THE CAGED SYSTEM

A Comprehensive Framework

fretteleven

DEMYSTIFYING THE FRETBOARD

If you've ever felt lost on the neck, unsure of where to go or how to sound good over a progression, you're not alone. The CAGED system exists to change that, not by giving you shortcuts, but by giving you structure. When you internalize this framework, you unlock three things that transform how you play:

Confidence: You won't second-guess your choices in a jam or freeze on stage. You'll know where to go and why. CAGED gives you a reliable roadmap that works in every key, so you're never just guessing or chasing shapes. It gives you the ability to contribute, not just follow.

Connection: Your ear, your hands, your mind, and the fretboard start speaking the same language. Instead of thinking in isolated chords or licks, you start seeing how everything connects. That connection breeds freedom. You can move through positions with intention, and your ideas won't get lost between your head and your hands.

A Stronger Ear: As the shapes become familiar, your ear starts to anticipate what's coming. You begin to hear intervals, voice leading, and chord tones before you play them. That means your improvising, songwriting, and even your rhythm playing will feel more locked in and more like you.

This guide will walk you through the CAGED system step by step. It's not flashy. It's not a quick fix. But it's effective. If you show up consistently, the fretboard will stop feeling like a puzzle and start feeling like home.

You'll stop being the player who's quietly trying to keep up and start becoming the player others rely on. Someone who knows their way around the neck, who can adapt on the fly, and who plays with clarity and conviction.

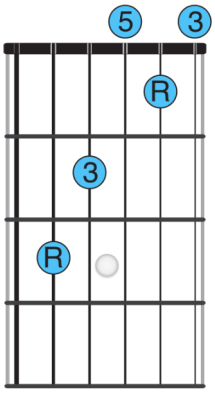
OPEN CHORDS

The CAGED system is built on five familiar open chord shapes: C, A, G, E, and D. If you've been playing guitar for a while, you likely already know them.

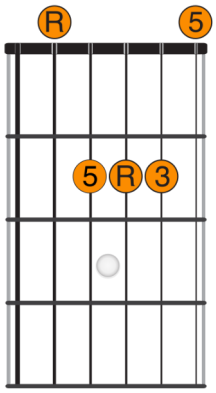
Each of these shapes outlines a major chord using just three notes: the root, the major third, and the perfect fifth. In every shape belowhhh, the lowest note is the root, and the rest of the chord is built around that.

These shapes are more than just a way to play chords. They give you a visual structure that you can move around the neck to play in different keys. When you understand how each one is built, you'll start to see how they connect to everything else like scales, arpeggios, and real musical ideas.

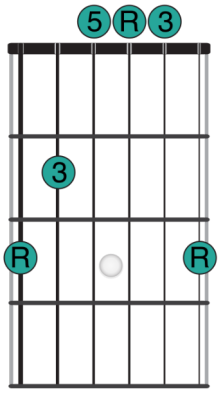
For now, focus on learning how each of these open chords is built. The root, third, and fifth are the foundation of the major chord, and they're the starting point for everything that follows in the CAGED system.



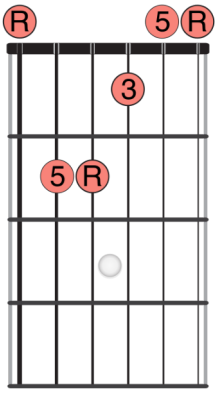
C SHAPE



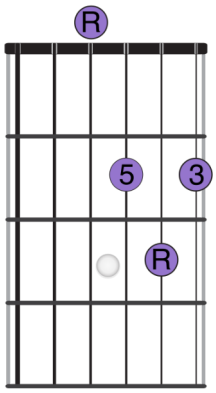
A SHAPE



G SHAPE

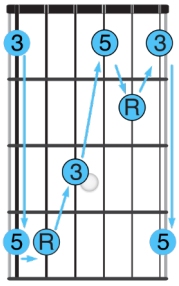


E SHAPE

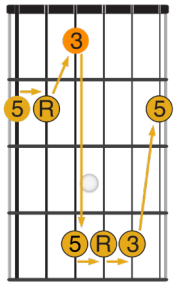


D SHAPE

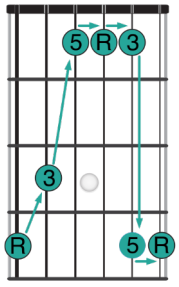
ARPEGGIOS



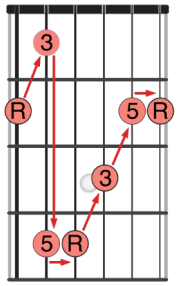
C SHAPE



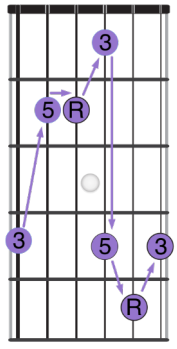
A SHAPE



G SHAPE



E SHAPE



D SHAPE

This is where it starts. Before you worry about how it all works, just get the five major arpeggio shapes under your fingers. These are the foundation of the CAGED system. Each one is based on a familiar open chord shape:

