How to Layer Guitar Scales in Usable Segments

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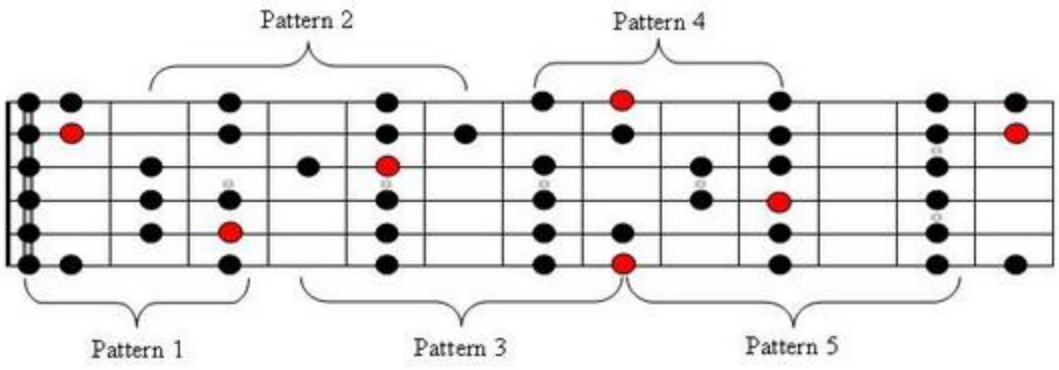
Length: **12 minute read**

Article URL: https://www.guitarchalk.com/learn-guitar-scales-segments/

QUICK HIT: *In a mathematical sense, guitar scales continue endlessly in both directions of the fretboard. That's why a formally written scale diagram covers the entire fretboard and ends up looking tremendously confusing. However, depending on our scale and mode, we can extract segments of those scales at different parts of the fretboard either individually or as multiple layers. We'll show you how to do that in this lead guitar lesson.*

Most scales we use on the guitar should and can be limited to a particular segment. While we can learn scales in a theoretical sense, we've got to limit their scope before we actually apply them. For example, you might see a C major scale diagram that covers the entire fretboard, **though you'll only use a short three or four fret section of that scale pattern**.

The full pattern might look something like this:



A full scale pattern. Image via music.stackexchange.com(View Larger Image)

This is because every scale interval pattern repeats itself and continues endlessly in both directions.

Any time you have a root note, the scale is the pattern that continues *until* you get to the next root note an octave higher. Thus, to learn the full form of a scale, you only technically need to memorize the notes that occur within that octave. Yet a segment is not necessarily just those notes which, in the case of a diatonic scale, includes only seven.

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Learning to extract and use segments doesn't limit you to the steps in a octave to octave scale, rather it allows you to do the following:

- Build continuous melody from the bottom register (low strings) to the higher register (top strings)
- Use portions of a scale that exceed the limitations of octaves, continuing in both directions
- Layer scales with other scales and modes to expand existing segments

If this language is foreign to you, I'll go through a detailed explanation of this process, meaning you don't have to get it all up front. Moreover, there's a much easier way to think about it: **We're going to take usable pieces of scales and modify them**.

To aid in this process visually, I'm going to use the GuitarLayers software, which I'd highly recommend downloading and using along with this material. It's a fantastic tool that I've just discovered and have been enjoying thoroughly. This is not a sponsored post and they're not paying me to say this. I just legitimately really like it.

Setting Up Scales and Getting Started

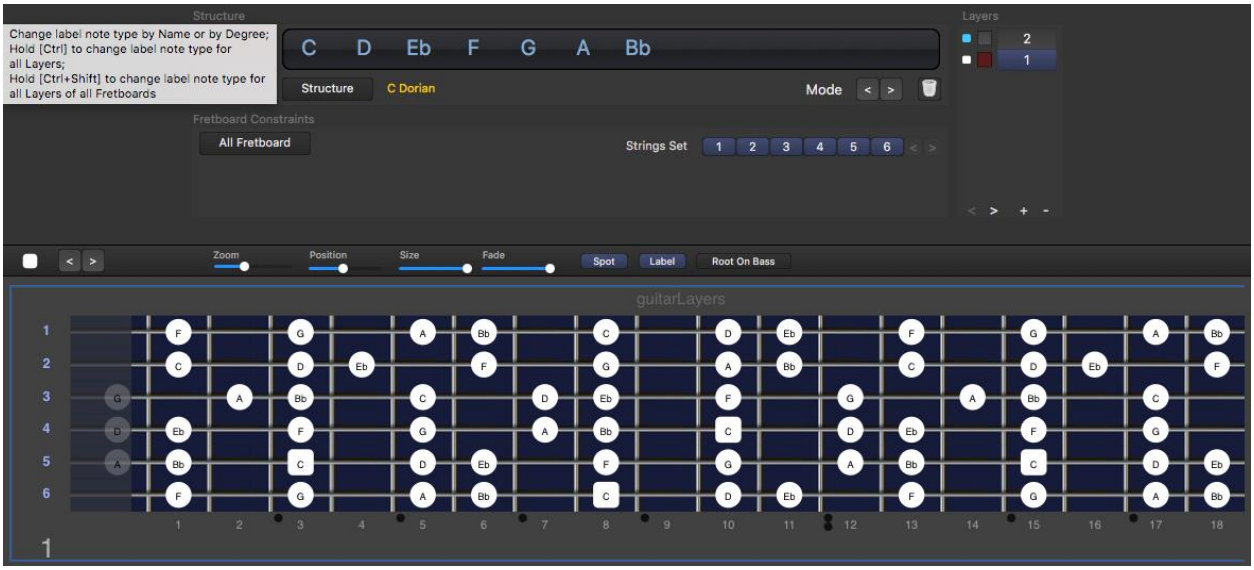
To start this exercise and illustrate the concept, I'll first setup a guitar scale in GuitarLayers so we have a working example. I've used the C Dorian mode, though you can select a different scale if you'd like.

