

# Pentatonic Scales

You should be familiar with the major and minor scales in order to fully understand all about the pentatonic scales. **Penta means five and tonic means note so a pentatonic scale is simply a scale composed of five notes.**

Pentatonic scale can be understood from several angles :

1. as an independent scale
2. a subset of a seven notes scale

Sometimes it can be useful to see it as 1. where you have harmonic content from a pentatonic scale and a melody from it too. However, this is not too common, especially in the guitar realm.

The 2. applies most of the time for most guitarists. We usually play melodies, solos and improvise in a pentatonic scale over foreign chords. We are going to study the use of pentatonic scales over the major scale and its modes. We are going to focus essentially on this in this lesson.

"Diatonic scales of five notes are harmonically limited in scope because of the lack of semitones. It is therefore extremely difficult to achieve harmonic and melodic direction in a pure pentatonic form. [...] Pentatonic materials function well melodically or harmonically, but seldom both. Pentatonic melodies are often harmonized with foreign chords." - Harmony, Creative Aspects and Practice by Vincent Persichetti, 1961

Learning the pentatonic scales offer several benefits :

- Playing the pentatonic scale is like only **playing the "nice" notes**. The ones that will work in *almost all* contexts. The "*almost all*" is important here, because music is not that simple and there are unfortunately no rules for everything.
- It is easier to play because you just have to **focus on 5 notes** instead of 7.
- It is **commonly used** ! Lots of solos, famous or not, use the pentatonic scale.

# Major Pentatonic Scale Theory

The Major Pentatonic Scale is really simply a subset of the Major Scale. So how do we construct it ? The pentatonic scales rules are the following :

- a pentatonic scale must have no semitones intervals
- it should contain the most important 5 notes of the scale it comes from

If we want to respect these two rules, since we have two semitones in the Major Scale; for each semitone we have to pick one note and discard the other. Now, which ones should we discard ?

Well, if we think about the intervals that compose the Major Scale :

- First, we need to choose between the M3 and the P4. The 3rd is clearly much more important than the 4th because the major third defines the Major Scale. We can not get rid of it ! On the other hand, the 4th is not a crucial note in the Major Scale. We can discard that note safely.
- Secondly, we need to choose between the M7 and the R (Root). There is no need to argue a lot on this. We just have to keep the root because it defines in which Major Key we are. The major 7th is not that crucial so we can discard this note safely.

We end up with this subset :

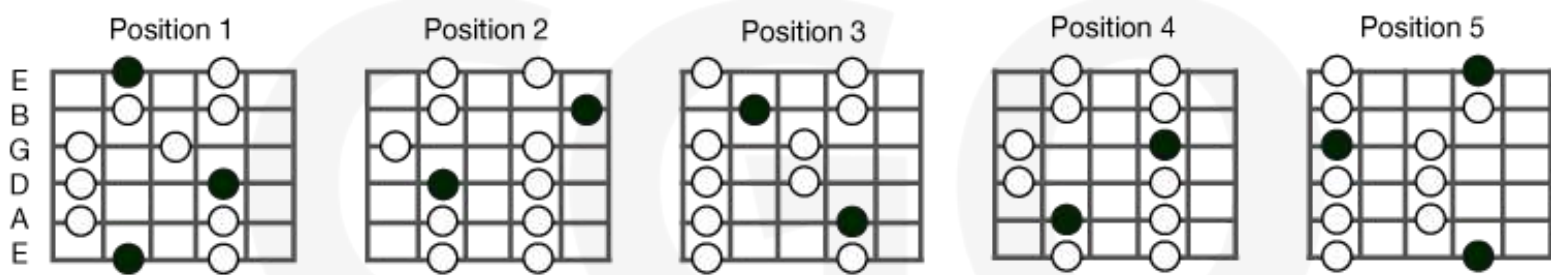
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Major	R	M2	M3	P4	P5	M6	M7	
Pentatonic Major	R	M2	M3	P4	P5	M6	M7	

The Pentatonic Major Scale is composed of the R, M2, M3, P5 and M6 of its corresponding Major Scale.

