

# HOW TO READ A CHORD CHART

A Guide to Understanding Chord Symbols

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## Four Basic Triads

C	Cm	C+	C°
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When developing an understanding of how to read a chord chart, it all begins with the four basic triads or three note chords. The chords are Major, Minor, Diminished and Augmented. These each can be defined by the number of whole and half steps that are found between each note. (Remember a half step is the very next note on the keyboard in either direction, whereas a whole step is simply two half steps.) Here is the make-up of each of the four basic triads by measuring the distance from the bottom note to the second note and the second note to the third note or from the tonic note to the third and the third to the fifth:

Major chord	=	2 whole steps + one and a half steps	C
Minor chord	=	one and a half steps + 2 whole steps	Cm, C-
Augmented	=	2 whole steps + 2 whole steps	Caug, C+
Diminished	=	one and a half steps + one and a half steps	Cdim, C°

Another way of looking at these 4 chords is to compare the Major chord with the other chords.

If you know the Major chord, to get the Minor chord, lower the third by one half step.

If you know the Major chord, to get the Augmented chord, raise the fifth by one half step.

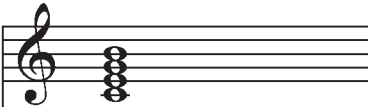
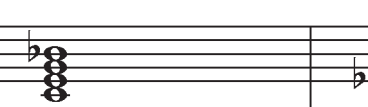
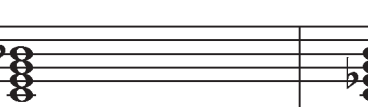
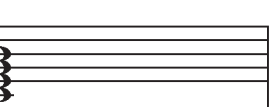
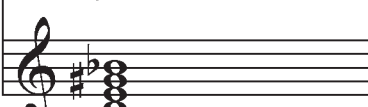
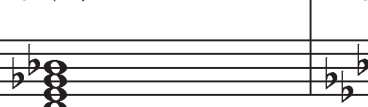
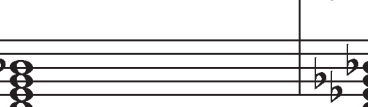
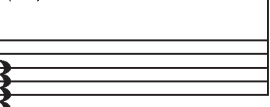
If you know the Major chord, to get the Diminished chord, lower the third and the fifth by one half step.

Understanding how to read chords begins with basic concepts that build at each layer and remain true no matter how complicated the chord. Here are some very important rules to remember:

1. If a chord does not have a “little m,” augmented, or diminished sign, we always assumed that the chord is major. “Maj” in a chord never tells us that the chord is major - we always assume.


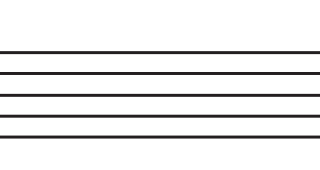
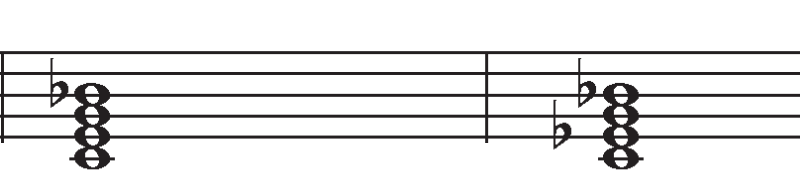
2. A “m” after the letter name of the chord always tells us the chord is Minor and that it has a minor 3rd which is one and a half steps. A “m” never refers to any other interval in a chord other than the third.

## Seventh Chords

CMaj7	C7	Cm7	Cm(Maj7)
			
C+7	C7(b5)	C dim7	Cm7(b5)
			

Listed above are some of the common seventh chords. Understanding chords from here on out is built on the rules for triads and the three most basic seventh chords as represented by CMaj7, C7, Cm7. Consider these important rules:

1. In a chord, “Maj” always refers to the seventh being a Major seventh, in other words, the seventh that is a half step down from the octave. As previously mentioned, “Maj” never means that the chord is a Major chord because we always assume a chord is Major unless we see a little m, diminished, or augmented sign.
2. In a seventh chord or above, we always assume that the seventh is a Minor seventh or in other words, the seventh that is a whole step down from the octave. The “little m” never refers to the seventh being a Minor seventh because we always assume the seventh is Minor unless we see “Maj” in the chord.
3. The “little m” always refers to the third and “Maj” always refers to the seventh.