When identifying a full scale, you only need to think about two variables:

1. Key
2. Structure

In my example, I've chosen a scale in the *key* of C with a Dorian *structure*. Pretty basic so far.

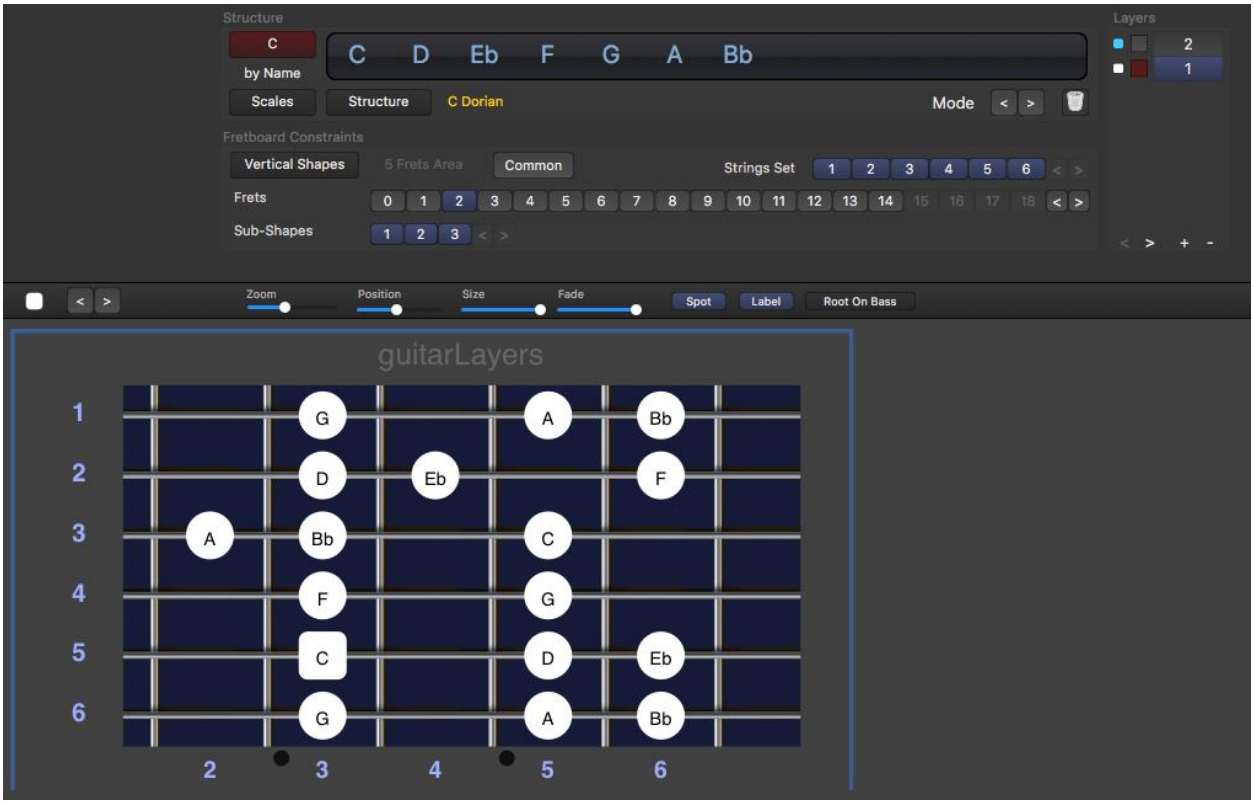
Guitar Scale Segment #1: The C Dorian Mode



