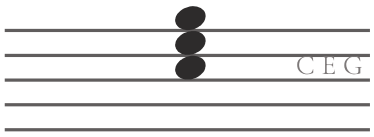
Primary triads & writing a melody

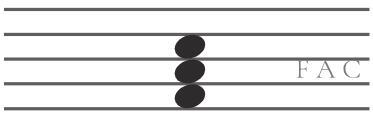
Three chords — built on degrees 1, 4 and 5 — will harmonise almost any simple tune. Learn them in one key and you have the frame every melody you write can hang on.

THE THREE PRIMARY TRIADS IN C MAJOR



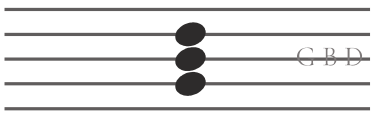
I — tonic C

Home. Everything is measured against it, and most pieces end here.



IV — subdominant F

A clear step away from home — open and warm, but not yet tense.



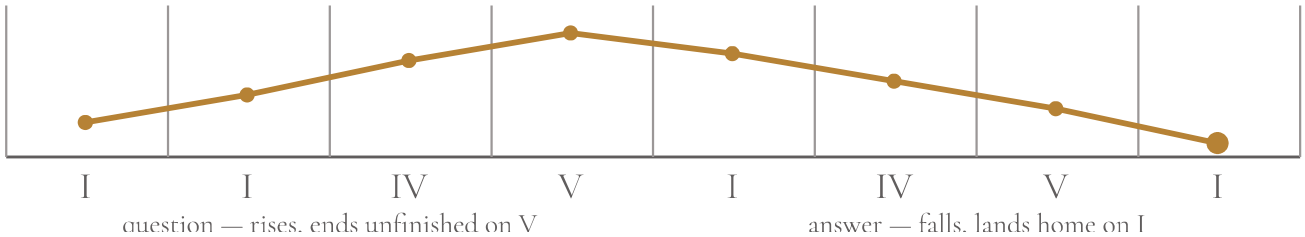
V — dominant G

Tension. The B pulls up to C — which is why V wants to fall back into I.

CHORD	NAME	IN C MAJOR	IN G MAJOR	IN F MAJOR	BUILT ON DEGREE
I	Tonic	C E G	G B D	F A C	1
IV	Subdominant	F A C	C E G	B♭ D F	4
V	Dominant	G B D	D F♯ A	C E G	5

Each triad is a root with a third and fifth stacked above — three notes, every other letter. Between them, I, IV and V contain every note of the scale.

HANGING A MELODY ON THEM



Eight bars, two balanced halves: the first four rise and stop on V — a question — and the second four answer, coming down to the tonic. Choose the chord first, then pick melody notes that mostly belong to it.

HOW TO FINISH

The strongest ending is a step or a short leap onto the tonic, with V changing to I underneath it. Land on a strong beat and give the last note more length than the ones before it.

THEN SING IT

Always play or sing a finished melody back. The ear catches what the eye on the page misses — an awkward leap, a phrase with no breath in it, an ending that arrives too soon.