



CHORD BUILDING, KEY SIGNATURE, & SONGWRITING BASICS FOR GUITAR

“Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination and life to everything.”

-Plato



-Written by David Taub

“Life without music would be a mistake.”

-Friedrich Nietzsche

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CHORD BUILDING, KEY SIGNATURE, & SONGWRITING

Wouldn't being able to write a song be a very cool thing? Wouldn't it be powerful to use the guitar to create something uniquely you? What can beat that?

But finding those chords that sound just right together can be a daunting task for sure. You may not even know where to start. Not to worry as I can help get your songwriting journey kicked off to a great start.

There is no one set way of going about it and I don't want to bog you down with all kinds of music theory that may confuse or overwhelm. However, I have some suggestions and handy chord key charts to get you pointed in the right direction.

This lesson includes two charts with all the chords written out for each major key and each minor key. These charts are great tools to keep by your side when putting progressions together or writing songs.

**Remember
that if it
sounds
good.....It IS
good!**

Often you can let your ear guide you while you play. Remember that if it sounds good.....it **IS** good. Try humming out a melody or musical idea, find those notes or chords on the guitar, and build your melodies from there. This is just one suggestion, again, there are no set rules.

Let your mind wander and play some chords. While bouncing around the neck, listen to the sounds and stop and note when you hit something interesting.

Now let's examine a more structured approach to understanding what chords make up each key and why. This will take a lot of the "hunting and pecking" away from endlessly searching for the right chords that sound good together.



CHORD BUILDING, KEY SIGNATURE, & SONGWRITING

Let's learn a little bit of music theory to help tie the coming principles together. Bear with me as this will all make sense very soon when you start strumming that guitar and creating beautiful music all your own!

We first need to define a few musical terms. A scale is a series of sounds arranged by order of pitch, or alphabetically, from any given note to its octave.

Basically all music theory falls back to the major scale. Think of the major scale as the foundation from which all other scales are formed. The major scale has seven notes and it is THE standard in music that all is compared.

MAJOR SCALE - doe, re, me, fa, so, la, ti

How many times did we all sing this darn song in elementary school?

The seven notes in the major scale each represent a chord. Since there are seven notes in the scale there will be seven corresponding chords in each major key. Each note or chord is numbered, also called a degree. And the scale degrees always appear in order as illustrated below in the key of C major.

C Major Scale – C	D	E	F	G	A	B
Scale degrees – 1	2	3	4	5	6	7



CHORD BUILDING, KEY SIGNATURE, & SONGWRITING

The term “key” in music means the “root” or “tonic” which gives the listener a sense of arrival or rest. It is what all the other chords or notes are pulling toward. It’s what I call “home base”.

Most songs are written in either major key or minor key. Although there are also modal keys, you will most often find major or minor keys in most popular songs. Often you will find in popular music the first chord of the song is usually the key of the song, but not always.

The chords most often used in a song for a particular key are those made from the notes in the corresponding scale. That is why they usually sound so good together.

All the chords in a given major key are made from various combinations of the notes in that key’s major scale. Same thing with minor key just use minor scales.

Building the seven chords from each scale degree generates the chords in that particular key. With this vital information, we then will easily be able to know which chords are in any given key and sound good when played together.

Armed with this critical data we can now instantly put chords together that we know will sound good together as they will be in the same key. This will streamline the chord choosing process and cut down on all that hunting and pecking.





CHORDS IN EACH KEY AND SONGWRITING BASICS

Remember, any chord *might* show up in any given key. However, some chords are ***much more likely*** to be in a given key than others. The most likely chords to show up in a given key are the chords made from combinations of the notes in that key's corresponding scale.

Let's examine the C major scale and build the seven chords in that key. Later in this eBook we will get into the "how's" of chord construction. Be sure and check out those lessons when time allows.

