

How To Write Chord Progressions



Song Writer Series Lesson 1/4
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Video Tutorial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urTKZaDePdA>

What is a chord progression?

A chord progression is a series of chords that are played in a circle. This circle of chords creates the harmony that is used to support the melody of the song.

How are chord progressions made?

The first step is to determine the key of the song you would like to play in. Why? The key determines the scale that you will use, and the scale is used to create both the melody and harmony. Let's look at the C scale for an example.

C Major scale - C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C

Intervals are - Root, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, Octave

The scale on the Ukulele looks like this.

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  C D E F G A B C
A|-----0-2-3-|
E|----0-1-3-----|
C|0-2-----|
G|-----|
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How Are Chords Created? - Chords are created by using specific intervals, the easy way to look at the basic chords is start on a note, skip a note, play a note, skip a note, play a note, for example.

The C Major Chord is Created as Follows - Starting at C, skipping D, playing E, skipping F and playing the G note

C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C

The D Minor Chord is created as follows

C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C

That works for all the chords in the scale. Depending on which note you start on the chord also receives a different roman numeral. Let's look at the chords for C major and their roman numerals. Notice the lower case roman numerals are minor chords.

I ii iii IV V vi VIIdim I
C - Dm - Em - F - G - Am - Bdim - C

That is why you sometimes will here chord progressions referred to in numerals, for example "Hey, let's play a 1, 4, 5 in C." Would mean C - F - G chords.

Let's look at some examples.

I - IV - V
C F G

This is a classic and should feel very familiar right away. Let's look at some famous songs and use them as examples.

Let It Be (Verse) - The Beatles

I'm Yours - Jason Mraz

I - V - vi - IV
C G Am F

Vance Joy - Riptide

vi - V - I
Am G C

Down On The Corner (Chorus) - C.C.R.

IV - I - V - I
F C G C

These are just some examples of popular songs, but it is important to know that you don't have to play everything in the key of C, you don't need to limit yourself to one chord progression a song, you don't even have to limit yourself to one key for a song!

Transposition - This is also how you can make a song easier, but it is good just to hear some examples in other keys to feel the similarities and differences. Let's look at the Riptide progressions in a couple of keys to illustrate that (use the chord chart in the other attachment to practice transposing chord progressions that you are familiar with as well as identifying the key.

In C

vi - V - I
Am G C
In D

vi - V - I
Bm A D

In F

vi - V - I
Dm C F

In A

vi - V - I
F#m D A

How Do I Write My Own Chord Progressions? - This is really just a two-step process, 1. Choose a key 2. Experiment with different progressions (you should study your favorite songs and look at what chords they use and what progressions they use as well).

Write your chord progression, tape yourself and load it instragram. Tag me @tenthumbspro so I can see your progress!

Taking your progression to the next level - There are a lot of ways to do this, and in the second of the series we will look at my 4 favorite ways, but for now let's look at diatonic seventh chords. You can add another note to your chords, making them seven chords. There are three types, Maj7, m7, D7. Let's look at how it works.

The C Major 7 Chord is Created as Follows - Starting at C, skipping D, playing E, skipping F and playing the G note, skipping the A and playing the B

C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C

How do you know if it is maj7, m7, or dominant 7? Every roman numeral has a corresponding 7th, so if you have your chord chart ready, or you know your roman numeral positions, you can easily extend the chords.

Imaj7 ii7 iii7 IVmaj7 V7 vi7 VIIIdim7 Imaj7
Cmaj7 - Dm7 - Em7 - Fmaj7 - G7 - Am7 - Bdim7 - Cmaj7

When Can I Use 7 Chords in My Progressions? These chords can be used to taste, they are very common in specific genres, but you can use them anytime you would like.

Non-Diatonic Chords - Another cool thing you can do is modify some chords in a song that aren't naturally in the key, there are many ways to do this

but I am just going to provide two examples for you today that I used in my song that I am writing for this month with you.

Verse Progression:

I - III7 - ii7 - V7
F A7 gm7 C7

Two things to note about this, one, there are a lot of 7 chords, but, the second chord is an A7 instead of an Am7. In the key of F the third chord should be a minor chord, or a iii chord, but you can switch out the three chord for a III7, or a dominant 7 chord, this change gives a nice strong ragtime feel.

Chorus Progression:

IV - iv - I
Bb Bbm F

Another cool trick you can do when going from the IV chord to the I chord is you can change the IV chord from a major to a minor (iv) on the way back to the one chord. Very Space Oddity David Bowie cool.

When examining chord progressions from your favorite artists make sure to look out for these sneaky non-diatonic chords.



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