In GuitarLayers I select the key of C and Dorian mode (structure) which displays a full fretboard of scale notes made up of the seven notes in the Dorian mode, since it is technically a diatonic scale. (View Larger Image)

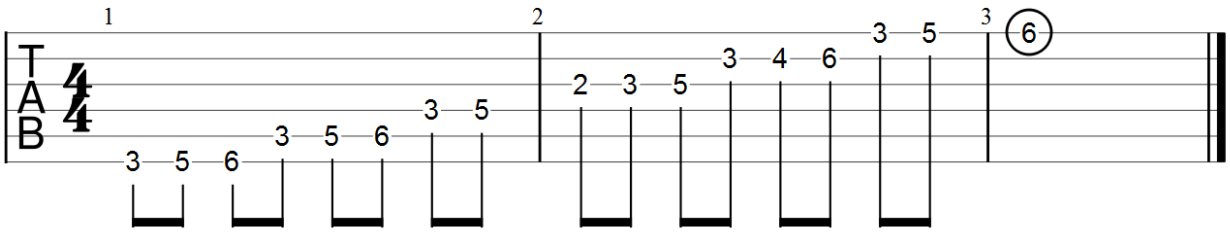
You can see at the top of the screen shot where the software gives you the seven notes in the Dorian mode which are C, D, E♭, F, G, A and B♭. From there we can look for segments in the scale. If you aren't using the software, just follow along with the next step.

If you are using the software click on the button under "Fretboard Constraints" and select "Vertical." This allows you to choose a fret segment and map it in a vertical position, per the following screenshot:



Use the "Fretboard Constraints" option (or simply make a note if you're not using the software) to map a segment of the C Dorian mode vertically, to actually use the shape. ([View Larger Image](#))

You can see that the shape now looks a lot more manageable, perhaps even more familiar and what you're used to seeing when you lookup guitar scales. Let's go ahead and drop that same shape into a tab sheet.



The same segment translated to tablature for easier reading. (View Larger Image)

LAYERING THE DORIAN MODE

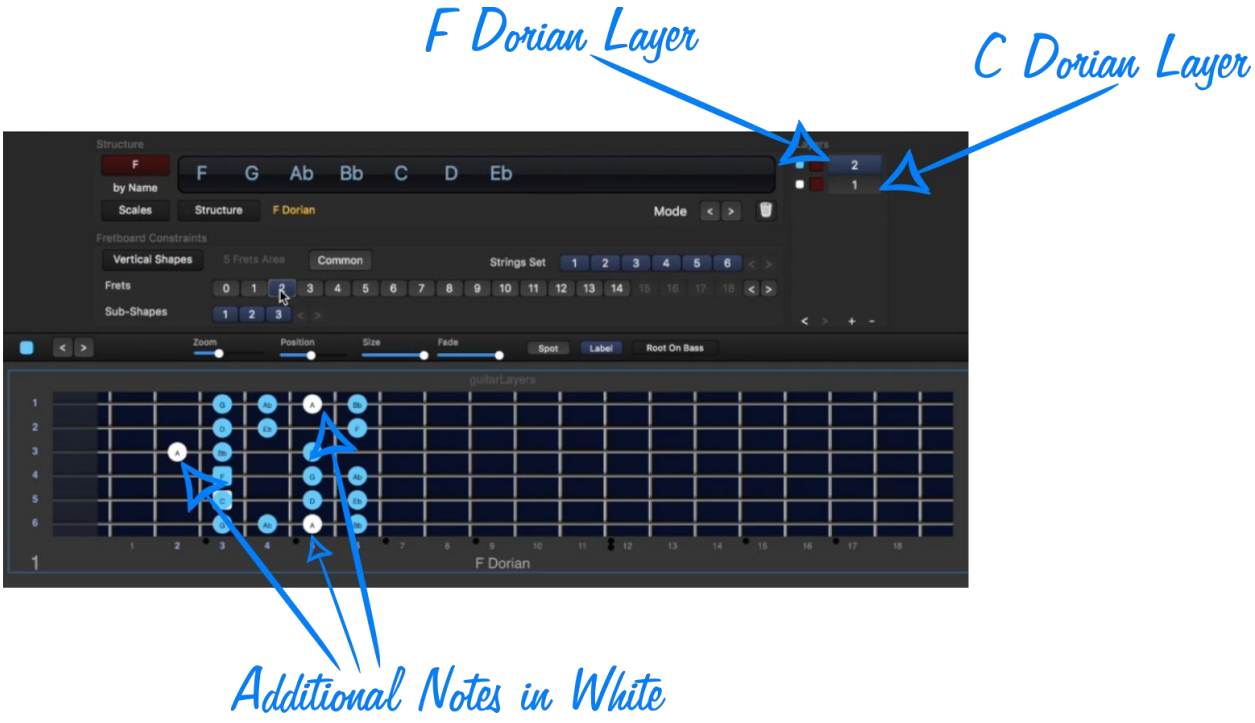
At this point in a scale-focused guitar lesson, you'll often hear talk about adding notes or slightly modifying the scale shape. It's true that you can do this on the fly, though you can also use the tactic I've mentioned called **layering** which is basically canvasing one scale segment over top of another.

