

Scales – help for dyslexic musicians (and others!)

For some students, having scales assessed can be particularly challenging. If this is the case, there are exams which do not require scales. However, they should still be studied to increase general musical knowledge and technique.

Use a combination of strategies: this can help your brain remember the patterns in different ways and increases your chances of retaining them.

In particular, think about using

visual
auditory &
movement memory.

By doing this, your memory for the scales will be more secure & you'll be able to monitor where you are in the scale during any assessments more easily.

- Try **writing down a list** or **making a table** or **mind map** of all the scales you need to do and group them in different ways to make them more manageable. For example, group by key, key centre or type of pattern
- Think about how you would **teach someone else** to learn their scales. Be as creative as you can. For example, having characteristics or emotions attached to different patterns or keys might make them more individual and memorable.
- Try to make it **'fun'** if you can! We remember things better if we are relaxed and enjoying ourselves.

- **Colour coding.** You could colour code **particular patterns** or **keys** or **different parts of the scale** so, when you are asked to play a particular scale or a particular version of the scale the colour/s comes into your head. For example, you could have 4 different colours: 2 for going up and 2 for coming down.
 - Mark the colour/s on your score and practice playing the scale looking at the colours.
 - Talk about the different bits so you have a verbal dialogue happening in your head to help you keep your place
 - Once you have learnt it with the colours, practice imagining the scale with the colours and play each section imagining the colours from memory.

- Identify if there are particular **auditory characteristics** to some patterns or keys which might help you remember the particular pattern. For example, you could think about sharps as being spikey and E major having four sharps which are the legs to an E shaped table.

- You could try having **each day** of your practice devoted to **a different key**
 - You could try to connect particular keys with **particular pieces** that you have played or heard in that key.
 - You could play through the scale patterns for the particular key and listen or play through pieces in that key to help make the key feel more individual and memorable.
 - You could try and think about each scale as a piece itself and improvise around it

- **Flashcards:** each card has a note on, both on the stave (whichever clef you use) and the letter if you want.
Lay them out in order before you play the scale and say the scale (note names) ascending and descending.
- **Pyramid technique** to build scales up e.g. C, CD, CDE, CDEF and so on.
- Use a (homemade?) **giant floor keyboard** and step on each note as you play it on your instrument (clearly not possible for pianists!)
- Write names of scales on cards, pick one and play it.
- For **brass instruments** which are particularly difficult in terms of seeing any pattern because of the fingerings, try focussing on mastering the **chromatic scale** over as many octaves as needed.

The British Dyslexia Association cannot take responsibility for this material; it is offered as advice and represents the experience and knowledge of the BDA Music Committee. Full research verification has not been undertaken.