- C and A shapes share a root on the 5th string
- G and E shapes share a root on the 6th string
- D shape on the 4th string

Follow the arrows on the diagrams to move from the lowest note to the highest in the shape. Feel free to end it on the root so your ear can hear the resolution. Your first goal is simple and attainable: get the shapes into your hands without overthinking them. Don't worry about being fast, just focus on familiarity. That's what builds real confidence over time.
As you go, lock in where the root is in each shape. That's your anchor. Once you know where the root lives, everything else starts to make more sense.
Then come back each day and start paying attention to the other two notes in every major triad: the 3rd and the 5th. Looking into this deep reveals the sounds available in a major chord. Learn where they are. Know what they sound like. The intervals between them never change:

- Root to 3rd = Major 3rd
- 3rd to 5th = Minor 3rd
- 5th to Root = Perfect 4th

Get these shapes off the page and into your hands. The more you work with them, the more your playing will feel connected and intentional.
At first, it might feel like you're just following a diagram. That's normal. Keep at it and you'll start hearing the sound of the shape in your head before you even play it. That's your ear, brain, and hands working together.
This takes time, that's how it's supposed to work. It doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong. Every day you spend with these shapes builds a stronger connection to your guitar. Even five quiet minutes can make a difference.
Go slow and pay attention. When you're away from the guitar, run through them in your head, picture the shape, picture the root, hear the 3rd, hear the 5th.
The payoff is huge: you'll feel at home on the fretboard. No more guessing, just knowing where you are and what you can play. That's the goal, confidence, clarity, and that steady "I've got this" feeling.

CAGED IN DIFFERENT KEYS

Once you know the five shapes, the next step is learning they fit together. The CAGED system isn't locked to one position, it shifts depending on the key you're in. That's where the real power starts to show up.

On the next few pages, you'll see the CAGED shapes mapped out horizontally across the fretboard in the keys of D, A, E, and G. Each diagram shows how the five shapes lay out in order, always rooted in the same sequence: C → A → G → E → D. The only thing that changes is where the pattern starts.

Pay close attention to the root notes. These are the reference points that hold the system together. You'll notice how each shape overlaps with the next, sharing notes, connecting seamlessly across the fretboard. That overlap is key. It's what allows you to move fluidly between shapes and unlock the full fretboard.

But here's something important:
These diagrams are just a jump-start.
They're here to help your brain see the system. But don't stay stuck on them.

The real progress happens when you get off the page and work it out on the fretboard yourself. Close the book. Pick a key. Find the roots. Build the five shapes with your hands. That's how the connections start to wire into your mind. That's how the shapes stop being something you're memorizing and start becoming something you know.

At first, it might feel slower. That's okay. The frustration you feel when you can't quite find the next shape? That's your brain learning. That's the very process that builds real confidence.

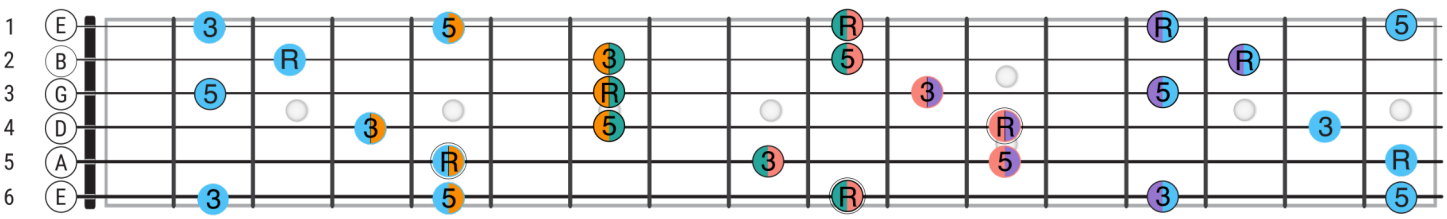
When you stop needing the diagram and can build the system from memory, you own it. You'll start to feel less hesitant, more sure of yourself. You'll be able to shift keys, track chord tones, and move through the neck without guessing. You won't just see the roadmap, you will be the one drawing it.