C Major Scale – C	D	E	F	G	A	B
Scale degrees – 1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Seven notes correspond to seven chords. So we start with the C note and build a C chord, then the next note in the scale, D, and build a D chord, etc., etc. All the way through the scale we end up with these chords in the key of C:

1. C D E F G A B C - C, E, G = C (C major chord)
2. C D E F G A B C - D, F, A = Dm (D minor chord)
3. C D E F G A B C - E, G, B = Em (E minor chord)
4. C D E F G A B C - F, A, C = F (F major chord)
5. C D E F G A B C D - G, B, D = G (G major chord)
6. C D E F G A B C D E - A, C, E = Am (A minor chord)
7. C D E F G A B C D E F - B, D, F = B° (B diminished chord)



CHORDS IN EACH KEY AND SONGWRITING BASICS

We have now constructed all the basic chords in the key of C major. They are:

C major, D minor, E minor, F major, G major, A minor, and B diminished.

These are the basic chords in the key of C major and please note in the diagram above that all these chords are built from different combination of the C major scale notes. This is why they all sound pretty good when played together.

Because major scales are always built from stacking thirds, the pattern is always the same for every major key. You'll find that although the chords change from one key to the next, the **pattern** of major and minor type chords is always the same for any major or minor key.

In major keys the chords built on the first, fourth, and fifth degrees of the scale are major type chords (I, IV, and V). The chords built on the second, third, and sixth degrees of the scale are minor type chords (ii, iii, and vi). The chord built on the seventh degree of the scale is a diminished chord. So whichever major key you are building chords the pattern will always be the same - **Major....Minor....Minor....Major....Major....Minor....Diminished**

Remember, any chord might show up in any given key. However, some chords are much more *likely* to be in a given key than others

I followed this template to build all the chords in every major key and then listed them out in the chord chart on page seven. I then built all the chords in each minor key, using a different formula, and listed all those keys out on page eight.



CHORDS IN EACH KEY AND SONGWRITING BASICS

The two charts below are guides or jump off points to get you started. Be sure to experiment and get creative. First try writing a progression in a major key using the below chart as a reference.

Remember that the first chart is for **MAJOR KEYS**. Minor keys follow different formulas. While there is only one major scale there are three different types of minor scales: natural minor, harmonic minor, and melodic minor.

The first line in the major key chart is the notes in that key's major scale. The next two lines are the 3-note chord and 4-note chord in each key. Use these chords in a given key and experiment with the sounds. Let your ear guide you to find what sounds good together.

The V chord often resolves nicely to the I chord. Try it out, put the V chord last in the progression and then have the first chord being the I chord. Here you get that great resolution of that V chord leading right back to the I chord. The IV chord is a great strong chord to go to for a chorus section – try it.



There are in-depth theory lessons later on in this eBook that explain chord construction. You can hold off for now on that as I first want to get you playing, creating, and having fun. Be sure to check out the other lessons in this eBook to round out your theory education when time allows.

So pick up that guitar, reference some chords in the below charts in a given key, and start creating unique beautiful music.....and enjoy the journey!

CHORDS IN EACH MAJOR KEY - CHART

KEY signature	Notes each key, 3 & 4 note chords	Ionian major	Dorian minor	Phrygian minor	Lydian major	Mixolydian major	Aeolian relative minor	Locrian diminished	# sharps or flats
C	Notes key C 3 note chord 4 note chord	C C Cmaj7	D Dm Dm7	E Em Em7	F F Fmaj7	G G G7	A Am Am7	B Bdim Bm7b5	No sharps or flats
G	Notes key G 3 note chord 4 note chord	G G Gmaj7	A Am Am7	B Bm Bm7	C C Cmaj7	D D D7	E Em Em7	F# F#dim F#m7b5	1 sharp
D	Notes key D 3 note chord 4 note chord	D D Dmaj7	E Em Em7	F# F#m F#m7	G G Gmaj7	A A A7	B Bm Bm7	C# C#dim C#m7b5	2 sharps
A	Notes key A 3 note chord 4 note chord	A A Amaj7	B Bm Bm7	C# C#m C#m7	D D Dmaj7	E E E7	F# F#m F#m7	G# G#dim G#m7b5	3 sharps
E	Notes key E 3 note chord 4 note chord	E E Emaj7	F# F#m F#m7	G# G#m G#m7	A A Amaj7	B B B7	C# C#m C#m7	D# D#dim D#m7b5	4 sharps
B	Notes key B 3 note chord 4 note chord	B B Bmaj7	C# C#m C#m7	D# D#m D#m7	E E Emaj7	F# F# F#7	G# G#m G#m7	A# A#dim A#m7b5	5 sharps
F#	Notes key F# 3 note chord 4 note chord	F# F# F#maj7	G# G#m G#m7	A# A#m A#m7	B B Bmaj7	C# C# C#7	D# D#m D#m7	E# E#dim E#m7b5	6 sharps
Db (C#)	Notes key Db 3 note chord 4 note chord	Db Db Dbmaj7	Eb Eb Eb7	F Fm Fm7	Gb Gb Gb7	Ab Ab Ab7	Bb Bb Bb7	C Cdim Cm7b5	5 flats
Ab (G#)	Notes key Ab 3 note chord 4 note chord	Ab Ab Abmaj7	Bb Bb Bb7	C Cm Cm7	Db Db Db7	Eb Eb Eb7	F Fm Fm7	G Gdim Gm7b5	4 flats
Eb	Notes key Eb 3 note chord 4 note chord	Eb Eb Eb7	F Fm Fm7	G Gm Gm7	Ab Ab Ab7	Bb Bb Bb7	C Cm Cm7	D Ddim Dm7b5	3 flats
Bb	Notes key Bb 3 note chord 4 note chord	Bb Bb Bb7	C Cm Cm7	D Dm Dm7	Eb Eb Eb7	F F F7	G Gm Gm7	A Adim Am7b5	2 flats
F	Notes key F 3 note chord 4 note chord	F F Fmaj7	G Gm Gm7	A Am Am7	Bb Bb Bb7	C C C7	D Dm Dm7	E Edim Em7b5	1 flat