CMaj7	C7	Cm7
		

This is a Major chord because there is no “little m.” It has a Major seventh because of the “Maj.”

This is a Major chord because there is no “little m.” It has a Minor seventh because we assume that it is Minor. This chord has two assumptions - that it is Major and that it has a Minor 7th.

This is a Minor chord because of the “little m” and has a Minor 7th because it is assumed since there is no “Maj.”

These chords below are “sus” chords and added note chords. “Sus” stands for suspended which means that the third has been replaced by either the 4th if no number is indicated or the 2, 4, or both according what number is written in the chord. The chords that contain a 2 or 6 simply means to add that note to the harmony without taking anything away. The Cadd9 is like a C2 except that it specifically indicates that the 2 should be the highest note.

### Sus, 2s, 6s, add 9s

Csus	Csus2	Csus4,2	C2	Cm2
C6	Cm6	C6,9	Cadd9	

Whenever you have a chord name, a slash, and then another note name, this relates to the bass note which should be played. It means that you play whatever chord is on the left and the note on the right is merely the bass note or the lowest note being played. This could be as in an inversion where the bass is any note other than the root of the chord or the bass note may not even be a note in the chord at all. So, left of the slash is the chord and right of the slash in the bass note.

### Inversions and alternate basses

C/D	Cm/E $\flat$	Gm7/C	B $\flat$ Maj7/C

When the guitar and bass are playing it would be normal for the guitar to play the chord and leave the bass note to the bass player. Sometimes it would be best for the piano or guitar to leave the bottom note to the bass so that there is not a “muddy” or “too busy” sound.

With ninth chords and most other extended chords which are beyond a seventh, the same rules apply that were mentioned in relation to triads and common seventh chords. “Maj” still always refers to the seventh being a Major seventh and the “little m” still always refers to the third being a Minor third. The base chord is always assumed to be Major and the seventh is always assumed to be Minor.

## Ninths

The image shows four measures of music, each illustrating a different C-based ninth chord. The first measure is CMaj9, showing a C major triad with a major seventh (Bb) and a ninth (D) in the treble clef, and a C bass note in the bass clef. The second measure is C9, showing a C major triad with a minor seventh (Bb) and a ninth (D) in the treble clef, and a C bass note in the bass clef. The third measure is Cm9, showing a C minor triad (Cb, Eb) with a minor seventh (Bb) and a ninth (D) in the treble clef, and a C bass note in the bass clef. The fourth measure is C7(b9), showing a C major triad with a minor seventh (Bb) and a flat ninth (Db) in the treble clef, and a C bass note in the bass clef.

Below is a “rock and roll” sharp nine chord and an eleventh chord. Note in the third measure the stacking of the eleventh chord in thirds. However, practically speaking, the eleventh chord almost always omits the third because of the unacceptable clash that occurs with the 11th which can also be seen as the fourth. The fourth measure is how this would actually be played.

## Other Ninths and Elevenths

The image shows four measures of music, each illustrating a different C-based chord. The first measure is C7(#9), showing a C major triad with a minor seventh (Bb) and a sharp ninth (D#) in the treble clef, and a C bass note in the bass clef. The second measure is C7(#9), showing a C major triad with a minor seventh (Bb) and a sharp ninth (D#) in the treble clef, and a C bass note in the bass clef. The third measure is C11, showing a C major triad with a minor seventh (Bb) and an eleventh (Eb) in the treble clef, and a C bass note in the bass clef. The fourth measure is C11, showing a C major triad with a minor seventh (Bb) and an eleventh (Eb) in the treble clef, and a C bass note in the bass clef.

## Thirteenth

C13                      C13(b9)                      C13(#11)

Above are a few thirteenth chords that also have a practical example of how they would be played in reality. Of course with so many notes, you have to make a choice of which ones to leave out. The fifth is generally the first note left out, then the root if it is being played in the base. The notes you must always have are the 3rd, the 7th, and the named interval in the chord, in this case, the 13th.

## Accurate Chords, But Poor Voice Leading

FMaj7      G7/F      Em7      Am7      Dm7      G7      CMaj7

The key to making sounds smooth and not erratic is in using good voice leading. Whenever possible, hold the common tones between chords and move the rest of the notes step-wise to the nearest notes of the new chord.

## Good Voice Leading, Hold the Common Tones-Move the other Notes Step-wise

FMaj7      G7      Em7      Am7      Dm7      G7      CMaj7