

Learn about tonic shapes

Tonic shapes are an excellent way to organize the fretboard so that you always know what key you are in. This enables you to use your musical vocabulary to create music freely.

Let's start with clarifying a few music theory terms:

root and **tonic** mean the same thing: it's the key you're in

Now, what does key mean? Well, there is an in-depth definition based on a lot of music theory, and then there is a simplistic definition, which is a little vague. Let's go with the latter:

key = *a group of notes that belong together, which songs use to create melodies and chords.*

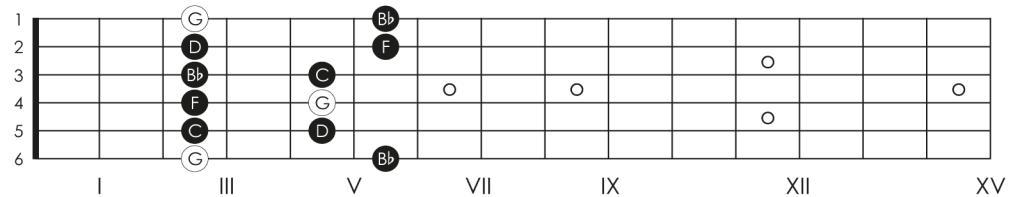
So when someone says that a song is in a particular key, for example "the key of E", they are usually referring to E major and there are certain notes that are used for that key. Songs can also be in minor keys as well, like "the key of A minor."

Essentially, these tonic shapes are fundamentally just octave shapes (**octave** = same note name, but higher or lower). You want to know them by both names: **tonic shapes** and **octave shapes**.

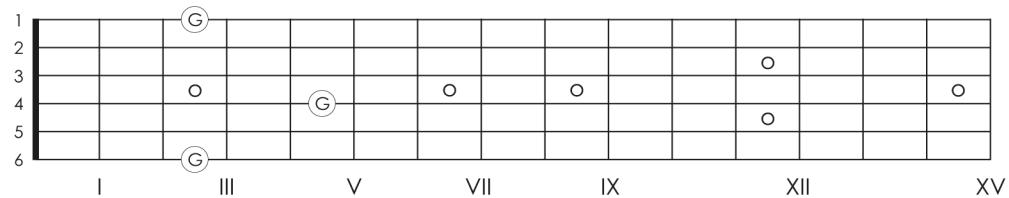
Once again, I am suggesting that you focus on keeping it simple for now and trust that you will learn the details of music theory later, after you've been playing music for a while. This is an effective approach. I've stated before that one of the cooler aspects of learning to play the guitar is that you do not have to really know a lot about music theory in the beginning—it's all about shapes and fingerings and patterns.

Here are the tonic shapes in each pattern:
 (all the other note names are here for reference—mainly focus on the tonics)