This is what it looks like to level up:

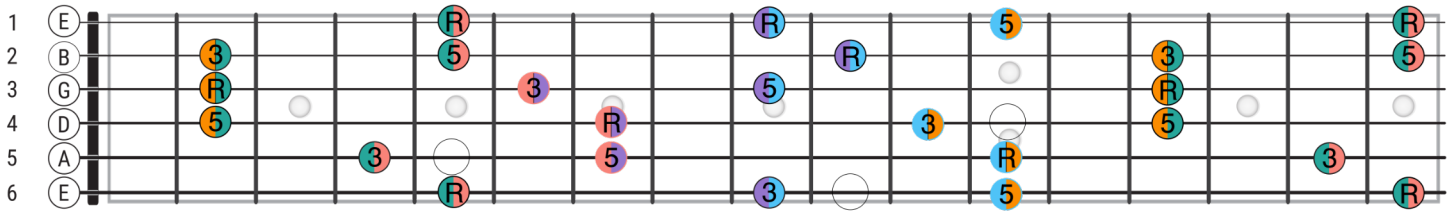
- Move beyond rote shapes.
- Train your eyes, ears, and hands together.
- Get free of the page.

And the reward? A deeper connection to your instrument. More confidence in your hands. And a fretboard that finally feels like it's working with you, not against you.

