

How can I change the key of a song to better fit my voice or instrument?

Let’s say the suggested keys or capo positions just don’t work for your voice or for how you want to play your instrument. It’s a simple process to transpose the chord progression to other keys. It’s a bit more involved to change the melodies and write them out, but the same principles apply. Most of you will probably just need to transpose the chords so you can accompany yourself in a new key.

Let’s look at “Amazing Grace” on page 9. It’s presented here in the key of G, noted in the upper left hand corner of the page. Again, “M: G” means that a typical male voice would sing “Amazing Grace” in the key of G. If the key of G is too low for your voice, you can simply capo up until you find a key and capo position that works. What if the key of G is too high? If that’s the case, you’ll have to substitute a whole different set of chords. The **Scale and Transposition Chart** will make the process of transposing easier.

Scale and Transposition Chart

| | Key signature | Major scale | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 (I) |
|-----|---------------|-------------|----|-----|-----|----|----|-----|------|-------|
| Key | #/b | | I | ii | iii | IV | V | vi | vii° | I |
| C | none | C | C | Dm | Em | F | G | Am | B° | C |
| F | 1 - b | F | F | Gm | Am | Bb | C | Dm | E° | F |
| Bb | 2 - b | Bb | Bb | Cm | Dm | Eb | F | Gm | A° | Bb |
| Eb | 3 - b | Eb | Eb | Fm | Gm | Ab | Bb | Cm | D° | Eb |
| Ab | 4 - b | Ab | Ab | Bbm | Cm | Db | Eb | Fm | G° | Ab |
| Db | 5 - b | Db | Db | Ebm | Fm | Gb | Ab | Bbm | C° | Db |
| Gb | 6 - b | Gb | Gb | Am | Bm | Cb | Db | Em | F° | Gb |
| Cb | 7 - b | Cb | Cb | Dm | Em | Fb | Gb | Am | Bb° | Cb |
| C# | 7 - # | C# | C# | D#m | E#m | F# | G# | A#m | B#° | C# |
| F# | 6 - # | F# | F# | G#m | A#m | B | C# | D#m | E#° | F# |
| B | 5 - # | B | B | C#m | D#m | E | F# | G#m | A#° | B |
| E | 4 - # | E | E | F#m | G#m | A | B | C#m | D#° | E |
| A | 3 - # | A | A | Bm | C#m | D | E | F#m | G#° | A |
| D | 2 - # | D | D | Em | F#m | G | A | Bm | C#° | D |
| G | 1 - # | G | G | Am | Bm | C | D | Em | F#° | G |

The chart shows the scales, chords, and key signature (number of sharps or flats) that identify each key. If you look in the key of G line at the bottom of the chart, you’ll see in the second column (“key signature”) that the key of G has one sharp in its key signature. If you read across to the right you’ll see “G Am Bm C D Em F#°.” These are the chords of the key of G and all are made up using only the notes of the G major scale. Songs in the key of G can have other chords as well, like E or A7, but to make these chords we need to use notes from outside of the G major scale.

If you remove all the “m” (or minor) and “°” (or diminished) chord designations, you’ll come up with the G scale, which is “G A B C D E F#.” Be sure to leave the sharps and flats shown or the scale changes. So, how do we use this to transpose?

Going back to “Amazing Grace,” we see that the chord progression to the first line of the song is G—C—G. Since “Amazing Grace” is written here in the key of G (noted in the upper left hand corner of the page, “M: G”) let’s see where these chords occur in the “key of G” line in the chart. The G chord is in the “I” (upper case Roman numeral

one) column. The G chord in the key of G is a “one” chord. The C chord is in the “IV” column and is a “four” chord. We need to know where these chords fit numerically in order to transpose them. All chords are identified by Roman numerals, upper case for majors (I, IV, V) lower case for minors (ii, iii, vi) and the lone diminished chord which has a little circle as part of the chord name (vii°).

