

Chords that go together

Every major key contains seven chords built from its own notes, sorting into three jobs: home, away, and the chord that pulls you back.

THE SEVEN CHORDS OF A MAJOR KEY

DEGREE	NAME	QUALITY	IN C	IN G	IN F	WHAT IT DOES
I	Tonic	major	C	G	F	Home. Where the piece begins and ends.
ii	Supertonic	minor	Dm	Am	Gm	A gentle approach to V — the polite way in.
iii	Mediant	minor	Em	Bm	Am	The rarest one. Colours a line without moving it far.
IV	Subdominant	major	F	C	Bb	Away from home, open and lifting.
V	Dominant	major	G	D	C	Tension. Contains the leading note, so it wants I.
vi	Submediant	minor	Am	Em	Dm	The relative minor — home's shadow.
vii°	Leading-note	diminished	B°	F#°	E°	Unstable. Usually used in first inversion, or as part of V7.

Capital = major, lower case = minor, ° = diminished. **I ii iii IV V vi vii°** holds in every major key — learn it once and it transposes itself.

THREE JOBS, SEVEN CHORDS

Tonic I · iii · vi	At rest. Any of these can stand in for home — swap I for vi and the phrase stays grounded but turns wistful.
Subdominant IV · ii	Departure. Moves away from the tonic without demanding a resolution yet. ii and IV are interchangeable.
Dominant V · vii°	Tension. Pulls hard back to I. Sit on it too long and the ear begs for home.

Harmony travels **tonic** → **subdominant** → **dominant** → **tonic**. Skip forwards freely; going backwards (V to IV) undoes a step — rare in hymns, common in blues.

PROGRESSIONS WORTH STEALING

I → V → vi → IV In C: C → G → Am → F · the four-chord song
I → vi → IV → V In C: C → Am → F → G · the fifties turnaround
ii → V → I In C: Dm → G → C · the jazz cadence
I → IV → I → V In C: C → F → C → G · twelve-bar blues, first half

IN A MINOR KEY, AND THREE HABITS

i · Am	ii° · B°	III · C
iv · Dm	V · E	VI · F
vii° · G#°		

A minor, harmonic form. The seventh is raised (G#) so **V is major** and the cadence still pulls home.

BORROWING

A key and its relative minor share all seven chords, so a piece can slip from C major to A minor without a new note.

KEEP THE COMMON

NOTE

Chords a step or third apart share notes. Hold the shared note and move the others as little as possible.

FIT IT TO THE TUNE

One or two chords a bar, changing on beat one. A chord fits if the strong-beat melody notes belong to it.