

Triads from Major Scales

Turn a seven-note scale into seven chords

What is a triad?

A triad is a three-note chord built from a root, a third and a fifth. A chord sounds its notes together; an arpeggio plays them one after another. To build a triad from a scale, choose a scale note, skip the next note, take the next, skip again, and take the next. This stacks two thirds.

The parent scale

C-D-E-F-G-A-B

Step pattern: W-W-H-W-W-W-H

W = 2 semitones; H = 1 semitone; 3H = 3 semitones.

Build the first chord

Number the seven scale notes 1 to 7. Take degrees 1, 3 and 5 for the tonic triad. For the next chord, take 2, 4 and 6. For degree 3, take 3, 5 and 7. Continue by wrapping into the next octave: 4-6-1, 5-7-2, 6-1-3 and 7-2-4. Count positions in this scale; do not substitute notes from another scale.

Quality	Root-based formula	Two stacked thirds
Major	1-3-5	4 + 3 semitones
Minor	1-b3-5	3 + 4 semitones
Diminished	1-b3-b5	3 + 3 semitones
Augmented	1-3-#5	4 + 4 semitones

The formulas compare each chord with a major scale on its OWN root. The Roman numeral shows its place in the PARENT scale. These are different jobs: a chord on degree 2 still has its own root, third and fifth.

Each chord keeps the notes of the parent major scale. The scale's whole- and half-step arrangement creates different chord qualities. Starting from degree 2 does not automatically give a major chord: D-F-A has a minor third, so ii is minor.

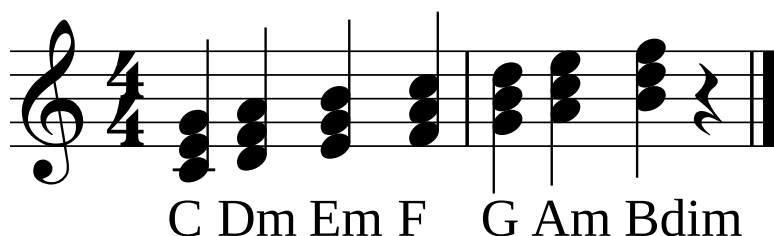
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Chord-quality order: major, minor, minor, major, major, minor, diminished. Uppercase Roman numerals indicate major triads; lowercase indicate minor. "dim" means diminished and "aug" means augmented. Numerals here identify scale positions; other systems may add flat signs when comparing roots with a parallel major key.

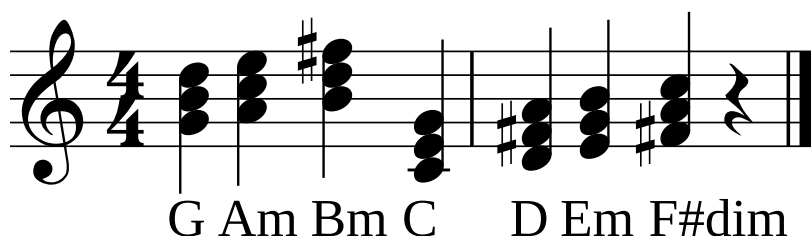
Degree	Symbol	Notes	Quality
I	C	C-E-G	Major
ii	Dm	D-F-A	Minor
iii	Em	E-G-B	Minor
IV	F	F-A-C	Major
V	G	G-B-D	Major
vi	Am	A-C-E	Minor
vii dim	Bdim	B-D-F	Diminished

Chords from C-D-E-F-G-A-B



C Dm Em F G Am Bdim

G major: G-A-B-C-D-E-F#



G Am Bm C D Em F#dim

The notes in each vertical stack sound together. These are treble-clef pitch examples in 4/4: one quarter-note chord per beat, with a rest completing the last bar. Key signatures are empty so the required accidentals are shown beside the notes. Accidentals may be cancelled by a natural sign.

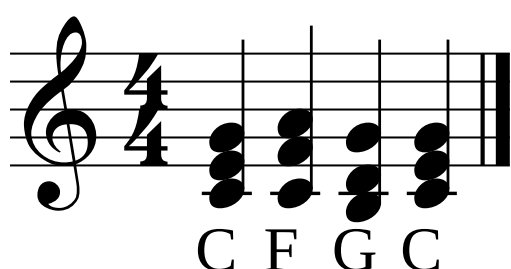
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Hear the chords in a progression

Try C-F-G-C (I-IV-V-I). C sounds like home; F moves away; G creates an expectation of returning to C. Then try C-Am-F-G (I-vi-IV-V). Roman numerals let you carry the same plan into another major key.

A connected four-chord example



Root position and inversions

In root position, the root is the lowest note. In first inversion, the third is lowest. In second inversion, the fifth is lowest. For C major: C-E-G, E-G-C and G-C-E. The chord remains C major because its notes remain C, E and G. Chord quality depends on the root-based intervals, not on the lowest visible note alone.

The progression above uses inversions to keep notes near one another. This is voice leading: each musical part moves smoothly to its next note. A slash symbol names a chosen bass note, for example C/E means C major with E in the bass. The root can differ from the bass.

Important harmonic detail

The diminished triad on degree 7 has two minor thirds: B-D and D-F. Its outer notes B-F form a diminished fifth. It often creates tension that resolves towards tonic harmony. Do not replace F with F# unless you intend to leave C major.

Move it to another key

Keep the Roman-numeral plan, write the new parent scale, and rebuild the chords from that scale. Check every third and fifth. A different key changes the letter names but preserves the scale's chord-quality pattern.

For piano, begin by playing a comfortable triad in one hand and its root in the other. For guitar or bass, play the three notes as an arpeggio before finding a chord shape. Sing the root first, then hear the third that determines the major or minor character.

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A manageable practice routine

Say it: Name the root, each note and the chord quality before playing.

Build it: Write the notes using the formula. Check letter names and accidentals.

Play it: Use relaxed hands. Start at 50-60 BPM; hold each chord for four beats. Guitarists and bassists can begin by playing the notes one at a time.

Hear it: Compare two chord qualities on the same root. Sing or play the note that changes.

Create: Make a short progression, record it, then describe how it sounds. Transpose it to another key when you are ready.

Common mistakes

- Building every chord as major instead of checking the scale notes.
- Forgetting to carry a scale's sharps or flats into every chord that uses them.
- Confusing the chord root with the lowest note of an inversion.

Your turn

1. Build the triad on degree 2 of C major.
2. Name I, IV and V in G major.
3. Spell vii diminished in D major.
4. Why is E-G-B minor rather than major?

Suggested answers

1. D-F-A: D minor (ii).
2. G major, C major and D major.
3. C#-E-G: C# diminished.
4. E-G is a minor third (3 semitones); E-B is a perfect fifth.

For younger learners: Use three coloured counters to mark a triad, then add one counter for each extra chord tone. Say the names aloud.

For adult learners: Compare the written formula with a practical voicing. Explain which notes are essential and why a performer might omit others.