Cadences

The two chords at the end of a phrase, and the punctuation they supply. A cadence is how music says full stop, comma, or — occasionally — something unexpected.

Perfect

ALSO: AUTHENTIC · FULL CLOSE

V → I

In C major: G → C

A full stop. The strongest ending there is, and the one nearly every piece finishes on. Use V7 for more pull still.

Imperfect

ALSO: HALF CLOSE

I ii IV → V

In C major: C → G

A comma. Ends *on* the dominant rather than reaching the tonic, so the phrase is left open and the answer is still to come.

Plagal

ALSO: THE AMEN CADENCE

IV → I

In C major: F → C

Also a full stop, but a gentler one — no leading note, so it settles rather than resolves. Hymns end this way after the last verse.

Interrupted

ALSO: DECEPTIVE

V → vi

In C major: G → A minor

The surprise. Everything prepares for the tonic and a minor chord arrives instead — the phrase is stopped mid-sentence and must carry on.

THE FOUR AT A GLANCE

CADENCE	CHORDS	IN C MAJOR	IN A MINOR	PUNCTUATION	ENDS ON
Perfect	V → I	G → C	E → Am	Full stop	Tonic, feeling closed
Imperfect	? → V	C or F → G	Am or Dm → E	Comma	Dominant, feeling open
Plagal	IV → I	F → C	Dm → Am	Full stop, softer	Tonic, feeling settled
Interrupted	V → vi	G → Am	E → F	Dash	Submediant, unresolved

In a minor key the dominant is made major by raising the leading note — E major, not E minor, in A minor. The interrupted cadence there goes to VI, a major chord.

IDENTIFYING ONE IN A PIECE

FIND THE PHRASE END

Look for a long note, a rest or a slur ending. The cadence is the last two chords before that point — not any two chords you like.

NAME THE BASS NOTES

Work out the chord from the bass upwards, then convert to Roman numerals in the key of the piece. The final numeral tells you most of the answer.

CHECK BOTH CHORDS ARE ROOT

A perfect cadence needs V and I both in root position to count as perfect in an exam. With an inversion it is weaker, and named as such.

Question and answer. Most tunes come in pairs of phrases: the first ends imperfect, the second perfect — the shape of almost every folk song and hymn.

Approaching the final chord. Ic → V → I is the classic three-chord approach: the 6/4 leans on the dominant, the dominant resolves, and the ending sounds inevitable rather than abrupt.