Have fun with this chart. Pick a key and try to come up with some cool sounding chord changes. It's a great reference chart to have nearby when you are writing songs or just trying to come up with some cool jams. Experiment and be sure to also try the minor key chart. Rock on!

CHORDS IN EACH MINOR KEY - CHART

KEY signature	Natural Minor (Aeolian mode)	1 Minor	2 diminished	b3 major	4 minor	5 minor	b6 major	b7 major
	Melodic Minor (Ascending)	1 minor	2 minor	b3 augmented	4 major	5 major	6 diminished	7 diminished
Cm	Natural Minor Melodic Minor	Cm Cm	Ddim Dm	Eb Eaug	Fm F	Gm G	Ab Adim	Bb Bdim
Gm	Natural Minor Melodic Minor	Gm Gm	Adim Am	B Baug	Cm C	Dm D	Eb Edim	F Gbdim
Dm	Natural Minor Melodic Minor	Dm Dm	Edim Em	F Faug	Gm G	Am A	Bb Bdim	C Dbdim
Am	Natural Minor Melodic Minor	Am Am	Bdim Bm	C Caug	Dm D	Em E	F Gbdim	G Abdim
Em	Natural Minor Melodic Minor	Em Em	F#dim F#m	G Gaug	Am A	Bm B	C Dbdim	D Ebdim
Bm	Natural Minor Melodic Minor	Bm Bm	C#dim C#m	D Daug	Em E	F#m F#	G Abdim	A Bbdim
F#m	Natural Minor Melodic Minor	F#m F#m	G#dim G#m	A Aaug	Bm B	C#m C#	D Ebdim	E Fdim
Dbm	Natural Minor Melodic Minor	Dbm Dbm	Ebdim Ebm	E Eaug	F#m F#	Abm Ab	A Bbdim	B Cdim
Abm	Natural Minor Melodic Minor	Abm Abm	Bbdim Bbm	B Baug	Dbm Db	Ebm Eb	E Fdim	Gb Gdim
Ebm	Natural Minor Melodic Minor	Ebm Ebm	Fdim Fm	Gb Gaug	Abm Ab	Bbm Bb	B Cdim	Db Ddim
Bbm	Natural Minor Melodic Minor	Bbm Bbm	Cdim Cm	Db Daug	Ebm Eb	Fm F	Gb Gdim	Ab Adim
Fm	Natural Minor Melodic Minor	Fm Fm	Gdim Gm	Ab Aaug	Bbm Bb	Cm C	Db Ddim	Eb Edim

There are three different types of minor scales; Natural Minor or Aeolian mode, Melodic Minor, and Harmonic Minor. To create a minor scale in any key start on the root note and go up the scale using the pattern: **whole step, half step, whole step, whole step, half step, whole step, whole step**.