The GuitarLayers software makes this really easy to do, though again, you can get the concept without using the software yourself.

Basically, the software allows you to map a second scale shape underneath the first one at the same fretboard position. In this particular example I'm going to layer the following two scales:

- C Dorian
- F Dorian

Using the software and plotting the two scales at the exact same spot, I get the following layered pattern:



Layering the F and C Dorian modes. (View Larger Image)

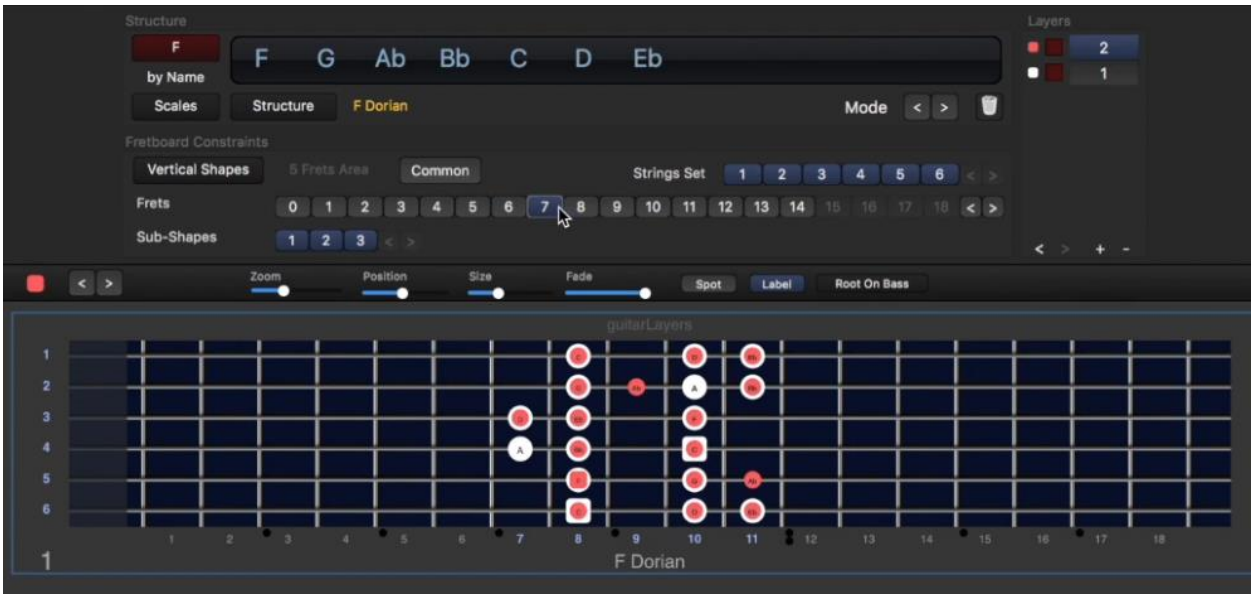
The software makes it really easy to plot and see the difference in the two modes. However, you can do this on your own with different software or simply by writing it down. Our goal is to learn how to *intentionally* add notes to a pattern you already know by using other scale segments. The alternative is just to guess at those notes.

Let's summarize it in a two-step process:

1. Plot your first scale using a limited vertical fret space
2. Layer your second scale over or next to the same spot

In a sense, you're just analyzing two scales and seeing how you could expand on one or move seamlessly between the two of them. You now have a pair of overlapping scale shapes that can be moved up and down the fretboard.

