

# Why a Circle of Keys Printable?

The Circle of Keys is the ultimate Circle of LIFE for a musician! The theory-packed ring breathes life into just about every aspect of music theory--from scales, to chords to harmony. From it, we glean SO much information that boosts theory comprehension, and makes connections which ultimately guides creativity.

Print the large Circle and place it in your students' three-ring binder for their reference. Print and cut the smaller Circles so students can use it as a "cheat sheet" when playing games. If you laminate the printables, then students can draw on it with a dry erase marker which is useful for some of the activities listed below.

Usually I want students to understand why they do something before they do it but on occasion, I change things up. Before I introduce the Circle, I require everyone to memorize these two sentences but give no reason why.

**FAT CATS GO DOWN ALLEYS EATING BANANAS  
BUTTERFLIES EXERCISE AND DON'T GO CATCHING FLIES  
OR BEAD.GUM.CANDY.FRUIT**

Soon enough, they realize that these zany sentences relate to the order of sharps and flats. If you have a better method to help them memorize the order, then by all means use it!

At the same time that students master the order of sharps and flats, they can begin to uncover the wealth of information the Circle has to offer by the activities below.

**Scales**  <https://youtu.be/VYS4xo9QYsc>

**Five Finger Patterns (first 5 pitches of a scale)**



Play Five-Finger Patterns beginning on C, then G, then D and continue all the way around the Circle. Show students the secret to staying in the middle of the keyboard by beginning on Middle C then UP a 5th to G, then DOWN a 4th to D, etc.

Keep in mind, students are moving around the circle clockwise and thus it's identified as the Circle of 5ths. I prefer this way when playing 5-finger patterns because the top note of a pattern is the next key in the circle. This makes it easy for students to locate the next pattern on the keyboard.

**Note:** I use the phrase “Five-Finger Pattern” because it relates to students’ five fingers faster than the term pentascale. Also, it is SO similar to the term pentatonic—and I don’t want students to get confused.



Check out this past blog post about how I use iReal Pro as a backing track to accompany students as they play through the patterns around the circle. <https://88pianokeys.me/fresh-ideas/use-ireal-pro-to-circle-the-keys-in-fives/>

### Tetrachords (scale of 4 pitches)



<https://youtu.be/Hs50TxRI4lw>

Build on the knowledge of Five-Finger Patterns by asking students to play the first FOUR notes of the C Major Five in the LH with fingers 5 4 3 2 and the first FOUR notes of the G Major Five in the RH, fingers 2 3 4 5. Next show how the LH and can take over the keys of the RH fingers (the G Five) and the RH moves to the first four notes of the D Five.

Encourage students to see the patterns that emerge while doing this:



- The Circle helps identify which two tetrachords make up every major scale.
- The pattern of WWH W WWH (whole and half steps) creates a major scale and that’s why certain black keys are required.
- A new black key is added for each scale and it’s always the 7th scale degree and a half step below the root.
- As play continues around the Circle, a new sharp is added. C = 0 Sharp, G = Fat (F#) D = Fat Cats (F# C#), etc.

To feel more comfortable with tetrachords, ask students to spin the *Decide Now* wheel to determine a key and play the correct tetrachord. Next, students must improvise within that tetrachord playing along with the app *MusiClock*—another favorite app that reinforces creativity, theory and technique.



Get 50 ways to use Decide Now here:  
<https://88pianokeys.me/product/50-ways-to-use-decide-now/>

Learn more about MusiClock here:

<https://88pianokeys.me/fresh-ideas/use-ireal-pro-to-circle-the-keys-in-fives/>

## Major and Minor Scales

The next logical step for students is to play traditional scales. I follow the Squared Scale Routine developed by Bradley Sowash.



Learn more here: <https://bradleysowash.com/o-christmas-tree-trial-lesson/?rq=squared%20scales>

The Circle can help you organize the order in which they are played. Some prefer going around clockwise as mentioned above. Jazz musicians prefer to play counter-clockwise around the Circle of *4ths* as it echoes the typical chord progression of V to I. For example, C is the Dominant of F, F is the Dominant of Bb and so on.

Another option: begin with the C scale, then G, then, F, then D—switching back and forth the between sharp and flat keys.