The first chord will always be minor, the second chord will always be diminished, the third chord will always be major, the fourth and fifth chords will always be minor, and the sixth and seventh chords will always be major.

Due to the three different minor scales there are more choices of chords when writing music in minor keys as compared to major keys. To keep things relatively simple the above chart illustrates the minor key chordal options when we harmonize the Natural Minor scale, (in **black**), and the ascending version of the Melodic Minor scale, (in **red**).



CHORD CONSTRUCTION

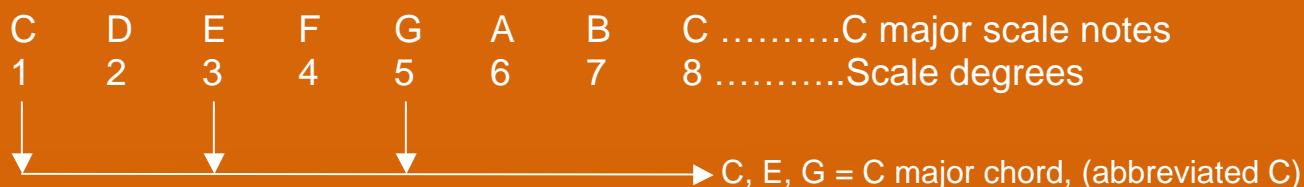
Chord construction theory teaches us invaluable musical concepts. When we study how chords are built, we learn why certain notes make up certain chords. As well as we learn the relationships between notes, chords, and scales.

Chords are built from notes in certain scales. Let's first examine the C major scale and build some chords from that scale. The key of C major is the only major key with no sharps or flats.

C major scale = C, D, E, F, G, A, B

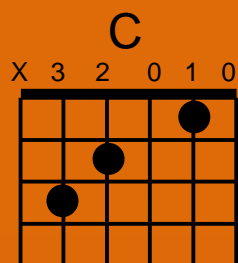
Let's build some major chords. A major chord is constructed from three notes, a root or 1, 3rd, and 5th. Remember that the scale is always laid out in order and each successive note is assigned a number or degree.

Lay out the scale and start counting. Start on the C and count to the third degree and you have an E note, (see diagram below). In the key of C major the third is an E. Now count to the 5th degree of the scale starting from the C note and you have a G note. In the key of C major the 5th is a G. Now put the three notes together as shown below and you have a C major chord – 1st, 3rd, and 5th - - the notes C, E, G.



CHORD CONSTRUCTION

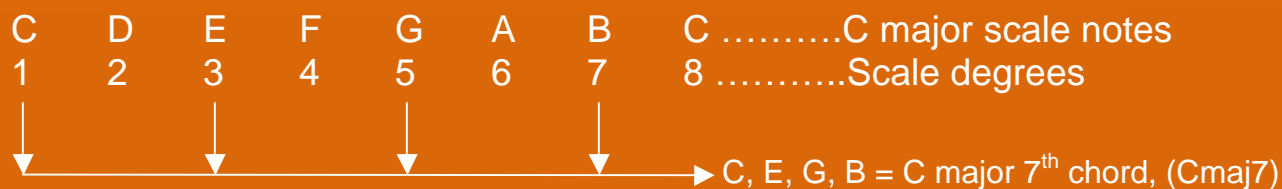
We just built a C major chord from the scale degrees 1,3,5 from a C major scale. Lets examine the C major open position chord illustrated below on the left.



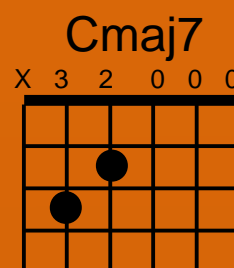
Like all major chords it is constructed from the 1st, 3rd, and 5th degrees of the major scale. In the key of C major the notes would be C, E, and G. Playing these notes on the guitar neck produces a C major chord. So you can play these three notes together anywhere on the guitar neck and you have a C major chord.

Let's try building another chord. This time we will build a Cmajor7th chord. Major 7th chords are constructed from the 1, 3rd, 5th, and 7th degrees of the major scale.