Here's how it would look at the seventh fret position with the root C on the eighth fret:

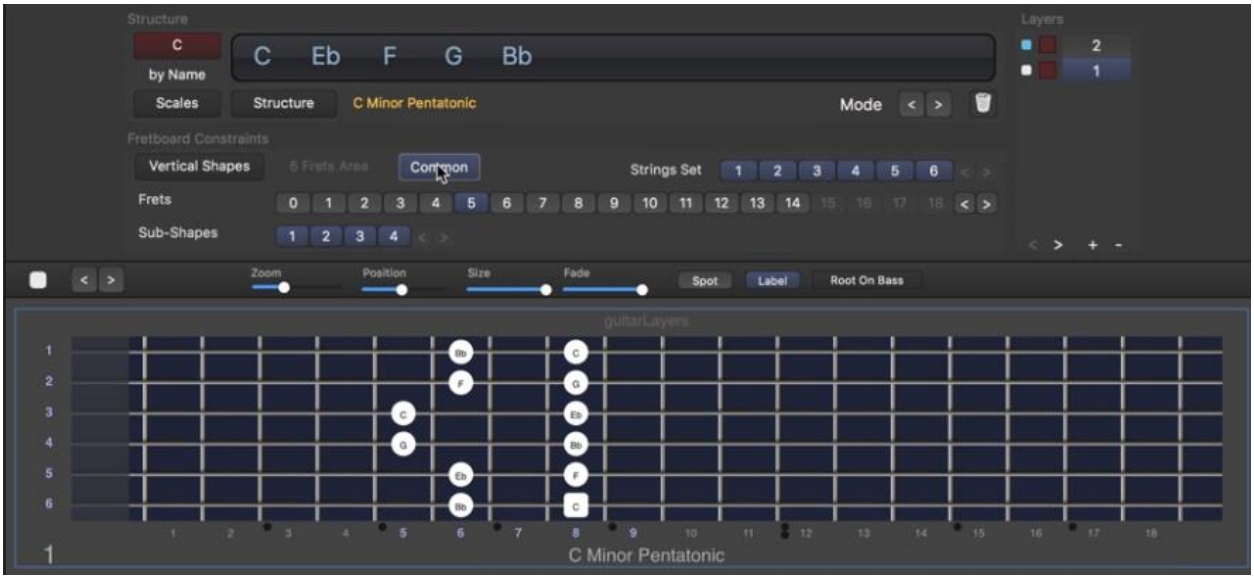


The C and F Dorian patterns can overlap at any point on the fretboard. (View Larger Image)

Guitar Scale Segment #2: The C Minor Pentatonic

Our second segment is pulled from the C minor pentatonic and displayed at the fifth fret position. If you've been working with scales for awhile, this shape should be somewhat familiar to you. Unlike the Dorian mode or diatonic scales in general, pentatonic scales only have *five* intervals between each octave, which means the C minor pentatonic scale has only five notes: **C, E♭, F, G and B♭**.

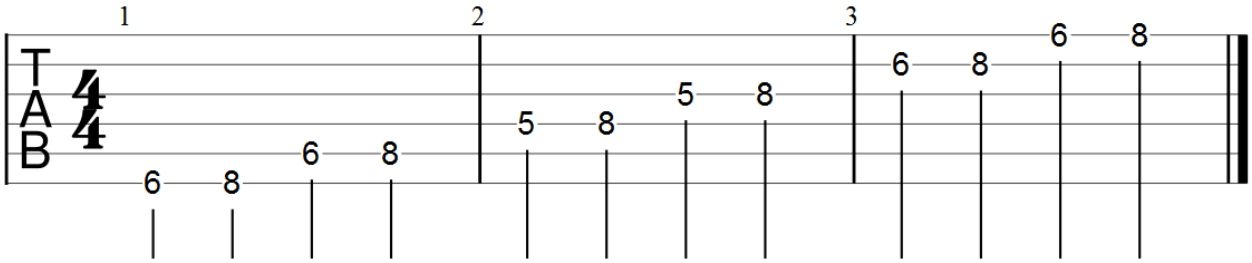
Isolated between the fifth and eighth frets, we end up with the following scale shape:



The fifth fret form of the C minor pentatonic scale extends in a simple pattern from the fifth fret up to the eighth fret and is easy to memorize. (*View Larger Image*)

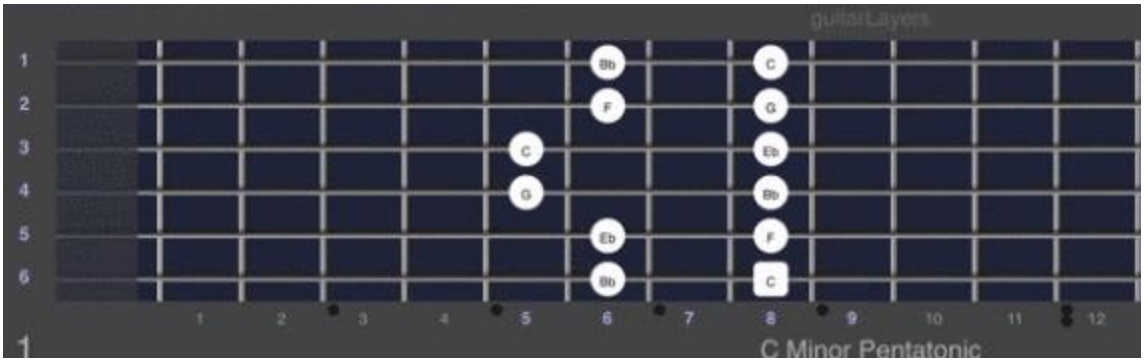
Notice where the first two root C notes occur.