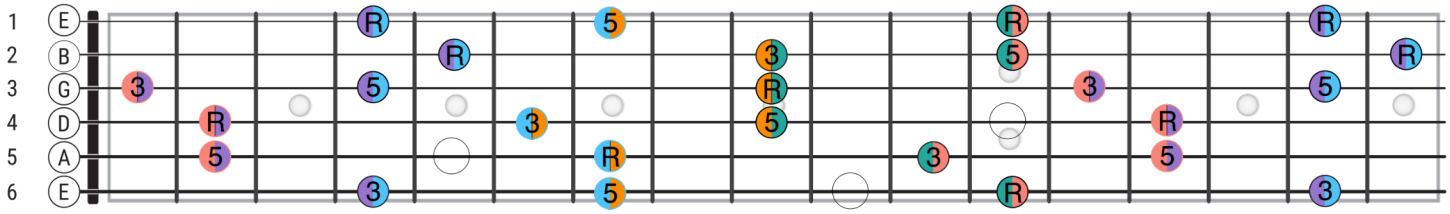
D Major



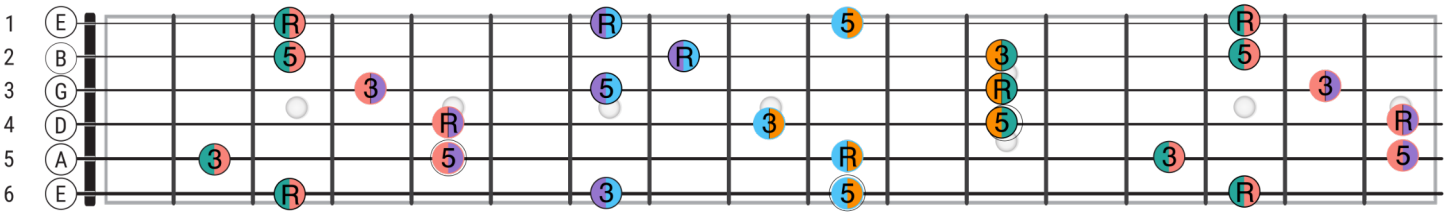
A Major



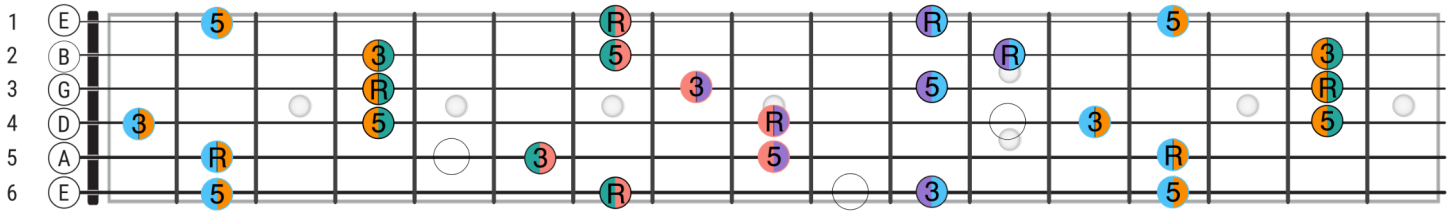
E Major



G Major



B Major



MAJOR PENTATONIC

R — Maj 2nd (Whole Step) — 2 — Maj 2nd (Whole Step) — 3 — Min 3rd (3 semitones) — 5 — Maj 2nd (Whole Step) — 6 — Min 3rd (3 semitones) — R

The major pentatonic scale is just your major triad with two extra notes. You already know the root, the 3rd, and the 5th. Now you're just adding the 2nd (a whole step above the root) and the 6th (a whole step above the 5th). That's it. Those two notes turn a chord into a scale.

And here's the best part, you're not learning **any** new shapes. You're building on the same five shapes you already know. You're just finding where those two extra notes fit in. That's way easier than trying to memorize scale after scale from scratch.

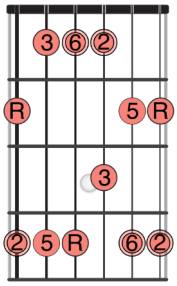
If you already know the pentatonic shapes, focus on how those shapes relate to the arpeggios you just mastered.

Take it one shape at a time. Find where the 2nd is compared to the root and 3rd. Find where the 6th is compared to the 5th and root. **Say the degrees out loud** while you play. Listen for how those new notes sound against the chord tones you already know.

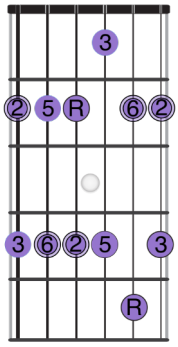
This way, you're not just copying patterns, you're actually seeing and hearing how the notes connect. It's all about building on what you've already learned and making it more musical.

Yes, it takes some focus. But every time you work on it, you're adding another layer to your playing. You're getting closer to knowing exactly where to go on the fretboard and why. That's the goal, and you're on your way.

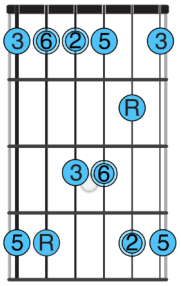
SCALE 1 (E SHAPE)



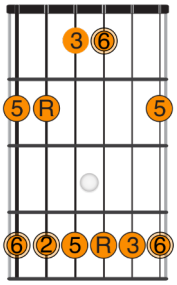
SCALE 2 (D SHAPE)



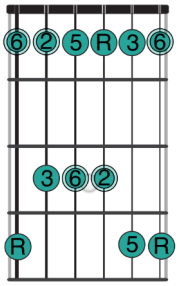
SCALE 3 (C SHAPE)



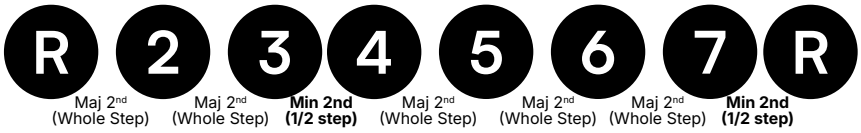
SCALE 4 (A SHAPE)



SCALE 5 (G SHAPE)



MAJOR SCALE



If you're solid on the major pentatonic scale, you're ready for the full major scale. The pentatonic gives you five notes, root, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, and 6th. The full major scale just adds two more: the 4th and the 7th.