As I mentioned, we’re assuming that “Amazing Grace” is pitched too high to sing in the key of G. We need to transpose it to a lower key, which will be to a key “earlier” in the musical alphabet (A, B, C, D, E, F, G) like F, E, etc. Let’s transpose “Amazing Grace” to the key of E. Start with the first chord of the original key, the G chord, in the “I” column. Follow up in the “I” column to the key of E row. The I chord in the key of E is an E chord. Write an “E” in everywhere you see a G chord on the music to “Amazing Grace.” (I suggest that you write in pencil in case your voice changes!)

The next chord in the key of G version of “Amazing Grace” is a C. The C chord is in the IV column of the key of G row. Follow that column up to the key of E row and you’ll find the new chord is an A. Write an “A” in everywhere you see a C chord in the music to “Amazing Grace.”

There’s one more chord in the key of G version of “Amazing Grace” and that’s the D. Once again, find the D in the key of G row. It’s in the “V” column and is a “five” chord. Follow up in the V column to the key of E row and you’ll find a B chord. Write a “B” in everywhere you see a D chord in the music to “Amazing Grace.” Now you’ve changed every G chord to an E, every C to an A, and every D to a B, transposing the chord progression from the key of G to the key of E.

Transposing other songs

Some songs are in kind of nebulous keys like “I Know You Rider,” “Shady Grove,” and “Wayfaring Stranger.” The first two are sometimes described as “modal,” the last as “minor.” In cases like this, it may not be clear to you which key row to use. If you match the number of sharps or flats in the key signature of the song to the second column (“key signature”) of the chart, you can’t go wrong. Just make sure that you follow up or down in the correct column.

There will be times when the exact chord you’re transposing can’t be found on the chart. In “Wayfaring Stranger” there’s an “A7” chord but there’s no “A7” in the key of F row, only an “Am” in the “iii” column. **You can still use this column as long as you maintain the original “quality” of the chord as you transpose.** For example, if the original is a seventh, the transposed chord needs to be a seventh. If the original chord is a minor, the transposed chord needs to be a minor also. Let’s transpose “Wayfaring Stranger” from the given key of F/Dm up to G/Em. The first chord is a Dm. Find the Dm in the key of F row. It’s in the “vi” column. Follow the “vi” column down to the key of G row and you’ll find an Em. Pencil in an Em everywhere you see Dm in “Wayfaring Stranger.” Find the next chord, the Gm, in the key of F row, in the “ii” column. Follow the “ii” column down to the key of G row where you’ll see Am. Write Am in the music where you see Gm. The next chord in the original key of F is B \flat . Find the B \flat in the “IV” column of the key of F row. Follow this down to the key of G row, where you’ll find a C. Pencil it in. Do the same with the original F chord changing it to G. Finally, find the A in the iii column, where it’s listed as Am. The original chord is an A7. Follow down in the iii column until you get to the key of G row. There you’ll find a Bm, which you’ll change to a B7 to preserve the dominant seven quality of the original. That’s all there is to it, you’ve transposed the chords of “Wayfaring Stranger” from the key of F to the key of G.

A similar thing happens in “Little Maggie.” It’s printed in the key of G and the second chord is an F. However, there’s no F chord in the key of G row, only an F \sharp in the “vii” column. F \sharp is one half step higher in pitch than F natural. All you have to do is take that into account in the transposed key. Let’s transpose “Little Maggie” to the key of D. The first chord of the original key is a G. The G chord is in the I column of the key of G row. Follow this up in the I column to the key of D row and our first chord is transposed to a D chord. Now go back to the key of G row and the “vii” column, which is still an F \sharp . Lower it one half step to get the F chord from the song in the original key of G. Follow up in the vii column to the key of D row. You’ll find a C \sharp . Since we lowered our original F \sharp one half step to F natural, we’ll need to do the same here and lower the C \sharp one half step to C natural. So, the first two chords in the key of D version of “Little Maggie” are D and C. If you’re interested in reading more about music theory, transposing, and how a capo works, check out my *Guide to Capo, Transposing, & the Nashville Numbering System* from Mel Bay. The “Transposer Wheel” on page 301 and the Capo Chart on page 302 will also be helpful in transposing.

Here’s hoping you enjoy this collection of great songs! Visit me online at www.musixnow.com. Lots of music, tablature and MP3s to download and learn. My e-mail address is dix@musixnow.com.

— Dix Bruce