Or, some teachers begin with the Db major scale because the fingering is so easy to learn thanks to all the black keys!

When reviewing minor scales, the Circle helps students see the relationship between Major and the relative Minor scale—they share the same key signature. I like to say they share the same “piece of pie.”

## Key Signatures

Tips to help with reading key signatures:

- Half step up from the last sharp is the key.
- Second to the last flat is the key.
- To find the relative minor of a Major key, count three half steps down.



When playing games and drilling during Off Bench Time or in group lessons, I let my students refer to the Circle “cheat sheet” as much as they want. This will help them see the benefit of the Circle and prompt them to return to it often. They’ll see the value in the Circle and become friends with *all* the golden nuggets it has to offer.

My goal for students is to recognize key signatures so quickly that when they see 5 flats, they immediately know the key is Db major. This takes repetition and reinforcement and lots of it!

That's when flash cards or an app like Tenuto come in handy.



Read about how to use Tenuto in group lessons here: <https://88pianokeys.me/fresh-ideas/have-a-ball-at-group-lessons/>

One more takeaway: when students analyze music and begin composing, the Circle helps them see the relationship between keys. For example, it would be common to modulate from D to A because they are only one black key away from each other and A is the dominant of D. It would be more unusual (but not impossible) to modulate from the key of D to F because of the difference in key signatures.

**Chords**  <https://youtu.be/-MIsfmtTxcA>

The Circle is not only ideal for learning scales but also for seeing how chords relate to each other. Notice that primary chords live right next door to each other in the Circle.



For example: the Dominant of C which is G, is to the right of C and the Subdominant chord which is F, is to the left.

In addition, the Diatonic chords in the Key of C (chords that live in the key) are the same as the relative minor keys of Dm, Am and Em.

With a laminated the Circle, students can circle the diatonic chords of any key with a dry erase marker and then choose a few to play and improvise with.

To explore this relationship between chords, ask students to choose a key and then circle three chords in neighboring “pie slices”

For example, a student might circle F, Dm and G with little thought to how these might sound when played one after the other. Then ask her to play the three chords in a different order, include C or the tonic chord at some point and experiment with playing various patterns on the chords. Once a preference

develops, this random exploration can easily become the basis of an improvisation or even a composition!

Composers like Bach and beyond, progress around the circle to create movement in their compositions. The standard ii-V-I progression that jazzers use is easy to spot in the circle. In addition, many composers add secondary dominants for color. Point students back to The Circle as a visual aid as you get under the hood of repertoire.

I hope you find these ideas helpful (many inspired by my friend and colleague, [Bradley Sowash](#)) and that you and your students enjoy these lovely Circle of Key Sheets designed by [Andrea West](#)!

-Leila at 88PK

## A Special Invitation...

Unlock, bring back, or enhance your creativity at the keys as well as that of your students and attend the 88 Creative Keys Summer Workshop!

The immersive, 2019 keyboard improvisation workshop for teachers is small in size and yet huge in opportunities to connect with creative gurus Bradley Sowash and Forrest Kinney and network with fellow like-minded teachers.

A promotional graphic for the 88 Creative Keys Summer Workshop. It features three circular headshots of speakers: Bradley Sowash (top), Leila Viss (middle), and Forrest Kinney (bottom). To the right is a stylized line drawing of a human head profile with a piano keyboard inside, connected by a cord. The text reads: "think backward to move forward", "a transformative creative-based workshop for piano teachers", "July 9-12, 2019 Denver, CO", and "Register NOW - 88creativekeys.com".

Bradley Sowash

Leila Viss

Forrest Kinney

think **backward** to **move forward**

a transformative creative-based workshop for piano teachers  
July 9-12, 2019 Denver, CO

Register **NOW** - 88creativekeys.com

On a personal note, this annual workshop is one that I've been looking for my entire teaching life. Because I couldn't find the perfect workshop, I decided to join forces with Bradley Sowash and make it happen.

Every teacher who attends is never the same and many return year after year to be refueled.

***Join me...join us for an adventure that you will value for a lifetime! -Leila***  
***Learn more at [88creativekeys.com](http://88creativekeys.com)***