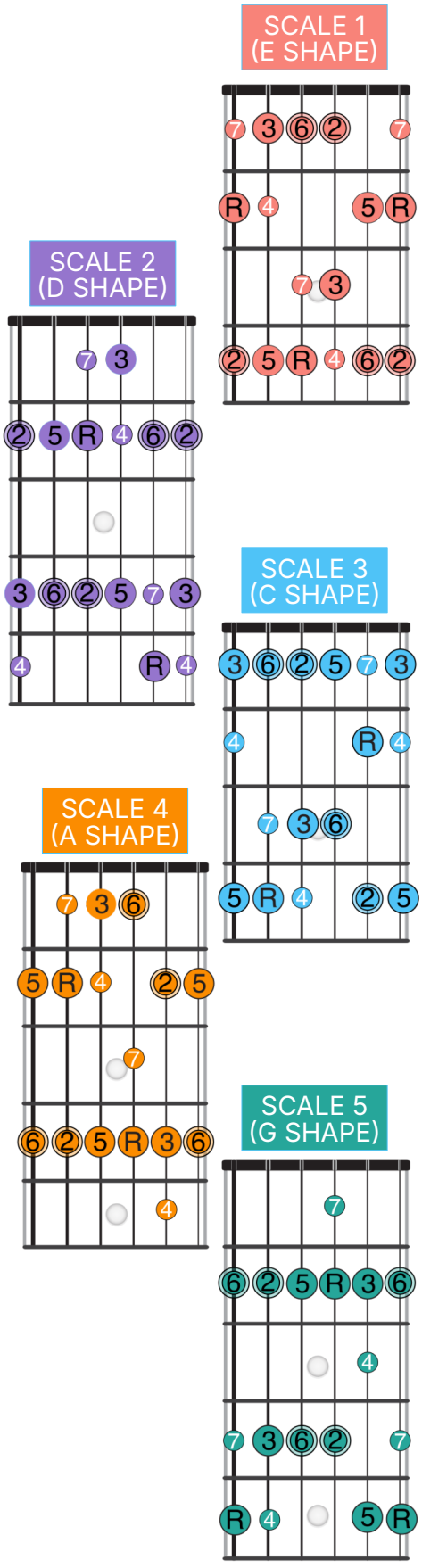
The 4th is a half step above the 3rd. The 7th is a half step below the root. Those smaller gaps change how the scale feels and how it flows under your fingers. They also bring in more tension and release, which can makes your playing more interesting, but they take a bit more accuracy to play cleanly.

Here's the good news: you're not starting from scratch. You've already got the triad / arpeggio (root, 3rd, 5th). You've already expanded it to the pentatonic by adding the 2nd and 6th. Now you're just adding two more notes to complete the picture. It's all the same five shapes you already know, just filled in.

If it feels like too much, go back to your foundation. Make sure the arpeggio shapes are solid. Make sure you can play the pentatonic shapes without thinking. That way, when you add the 4th and 7th, you know exactly where they fit and why.

Start with one shape. Add the new notes slowly. Switch between pentatonic and full major scale in the same position. That back-and-forth will train your hands and your ear.

It takes patience, but you're not "learning more scales", you're adding more control to the shapes you already own. Keep building. It sticks faster than you think.



MINOR SHAPES

Step 1: Check Your Foundation — Major CAGED Shapes

Before you learn the minor versions, make sure the five major CAGED shapes are solid.

You should be able to:

- Visualize each shape anywhere on the neck
- Find the root in each shape
- Play them in at least 2–3 different keys

If that's not fully locked in yet, review first. This isn't "falling behind", it's building a foundation so the minor shapes click instantly later.

Step 2: The One Change That Creates Minor

You already know the major shape. To make it minor, you only change one note:

- Lower the 3rd by one fret (one half step)

That's it. Everything else stays the same.

Step 3: Why This One Change Matters

Harmony Shift

- Major: bright, stable, uplifting
- Minor: darker, introspective, emotional

Scale Degrees

- Major triad = Root – 3rd – 5th
- Minor triad = Root – ♭3rd – 5th

Intervals

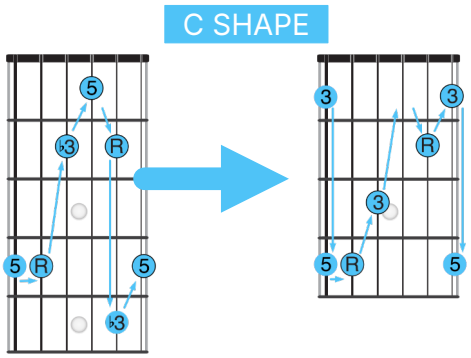
- Root → ♭3 = Minor 3rd
- ♭3 → 5 = Major 3rd
- 5 → Root = Perfect 4th

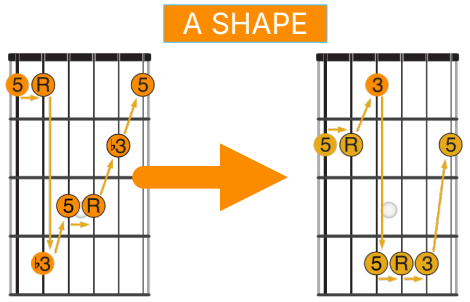
Step 4: See the Change in Action

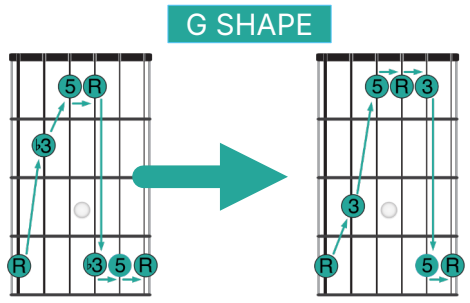
(Here's where you would add diagrams for each CAGED shape showing the major version, then the minor version with the 3rd highlighted and lowered.)

