If you start writing major scales and pay attention to the accidentals that occur, you are going to start noticing a pattern...

For example, look at the flat keys, starting with the key that has one flat, all the way through the key with seven flats: the flats accrue in a specific order. Same with the sharp keys!

So if you look for a key that has only a D flat, you won’t find it: if a key has a D flat, it must also have a B flat, an E flat and an A flat!

Since writing an entire piece in C sharp major would have been a sure-fire way to get carpal tunnel syndrome with all the sharps involved, composers pretty quickly came up with a way to simplify things: key signatures.

A key signature is a group of accidentals placed at the beginning of every line of music, just to the right of the clef, that instructs the performer to apply those accidentals to every corresponding note in the piece unless specified otherwise.

For example, this key signature indicates that every F, C, and G in the piece should be sharped, regardless of octave!

Oh, and another thing: the accidentals have to be placed in the correct order, and they need to follow a particular pattern of placement that varies slightly depending on the clef being used! If you deviate from this, you, as a composer, will be mocked!

Tenor clef sharps! What’s your problem? You need to conform!