Notice there are only five notes separating the first two C notes, before the pattern of intervals simply repeats itself, all the way up to the eighth fret on the high E string. Again, we can tab it out for a closer look:



The C minor pentatonic scale positioned between the fifth and eighth frets in guitar tab form. (View Larger Image)

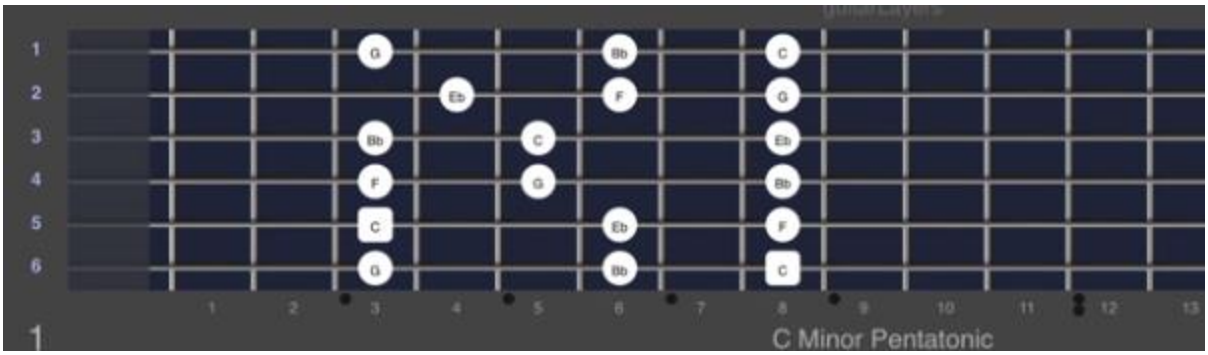
This time I want to expand the scale by adding a second layer *beneath* the first one. If you drop down to the third fret form of the C minor pentatonic scale, you get a pattern that spans the third and sixth fret and fits into our previous fifth position shape like a puzzle piece.



(View Larger Image)

This second pattern fits into our first like a well-placed Tetris block, expanding that original pattern. If we play the entire pattern vertically, it's not going to be as useful or functional because it would involve a lot of awkward stretching. What would be more helpful is to use a combination of vertical and lateral movement, treating the two scales as a *structure* and not necessarily a series of waypoints that *must* be hit.

For a clearer look, examine the two segments pulled together:



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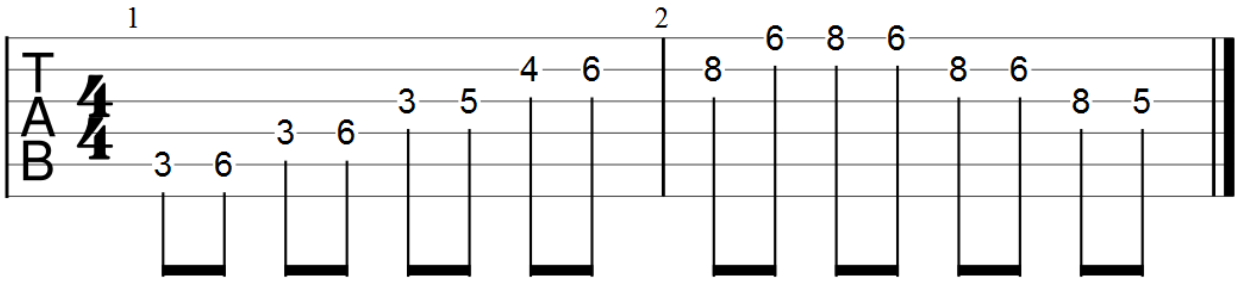
At this point, we can do a little improvising and *blend* the two patterns together to create something uniquely melodic. Here's what I came up with:



A combination of notes from the third and fifth fret forms of the C minor pentatonic scale. (View Larger Image)

Here's what the tab sounds like played through at a reasonably slow tempo:

There are a lot of different ways to use a structure like this. Keep in mind that instead of mapping the scales directly on top of one another (as we did in the previous layering example) we've fit them together like a puzzle piece. This is an equally valid approach to layering scales or just using multiple scale shapes at one time. Even with a seven-fret spread, the shape is still fairly manageable and useful for improvisation.