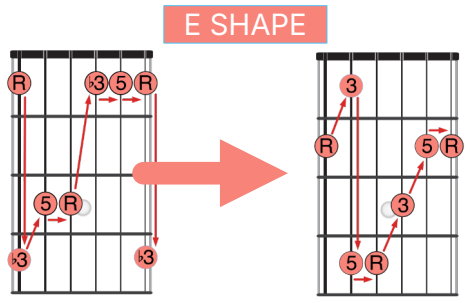
Example in one shape:

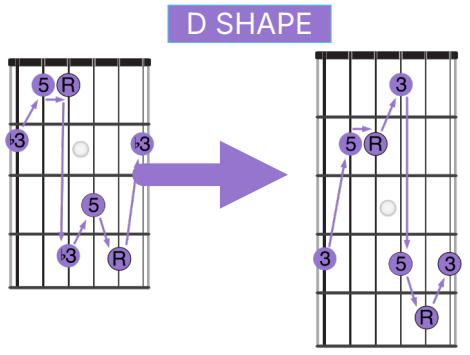
1. Find the 3rd
2. Move it down one fret











3. Play and listen to the change

Step 5: Practice Like This

1. Pick one CAGED shape you know well in major
2. Identify the 3rd in that shape
3. Lower it and play the minor version
4. Switch back and forth between major and minor — listen for the mood change
5. Repeat for all five shapes

Why This Works

You're not learning a "new set" of shapes, you're evolving the shapes you already know. Once you can flip between major and minor anywhere on the neck, you're not just memorizing patterns, you're understanding the fretboard.

MINOR PENTATONIC

The minor pentatonic is a direct extension of the minor arpeggio. You already have the root, ♭3, and 5. Now you're adding two more notes: the 4th and the ♭7. These two tones fill in the space between the chord tones and give you a complete five-note scale.

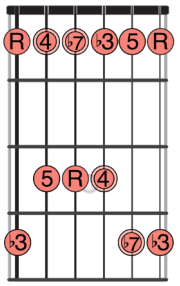
The 4 sits between the ♭3 and the 5. The ♭7 sits just below the root. Neither note changes the core identity of the chord, but they open to give you more options for phrasing and melodic movement. These are the notes that show up in riffs, licks, and solos in every genre.

If the minor arpeggios already feel solid under your fingers, this step will come naturally. You're adding two well-placed notes to expand what you can do in the same position.

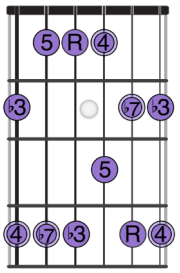
Here's the part that surprises a lot of players: the finger patterns for the minor pentatonic are the same as the major pentatonic. Your hands already know them. What changes is the note function / scale degree. Which note is the root, and what role each degree plays in the scale. In major pentatonic, the 2 and 6 are added to the major triad. In minor pentatonic, it's the 4 and ♭7 added to the minor triad.

Even though the shapes are the same, work through the minor pentatonic scale degrees separately so you hear and feel it as its own sound related to the minor arpeggio. That's what helps you connect the pattern in your fingers to the function of the notes and frees you to move between major and minor with confidence.

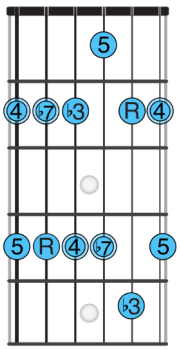
SCALE 1 (E SHAPE)



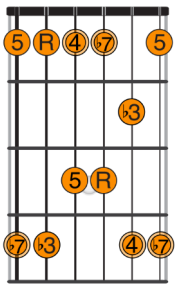
SCALE 2 (D SHAPE)



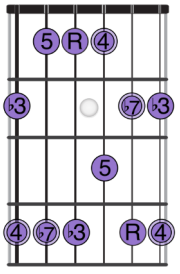
SCALE 3 (C SHAPE)



SCALE 4 (A SHAPE)



SCALE 5 (G SHAPE)



NATURAL MINOR

The natural minor scale is just your minor pentatonic with two extra notes. You already have the root, ♭3, 4, 5, and ♭7. Now you're adding the 2nd and the ♭6. These fill in the remaining gaps and give you the full seven-note scale.