# Major Pentatonic Scale in Practice

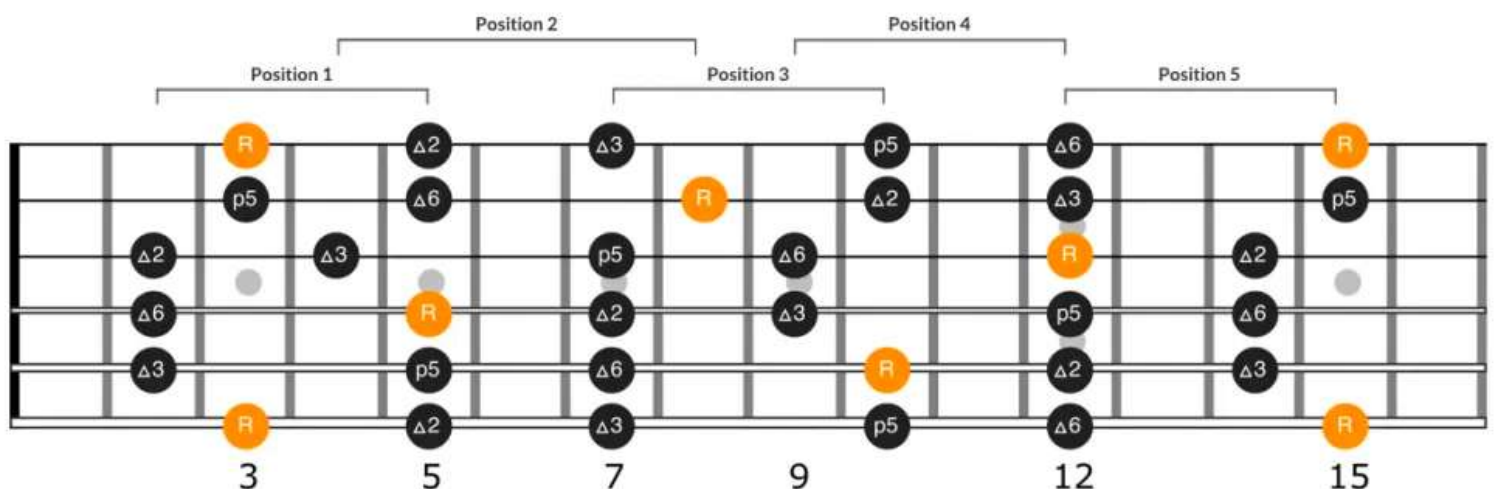
In reality, a lot of guitar players do not get the chance to see the theory behind the pentatonic scales and just learn the patterns. Patterns are indeed useful, nevertheless they do not allow you to comprehend the music you play in depth.

Patterns allow you to learn easily and quickly your pentatonic scales on your instrument. Here are the guitar patterns for the Major Pentatonic Scales :



These 5 positions are so common. They are the bread and butter of guitar solos. **You have to learn them at some point !** The root notes are in bold.

The G Major Pentatonic Scale on the guitar neck looks like this. We can see the 5 different positions directly on the whole neck with this representation :



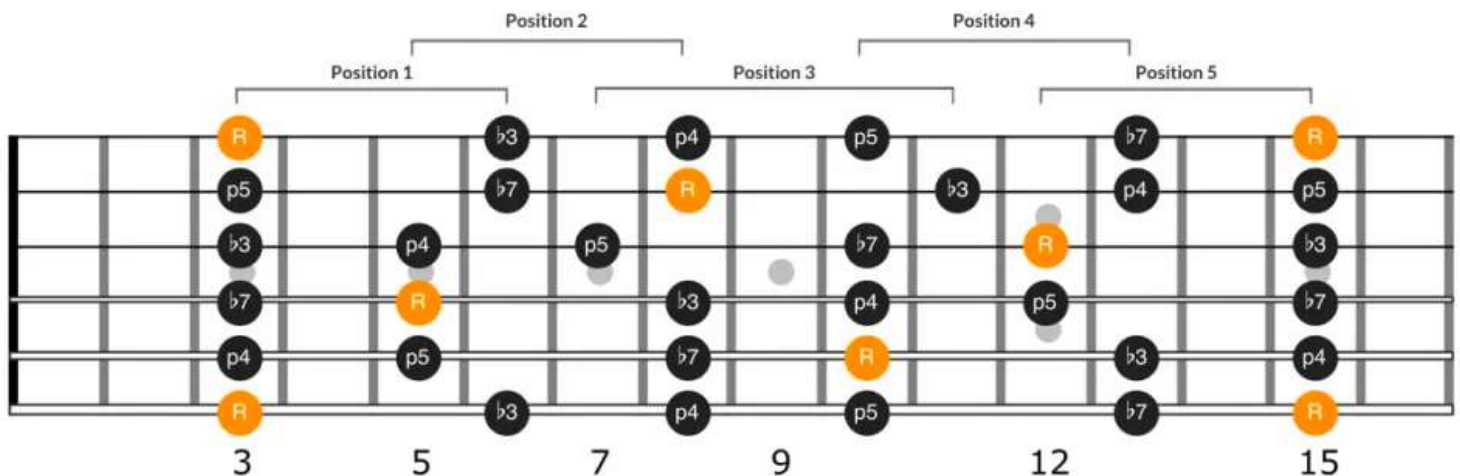
# Minor Pentatonic Scale

Since you have seen how to construct the Major Pentatonic Scale, we are going to skip most explanations. You can find it by yourself as an exercise.

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Minor	R	M2	m3	P4	P5	m6	m7	
Pentatonic Minor	R	M2	m3	P4	P5	m6	m7	

The Pentatonic Minor Scale is composed of the R, m3, P4, P5 and m7 of its corresponding Minor Scale.

The G Pentatonic Minor Scale looks like this on the guitar.



**The Pentatonic Minor Scale is maybe the most important scale to learn for guitarists.** It is used almost everywhere (without exaggeration) ! You should dedicate some times to **learn it by heart and study licks** to develop your soloing skills using this scale. This is also the first step to improvise on your guitar !

You may have noticed something a little strange if you compared the Pentatonic Major and Minor scales. They look the similar ! In fact it is even weirder : they look the same (with a slight transposition) ! This is totally normal and can be explained thanks to modes ! Modes are explored in the advanced part of the lessons.