Guitar Scale Segment #3: Lydian Mode in the Key of E

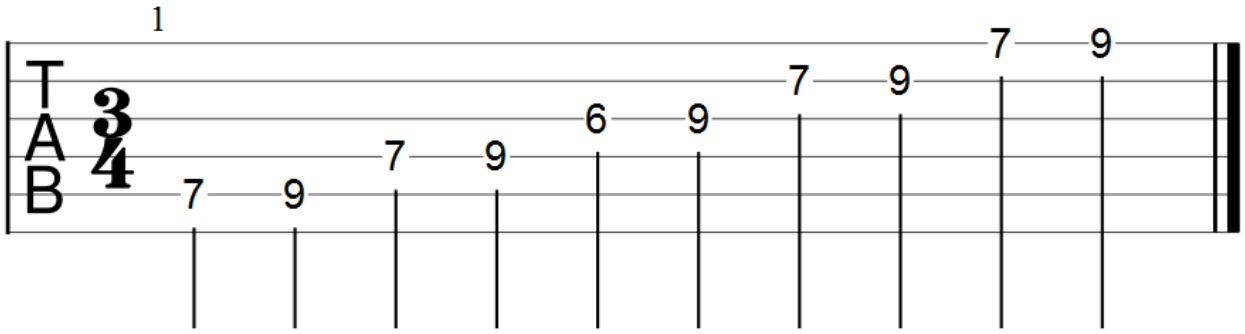
In our last example I'm going to use the Lydian Mode in the key of E, positioned at the seventh fret. With the exception of one note, this scale

shape occurs entirely between the sixth and ninth frets and is a rather simple modification of the pentatonic major scale at the same position.

- Base Scale: **E Major Pentatonic**
- Layered Mode: **Lydian**

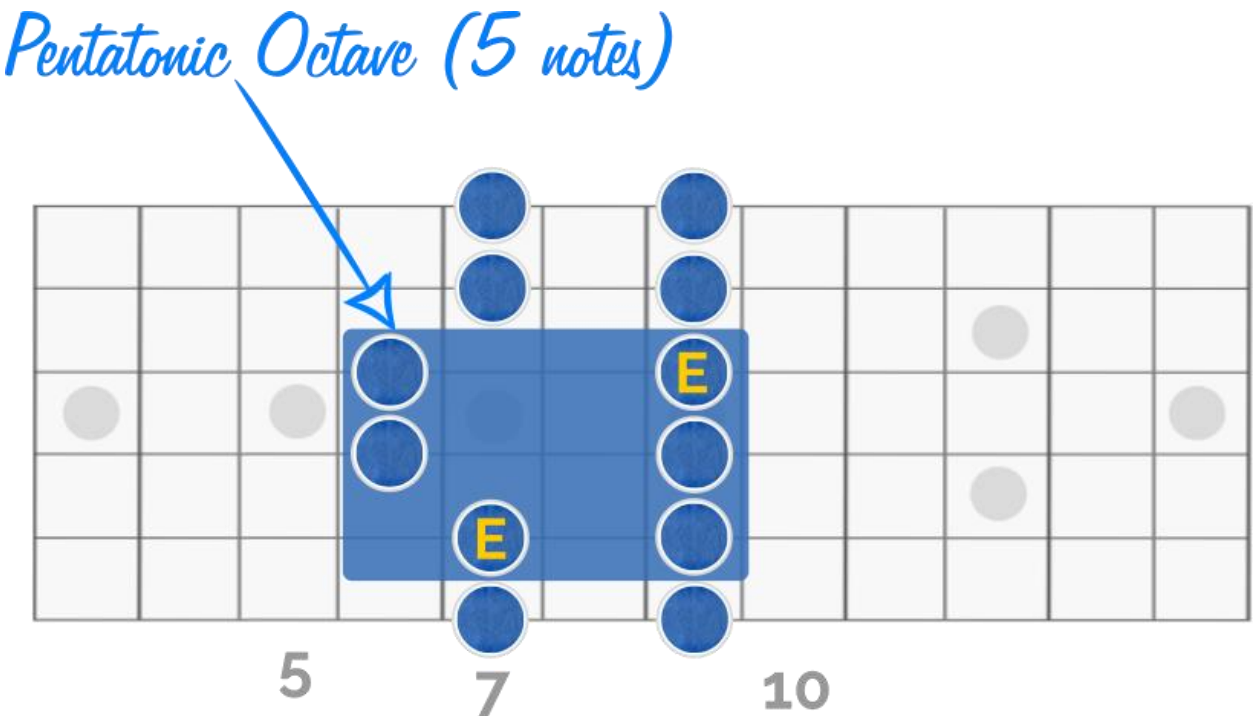
To illustrate this, I'll start with the E major pentatonic shape at the seventh fret, then layer the Lydian mode in the same key over top.