In the key of C major the 1st degree is a C, the 3rd is an E, and the 5th is a G. Let's draw out the C major scale again and begin counting degrees, (see illustration below). The 7th degree in C major is a B. So put all the notes for a C major 7th chord together and we have the 1, 3rd, 5th, and 7th or C, E, G, and B.



Let's examine the Cmaj7 open position chord illustrated on the right. Like all major 7th chords it is constructed from the 1, 3rd, 5th, and 7th degrees of the major scale. In the key of C major the notes would be C, E, G, and B. Playing these notes on the guitar neck produces a C major 7th chord. You can play these four notes together anywhere on the guitar neck and you sound a Cmaj7 chord.



CHORD CONSTRUCTION

Let's continue practice building chords but this time let's switch to the key of G major. Remember, all major keys are constructed in the same fashion. The G major scale is the only major key with one sharp, F#.

G major scale = G, A, B, C, D, E, F#

Next draw out the G major scale and start counting. Starting on the root note G, count to the third degree and you have a B note. In the key of G major the third is a B. Now count to the 5th degree and you have a D note. In the key of G major the 5th is a D. Now put the three together as shown in the illustration below and you have a G major chord – 1st, 3rd, 5th - - G, B, D.



Lets examine the G major open position chord illustrated on the left. Like all major chords it is constructed from the 1st, 3rd, and 5th degrees of the major scale. In the key of G major the notes are G, B, and D. Playing these notes on the guitar neck is a G major chord. You can play these three notes anywhere on the guitar neck and you sound a G major chord.

CHORD CONSTRUCTION

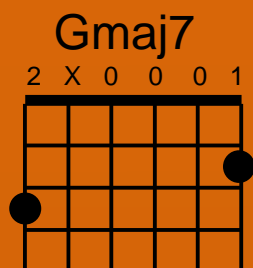
Expanding further with the G major scale let's build a G major 7th chord, (Gmaj7). Major 7th chords are constructed from the 1st, 3rd, 5th, and 7th degrees of the major scale.

In the key of G major the 1st degree is a G, the 3rd is a B, and the 5th is a D. Draw out the G major scale again and begin counting degrees. The 7th degree in G major is F#. Put all the notes for a Gmaj7 chord together and we have the 1, 3rd, 5th, and 7th - - G, B, D, and F#.

G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	GG major scale notes
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8Scale degrees

↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ → G, B, D, F# = G major 7th chord, (Gmaj7)

Examine the Gmaj7 open position chord illustrated below. Like all major 7th chords it is constructed from the 1st, 3rd, 5th, and 7th degrees of the major scale. In the key of G major the notes would be G, B, D, and F#. Playing these notes together anywhere on the guitar neck produces a Gmaj7 chord.



COMMON CHORD FORMULAS

Chord Examples using C	Chord Formula	Notes in the Chord
C major (C)	1,3,5	C,E,G
C minor (Cm)	1,b3,5	C,Eb,G
C5 (power chord)	1,5	C,G
Cmaj7	1,3,5,7	C,E,G,B
Cm7	1,b3,5,b7	C,Eb,G,Bb
C7	1,3,5,b7	C,E,G,Bb
C9	1,3,5,b7,9	C,E,G,Bb,D
Csus2	1,2,5	C,D,G
Csus4	1,4,5	C,F,G
C6	1,3,5,6	C,E,G,A
C 6/9	1,3,5,6,9	C,E,G,A,D
C diminished	1,b3,b5	C,Eb,Gb
Cm7b5	1,b3,b5,b7	C,E,G,Bb
Cmaj9	1,3,5,7,9	C,E,G,B,D
Cm9	1,b3,5,b7,9	C,Eb,G,Bb,D
C7#9	1,3,5,b7,#9	C,E,G,Bb,Db
C13	1,3,5,b7,9,13	C,E,G,Bb,D,A
Cm6	1,b3,5,6	C,Eb,G,A
Cm7b5	1,b3,b5,b7	C,Eb,Gb,Bb

Common symbols & abbreviations

b = flat	# = sharp	m = minor	maj = major
7 = dominant 7 th	m7 = minor 7 th	maj7 = major 7 th	
0 = diminished	sus = suspended	+ or aug = augmented	
whole step = 2 frets	or "whole-tone"	half step = 1 fret or "semi-tone"	
minor third = 3 frets		major third = 4 frets	

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