Inversions

The same three notes, reordered. Move the bottom note up an octave and the chord keeps its name but changes its footing — which is the whole point: the bass line can move while the harmony stays put.

A C MAJOR TRIAD, THREE WAYS

Root position

C · figured 5/3

G
E
C

BASS: C — THE ROOT

Solid and conclusive. Where a phrase comes to rest.

First inversion

C/E · figured 6/3, or 6

C
G
E

BASS: E — THE THIRD

Lighter, mobile. Good in the middle of a phrase.

Second inversion

C/G · figured 6/4

E
C
G

BASS: G — THE FIFTH

Unstable. Nearly always on its way somewhere.

Gold marks the root wherever it has moved to. The bass note — the lowest sounding note — is what names the inversion, not the order of the notes above it.

HOW THEY ARE WRITTEN

POSITION	BASS NOTE	FIGURED BASS	ROMAN NUMERAL	CHORD SYMBOL	INTERVALS ABOVE THE BASS
Root position	Root	5/3	I	C	3rd and 5th
First inversion	Third	6/3 → 6	Ib or I^6	C/E	3rd and 6th
Second inversion	Fifth	6/4	Ic or I^6_4	C/G	4th and 6th
Third inversion (7ths only)	Seventh	4/2 → 2	V^4_2 or Vd	G7/F	2nd, 4th and 6th

The figures count intervals up from the bass, not from the root. Two systems name the same thing: letters after the numeral (Ib, Ic) in British exams, figures (I^6, I^6_4) elsewhere.

A SEVENTH CHORD HAS FOUR

G7 root

7

F
D
B
G

G7/B

6/5

G
F
D
B

G7/D

4/3

B
G
F
D

G7/F

4/2

D
B
G
F

Why bother. Inversions let the bass walk by step instead of leaping, and let the hand move less between chords. C to F is a leap in root position; C to F/A is a step.

The cadential 6/4. The one place a second inversion is standard: Ic falling to V just before the final chord. It delays the dominant and makes the ending feel prepared.