate between major and minor chords in order to hear the shift in mood or tone that is associated with using relative keys.

Relative Major Keys

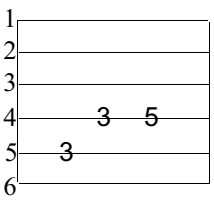
The concept of every major key having a relative minor key can be reversed, meaning every minor key also has a ***relative major key***. To determine the ***relative major chords*** for any minor key, simply reverse the *'Relative Key Method'*. For example, to determine the three primary and relative chords in the Key of 'A' Minor, use the 'Three-Chord Method' to determine the three primary chords, then repeat the method three frets higher to determine the three relative major chords (*see right*).

Minor Key



Key of 'Am'
('Am'-'Dm'-'Em')

Relative Major Key



Key of 'C'
('C'-'F'-'G')

Why Keys Are 'Relative'

On guitar, relative keys are always located three frets apart, with the relative major key always being three frets higher than its relative minor key. In the previous section, for example, the Key of 'C' Major is located three frets higher than its relative minor key of 'A' Minor. When applying the '*Relative Keys Method'* for ***either*** key, the result is that both the Key of 'C' and the Key of 'A' Minor ***share the same six chords*** (*'C'-'F'-'G'-'Am'-'Dm'-'Em'*), which explains why these keys are 'related' or ***relative***. The question then arises as to what *differentiates* between keys that share identical chords, and this will be discussed in the next section.

Properly Naming A Key

The chord that is the ***focal point*** of the song arrangement generally determines the proper key identification of the song. For example, with an '*Am-C-F-Am*' arrangement, the 'Am' chord is the focal point (*beginning and ending*) of the progression, so it would be more accurate to say the progression is in the Key of 'A' Minor. With an arrangement of *'C-Am-G-C'*, it would be more accurate to describe the progression as being in the Key of 'C' Major.

Relative Keys Chart

The ***Relative Key Chart*** below shows some of the more popular keys used for guitar.

Key	Primary Chords			Relative Chords		
G Major	**G**	**C**	**D**	**Em**	**Am**	**Bm**
D Major	**D**	**G**	**A**	**Bm**	**Em**	**F♯m**
C Major	**C**	**F**	**G**	**Am**	**Dm**	**Em**
A Minor	**Am**	**Dm**	**Em**	**C**	**F**	**G**
D Minor	**Dm**	**Gm**	**Am**	**F**	**B♭**	**C**