

## Getting Around the Key of C

Have you ever wondered why we often play in certain keys on stringed instruments and rarely in others? For example, the keys of C, F, and G are very popular in 'ukulele music, but you'll seldom find an 'ukulele piece in Gb. The simple answer: open strings. Open strings are unfretted (or untouched) by the left hand. We play in the keys of C, F, and G on 'ukulele because the open strings (G, C, E, and A) are present in their scales.

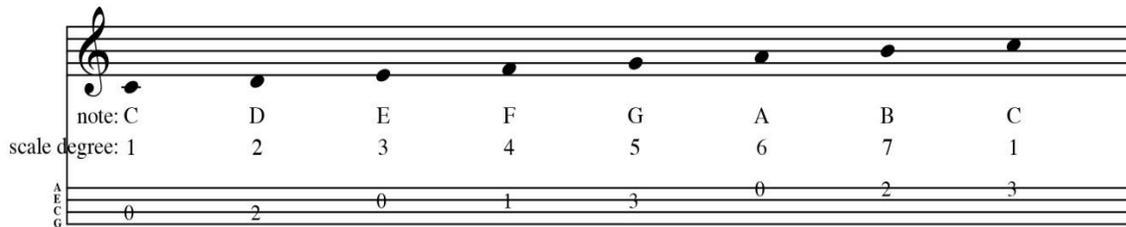
A goal of playing stringed instruments is to use as many open strings as possible. Open strings contribute to sympathetic vibrations and overtones that are not as prominent when strings are shortened by fretting with the left hand. Also, when the left hand is not required to finger many notes, it is free to execute other parts.

Now that you know why we favor some keys over others, let's start with the easiest and most common key for 'ukulele music: the key of C. We'll take a look at its scale and main chords, which are the basics needed to figure out music by ear, write your own songs, and even improvise!

### C Major Scale

The key of C is based on the C major scale. A scale is a series of notes formed with whole steps and half steps. As you play *Figure 1*, notice that a half step is equivalent to moving one fret on the 'ukulele, and a whole step is two frets apart.

*Figure 1*



A scale degree is a note's numeric relationship to its musical "home base" or key, the first degree of the scale.

The following are three positions I like to use when playing the C major scale. The red dots in *Figure 2* are the same notes as in *Figure 1*. If you use a low G string, the brown dots are lower pitches in the C scale.

*Figure 2*

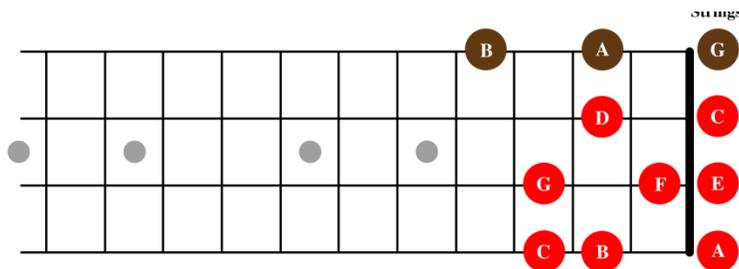


Figure 3 is one of my favorite positions because there are only two fingerings to remember: the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> frets of the G and C strings, and the 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> frets of the E and A strings. On a low G string, the orange dots extend your range down to B.