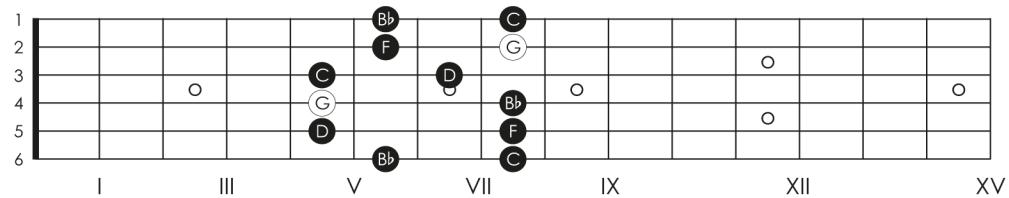
G Minor Pentatonic Scale Pattern #1



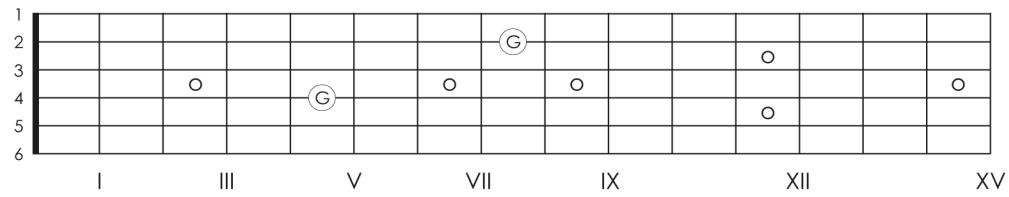
Tonic Shape #1



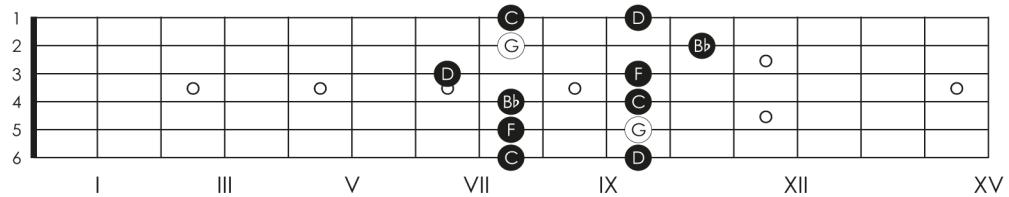
G Minor Pentatonic Scale Pattern #2



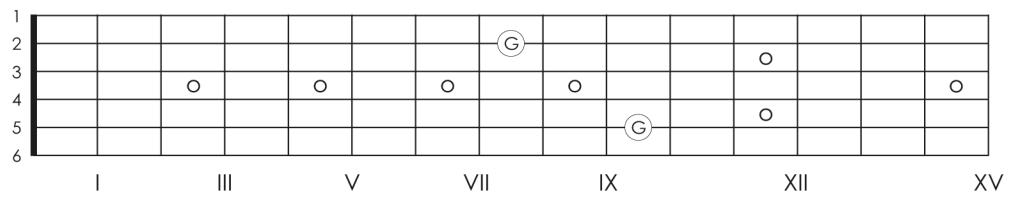
Tonic Shape #2



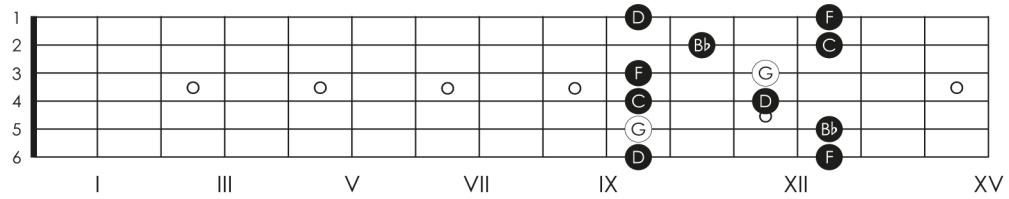
G Minor Pentatonic Scale Pattern #3



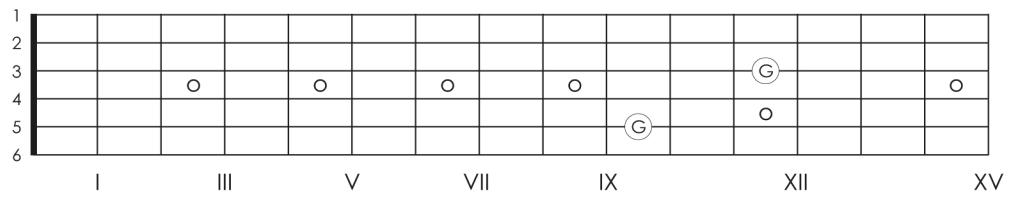
Tonic Shape #3



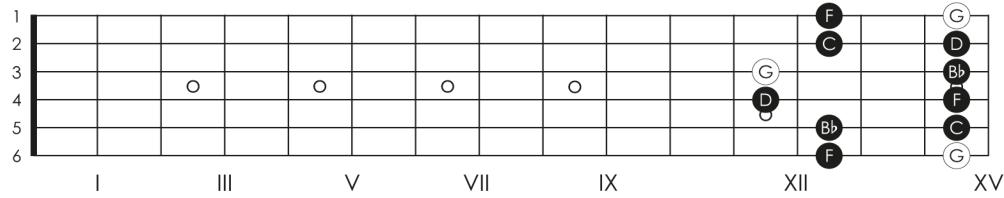
G Minor Pentatonic Scale Pattern #4



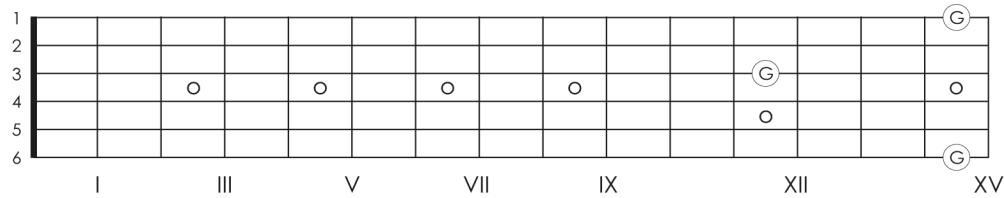
Tonic Shape #4



G Minor Pentatonic Scale Pattern #5



Tonic Shape #5



Notice that these tonic shapes overlap: the “left note(s)” of the *higher* tonic shape is/are the same as the “right note(s)” of the *lower* tonic shape.

Also, there isn’t any specific fingering for the tonic shapes themselves. It is best if you relate to these shapes by what string the notes are on, along with how many frets apart they are. But when you go to play them by themselves, just use a fingering that makes the most sense. It doesn’t always have to correspond to the fingering of the scale pattern they’re from, but often that will indeed work.

All of the music vocabulary that you will ever learn (chords, scales and arpeggios) will be based on these shapes. Soon you will be using them to navigate the fretboard and create music in a way where you know exactly what you are doing!

So, get these tonic shapes down solid and be able to play them in any order.