I'll stick to tabs and basic diagrams on this one without the software:



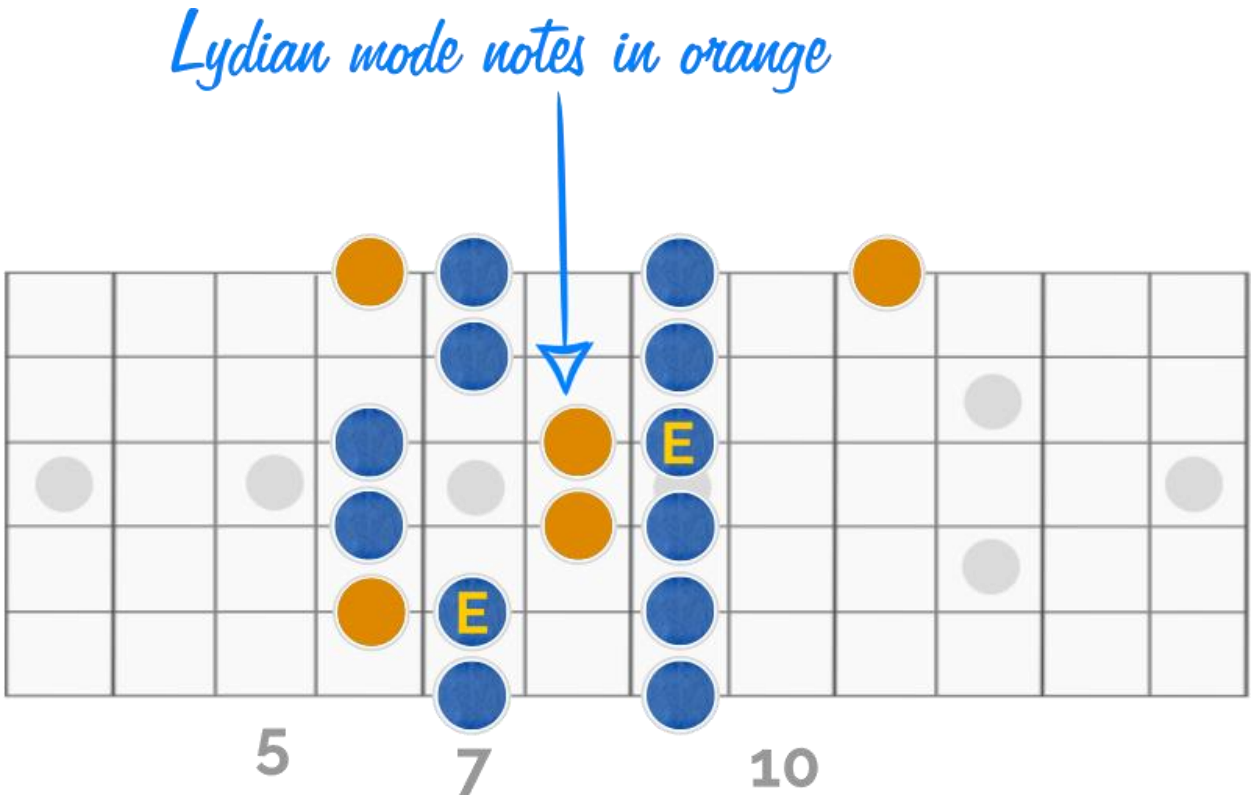
E minor pentatonic scale at the seventh fret position.

Let's take a look at the shape in a scale diagram with the roots labeled and the five-note pentatonic interval highlighted in blue.



Guitar scale diagram of the E minor pentatonic, highlighting the five-note pentatonic interval pattern in the blue square. (View Larger Image)

If we layer the E Lydian mode over the previous Pentatonic shape, we get the following diagram, where the additional Lydian mode notes are added in orange:



The Lydian mode notes can be thought of as "modification" to the base pentatonic scale, giving us an easy way to add notes to an otherwise predictable scale shape. (View Larger Image)

Conclusion

To summarize, we've covered four methods in this lesson. We've learned:

- How to isolate scale segments
- How to layer scales with other modes and/or scale shapes

- How to combine multiple scale segments
- How to use modes as scale "add-ons"

Once you understand how to work with these structures, it opens up a ton of variety and structural help for your melody-building. In other words, if you want to write a solo, a short guitar line or even sing in a particular style, you can use these scales to build variety within structure.

It also helps you interpret larger scale patterns quicker and without as much confusion. You now know that diatonic and pentatonic scales actually occur in short seven and five-note stretches, which makes it really easy to isolate them into more digestible segments.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

If you have questions about this material, the music theory involved or something else, feel free to leave them in the comments section below and I'll be my best to respond there.