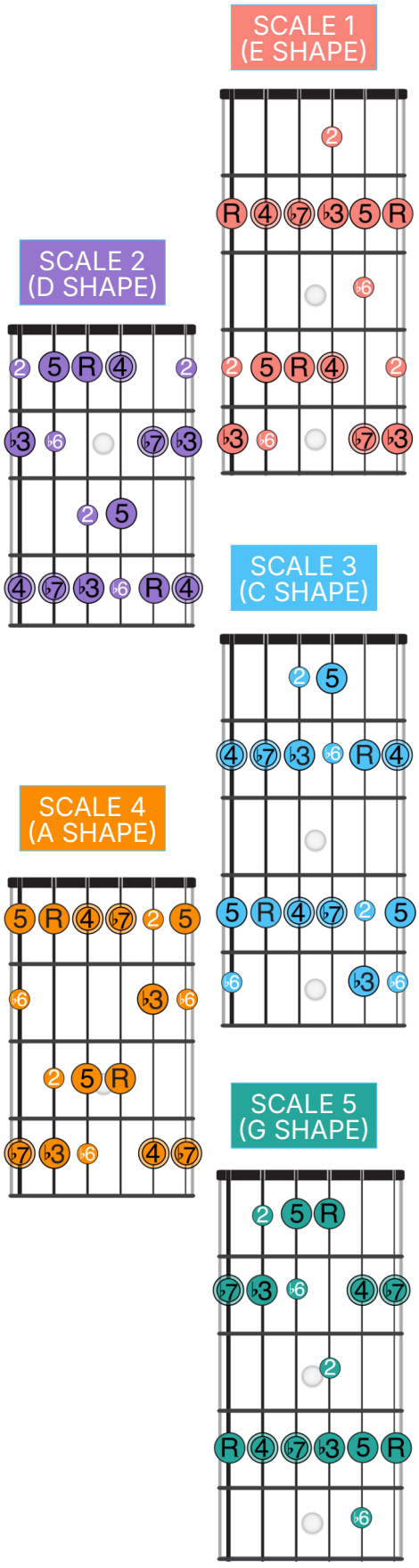
The 2 sits between the root and the ♭3. The ♭6 sits between the 5 and the ♭7. Adding them creates half steps and new interval shapes inside the position. The scale feels more connected, but also more detailed—so accuracy matters.

The easiest way to make it stick is to keep the minor triad (root, ♭3, 5) as your anchor. Every other note connects back to those three. If you try to learn all seven notes as a brand-new pattern, it can get overwhelming. If you see the new notes as extensions of what's already there, it stays manageable and musical.

Here's how to work it:

1. Pick one sharpe.
2. Find the chord tones first.Locate the 2 and ♭6 in relation to those chord tones.
3. Play slowly, listening for how they change the sound.
4. Move between the minor pentatonic and the full natural minor in the same shape.

The natural minor isn't a new system, it's the completed version of your minor pentatonic. Keep your triad at the center, build outward, and it'll feel like an expansion of what you already know, not a pile of new shapes to memorize.



NEXT STEPS

Everything in this document is information. But understanding only matters when it shows up in your playing.

Shapes and patterns are not the end goal. It is to hear something, understand what it is, and know how to play it. That only happens when you use this framework to play real music.

As you learn songs, start fitting them into this system. Ask what scale or arpeggio the part is using. Find the root. Identify the shape. The more you do this, the more the fretboard will start to make sense. You will stop guessing and start recognizing. That is when the system becomes useful.

This takes time. Be patient with yourself. You may need to go back and review the triads, arpeggios, or pentatonic shapes more than once. That is not failure, it is how this kind of learning works. Knowing something on paper is not the same as being able to use it in real time.

If you want help applying this, reach out to Freteleven. We work with guitarists every day on connecting this kind of understanding to the music they actually want to play. Whether you are learning songs, writing parts, or trying to solo with more clarity, we can help you get there faster.

Take your time. Work slowly. Focus on ideas, not just shapes. That is how this becomes real.