

Constructing Chords

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Basic Types - The basic chords are three-note types called *triads*.

There are four basic types: Major, Minor, Diminished and Augmented. Larger chords are built upon these 4 triads.

Major Triad Minor Triad Diminished Triad Augmented Triad

Major Tonic Chords (built on major triad) - These are stable chords that can be used to end phrases and that aren't pulling towards some other chord. They are suitable to function both as I and IV chords. When based on the root note of the key, all notes are drawn from the major scale with no accidentals. These chords are generally interchangeable among themselves and with major triads also.

C Cmaj⁷ C⁶ Cmaj⁹ C⁶⁽⁹⁾

Minor Tonic Chords (built on minor triad) - These are stable chords that can be used to end phrases and that aren't pulling towards another chord. When based on the root note of the minor key, the sixth or seventh will require an accidental to make it major. (a la Melodic Minor Scale) These chords are generally interchangeable among themselves and with minor triads.

Cm Cm(#7) Cm⁶ Cm^{9(#7)} Cm⁶⁽⁹⁾

Dominant Seventh Chords (built on major triads) - By adding a flat 7th to a major triad, we create the *Dominant* chord, which accommodates a wide variety of upper notes, which are called *tensions*. To the basic C7 chord, we can add 9ths (#1) which are natural, sharp or flat. 11ths (#2) can be natural or sharp. 13ths (#3) can be natural or flat. Almost any note sounds good over a dominant 7th except the natural 11th or the major 7th. Dominant 7th chords are not generally considered stable. The 3rd and 7th of the dominant chord is always trying to resolve with the root and 3rd of the chord a 4th above. All of these C dominant chords, for example, pull strongly towards F major and minor tonic chords.

C⁷ #1 - 9ths #2 - 11ths #3 - 13ths C^{13#11} C^{13b9}

Augmented and Diminished Chords - Because Augmented and Diminished chords are built on multiples of the same interval, they can obscure the key center and are often used to create mystery for the listener. Augmented chords go very well with whole-tone scales, and were very popular as dominant sevenths in the big band era. Diminished chords are mostly stacks of minor thirds, and any note a whole step above a chord tone can be used as a tension. The half-diminished chords (minor 7, flat 5) are often used in the same way as minor sevenths to set up the dominant chord a fourth above.

Caug C^{7#5} C^{9#5} C^{9#5(#11)} Cdim C⁰⁷ Cm^{7b5} C⁰⁷ (D added for tension)

Minor Seventh & Similar Setup Chords - Minor seventh chords have modal uses, but one of their most important and common functions is to prepare the way for the dominant seventh a fourth above, as in the ii-V and ii-V-I progressions. Natural 9ths are common as tensions, with 11ths and 13ths more common in Dorian mode use. A flat 9 or flat 5 could signal a minor ii-V progression.

Cm⁷ 9ths 11th 13th C⁰⁷ (Cm^{7b5})