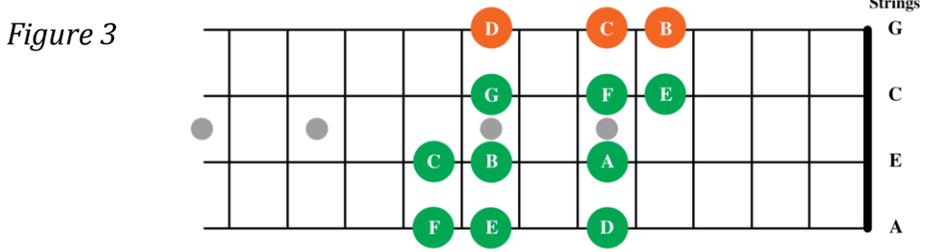
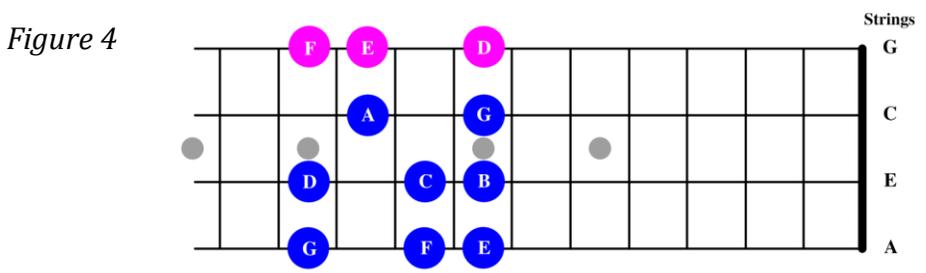
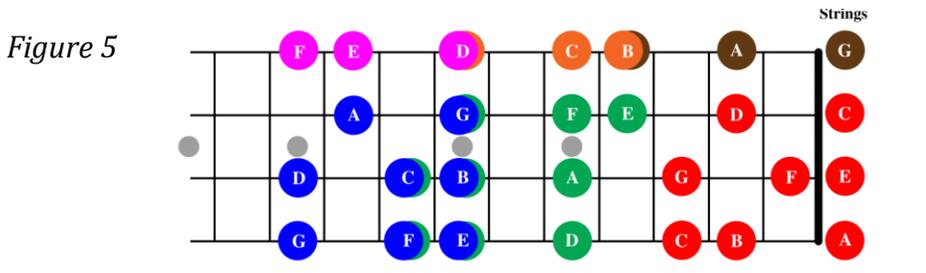


Figure 4 is the last positional variation of the C scale. The next position up would be Figure 2 played twelve frets higher. The pink dots give you more range with a low G string.



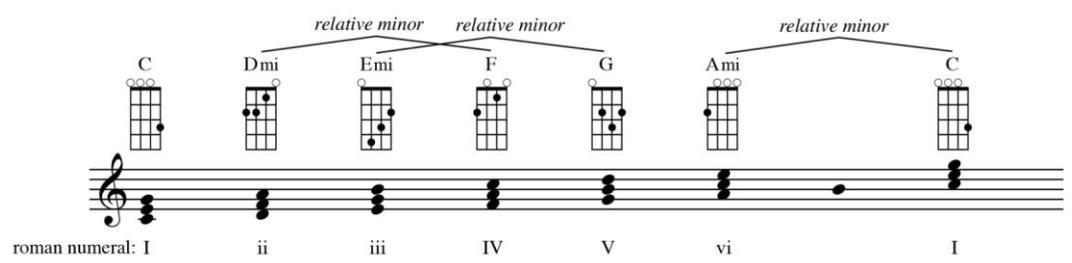
The following is a composite of all three positions. Memorizing their shapes and where they overlap will help you transition seamlessly from one to the next. With these positions in your 'ukulele arsenal, you can play the C scale anywhere on the fretboard!



**Six Main Chords**

There are six primary chords in a key. They are based on the first six degrees of the key's scale. The scale determines whether a chord is major or minor. Chords built on the first, fourth and fifth degrees of a major scale are always major, and chords built on the second, third and sixth degrees are always minor.

Figure 6



The three most commonly used chords in Western music (in order of frequency) are the I, IV, and V chords. Upper case roman numerals indicate major chords and lower case roman numerals designate minor chords. In the key of C, the I chord is C major, the IV chord is F major, and the V chord is G major.

The minor chords of a key are a minor 3<sup>rd</sup> (the equivalent of three frets or three half-steps) below each major chord. These are called relative minor chords. In the key of C, the relative minor of the C major chord is Ami, the relative minor of the F major chord is Dmi, and the relative minor of the G major chord is Emi. In fact, you can tell they're related because only one finger changes from the major chord voicing to its relative minor voicing.

### Major Chord

C



F



G



### Relative Minor Chord

Ami



Dmi



Emi



This is an easy way to identify the six main chords of a key and their relationships. Simply begin with the I, IV, and V chords and find their relative minor chords.

Understanding the scale and main chords of a key will increase your musical intuition and creativity. Knowing how to play them will help you form a deeper connection with your 'ukulele. When it becomes second nature, you'll feel like you are "one" with your instrument and can play virtually anything you hear in your head—'ukulele nirvana!