

Chord progressions & song structure

Chords are numbered by the degree of the scale they are built on, so a progression can be written once and played in any key. Roman numerals in capitals are major, in lower case minor. Learn the handful below and you can play most of the songs you already know.

THE SEVEN CHORDS OF A MAJOR KEY

NUMERAL	IN C	IN G	IN F	QUALITY	WHAT IT DOES
I	C	G	F	Major	Home. Everything is measured against it
ii	Dm	Am	Gm	Minor	Steps towards V – the usual approach chord
iii	Em	Bm	Am	Minor	A shadow of I; useful mid-phrase, rarely at ends
IV	F	C	Bb	Major	Leaves home without tension – open, hymn-like
V	G	D	C	Major	Pulls hard back to I; add a 7th and it pulls harder
vi	Am	Em	Dm	Minor	The relative minor – the same notes, sadder
vii°	Bdim	F#dim	Edim	Diminished	Restless; almost always moves straight to I

SIX PROGRESSIONS WORTH KNOWING BY HEART

THE FOUR CHORDS



C · G · Am · F. Endlessly circular – thousands of pop songs sit on it.

THE DOO-WOP TURN



C · Am · F · G. Falls away then climbs back; nostalgic by nature.

THE STRONGEST CADENCE



Dm · G · C. The jazz sentence; each root falls a fifth to the next.

MINOR DESCENT



Am · F · C · G. The same four chords starting sad – good for verses.

THE LAMENT



Am · G · F · E. A bass line walking downwards, step by step.

PLAGAL CLOSE



C · F · C. The amen – settles without the push of a dominant.

TWELVE-BAR BLUES



In C: C C C C · F F C C · G F C G. Twelve bars, three chords, then round again – the last bar turns the form back to the beginning.

THREE WAYS TO BUILD A WHOLE PIECE

VERSE & CHORUS



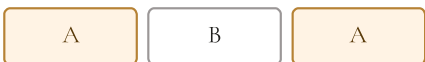
The verse tells the story and changes words each time; the chorus stays the same and carries the tune. The bridge goes somewhere new so the last chorus feels earned.

THIRTY-TWO BAR · AABA



Eight bars each. A is the tune, B – the middle eight – moves to a new key or mood, then A returns. The shape of most jazz standards.

TERNARY · CLASSICAL



Statement, contrast, return. B usually sits in a related key – the dominant, or the relative minor – and the return may be decorated rather than repeated exactly.

Count in fours. Phrases group naturally into 4 and 8 bars. Break the pattern deliberately – a 6-bar phrase surprises; an accidental one just sounds wrong.

Change one thing. To lift a repeated section, keep the chords and change something else: the bass line, the rhythm, who is playing, how loud.

Save the highest note. Put the melody's top note in the chorus or the last A, not in bar two. A tune needs somewhere left to go.