LESSON 1: THE BASICS
labeling notes + understanding keys

Today we’re going to be starting from the very beginning: labeling notes and understanding keys. I’m sure a lot of you are familiar with these concepts, but I want to make sure we’re all on the same page before we get into the complicated stuff.

1. THE MUSIC ALPHABET

Notes are laid out in order of the "music alphabet," which is:

A B C D E F G, A B C ...and so on.

Every time it hits G, it loops back around to A.

Pretty simple, right?

2. THE KEYBOARD

Even if you don’t play piano, it’s really helpful to understand the way the keyboard is laid out. Plus, I’ll be using the keyboard for all my examples in this course.

All of the white keys on the keyboard are letters of the music alphabet. A full-size keyboard starts with A:
3. HALF STEPS AND WHOLE STEPS

Notice how most of the white keys on the piano have a black key in between them. If there is one key in between two notes, those notes are a whole step apart.

A few of them (like B and C) don’t have black keys in between. If two keys are next to each other with no key in between them, they are a half step apart.

4. ACCIDENTALS

So what’s the deal with these black keys? - They have names too!

- **Sharp (#):** A sharp is a raised key. So the black key above G is called “G Sharp.”
- **Flat (♭):** A flat is a lowered key. So the black key below G is called ”G Flat.”
- **Natural (♮):** A natural is just a normal key. It’s essentially a reminder to NOT play the note sharp or flat.

So there are three different notes that are all versions of G: G sharp (G#), G flat (G♭), and G natural (G♮).

5. ENHARMONIC EQUIVALENTS

“Enharmmonic equivalent” is basically a fancy way of saying that a note on the piano has more than way to label it.
In fact, every single note on the piano has an enharmonic equivalent (aka multiple ways to label it). The black key in between D and E could be called a D sharp (D#) OR an E flat (E♭).

Got it?

Pick a few black keys on the keyboard and try to label it two different ways.

6. WHITE KEY ACCIDENTALs

So what happens when a note isn’t surrounded by black keys on both sides? Does it still have a sharp version AND a flat version?

Yep!

One of those is just going to end up being a white key.

Take B for example. Since there is no black key above B, B♯ is actually the same note as C.

7. KEY

So what is a "key"? I’ve been talking about keys on the piano this whole time, but there’s actually a different meaning of the word:

The definition of a "key" is a group of notes used in a song. It’s that simple.

Most songs stay in one "key" for the entire song and only use notes that are within the key.
Every key contains every letter of the music alphabet: A B C D E F G. The only difference is some may be sharp or flat.

Keys are centered around a certain note (ex. the key of C, the key of E, etc.). If you're playing in the key of C, the note C will have the most satisfying or "final" sound to it. Melodies in the key of C will likely end on the note C. The instruments will probably end the song on a C chord.

NOTE: In this course, we're only going to cover major keys, for the sake of time (and not overwhelming you!) So for the daily challenges, choose songs in major keys.

8. KEY SIGNATURES

Each key has a certain notes that are always sharp or flat. That's what makes each key unique. A key signature is a name for the unique number of sharps or flats in each key.

Here are some examples:

Key of D major: D E F# G A B C#
Key of F major: F G A B♭ C D E

Notice each key does contain every letter of the music alphabet, even though they don't start with A.

So the "key signature" for D would be F# and C#. The "key signature" for F would be B♭.

That's it for this lesson! Hopefully this gave you come clarity on how to identify notes and keys. I've made a key signatures reference sheet for you guys to help you memorize the key signatures. You can download it at modernsongstress.com/free-resources.
Lesson 1 Challenges

Time to take action!

☐ Print out the key signatures reference sheet at modernsongstress.com/free-resources and try to become familiar with them.

☐ If you’re a pianist, play through a few songs and identify the key based on which notes are sharp or flat. (You can use the chart if you need to.)

☐ If you’re a guitarist, find a song that you play with a capo and identify the key - If you’re in the key of G with a capo on the 3rd fret, that means you’re actually 3 half-steps above G. Look at a keyboard and walk up 3 half-steps from G: You should end up on a B♭ - you’re in the key of B♭.

☐ Eventually, you should work towards being able to play any song in any key.