

# Building Solid Chord Progressions in major keys.

## The rhythmic formula

In order to create a solid chord progression, we must have a structure for our harmony to operate within. Most popular progressions consist of four or eight chords, each lasting an equal length of time, such as one or two measures. The entire progression or phrase then usually repeats by an even number, often four. Changing between chords at a consistent pace is what gives a stable sense of forward movement throughout the progression.

## Four important chords

To write chord progressions that sound effective, you must have a working knowledge of the most important chords of the key. While the importance of chords varies based on the genre within which one is creating, the most common chords of popular music are as follows:

### **I chord** - the tonic

The tonic chord is the most important chord of any key. It is the “home chord” and carries a sense of stability and finality. Because it is composed of the most stable notes of the key, it does not experience a pull to resolve somewhere else.

### **V chord** - the dominant

The dominant, the second most important chord, creates a sense of tension, climax, or questioning. It carries a strong pull to resolve to the tonic chord.

### **IV chord** - the predominant

The IV chord is a stable chord in relation to the tonic. It communicates a sense of exploration, openness, and stability, and calm movement away from the home chord. We call chords like this “predominant” chords.

### **vi chord** - the minor version of the tonic

The vi chord is the only minor chord of the four. Because it shares two notes with both the tonic and IV chords, its function overlaps with both. It communicates a feeling of gravity, melancholy, or reflection.

Twenty-four unique progressions can be created from these four chords without repeating. These progressions are failsafe, and each one sounds stable and musically coherent.

## Other diatonic chords

Beyond the first four chords, these two diatonic chords can be used to expand your progressions:

**ii chord** - This chord functions like a predominant, and has a strong pull to the dominant as well as to the tonic chords. It has a melancholic, reflective feel similar to the vi chord, but with less stability within the key.

**iii chord** - This chord has a weak relationship to the tonic. Because it shares notes with the tonic and dominant chords, it doesn't lead strongly to either; instead, it feels somewhat restless. It experiences the greatest pull to predominant chords, and can smoothly transition into the dominant chord.

The only other diatonic chord left - the **vii°** - is the dominant chord's weaker counterpart, and it doesn't serve as strong of a role within diatonic progressions. Because its diminished quality carries less stability than major and minor chords, it is not commonly found within diatonic chord progressions.

## Beginning and ending your progression

The first chord of a progression or cycle will set the tone of the progression and the overall section. Because of this, it is arguably the most important chord of the progression. In order to create an effective progression, you should consider what kind of feeling you are trying to create.

To begin with a sense of:

stability/balance/direction - I chord

openness/exploration/reflection - IV chord

drama/conflict/intensity - V chord

melancholy/gravity/introspection - vi chord

It's also important to consider how you want each phrase or cycle of the progression to end. The last chord is the second most important chord of your progression. You generally will want to use **I, V, IV**, or **vi** to end the phrase, unless you want to create a cyclical pull back to the start of the progression.

To end with a sense of:

tension/climax/building - V chord

openness/calm/drifting - IV chord

resolution/finality/stability - I chord

grief/solemnity/introspection - vi chord

## Special relationships between chords

### 5-1 interval

Chords whose root notes relate by a fourth have a strong relationship, with the lower chord pulling towards the higher chord. This is because this relationship resembles that of the dominant chord to the tonic. The diatonic chords that fall into this pattern are as follows:

**V-I**

**I-IV**

**ii-V**

**iii-vi**

**vi-ii**

If you want your progressions to build, follow this flow. If you want them to open or relax, reverse the flow.

### Mediants

Diatonic chords whose roots are a third apart share two of their three notes. Because of this, one can transition between these chords very smoothly. Following the same principle, moving between chords who do not share common tones will create a greater sense of movement.

### Structuring a musical section

In some cases, you may want to repeat the same progression for the entire duration of the section. In other cases, you may want to modify the last phrase to create a sense of closure. For example, in a section which uses the progression **I-vi-IV-V**, the chords of the final phrase could be reordered to **vi-IV-V-I**, in order to end with the tonic chord.

### Creating contrast between sections

To create a new, contrasting section, the progression should vary in some significant way. A good way to achieve this is to use a different starting chord – preferably, one that belongs to a different chord category (tonic, predominant, dominant). If the first section uses the progression **I-vi-IV-V**, an effective contrasting section might begin with the **IV** chord.

A sense of contrast can be achieved simply by rearranging the chords of the initial progression. However, the new section will sound different to the degree that it uses new chords. For example, the progression **iii-vi-ii-V** will carry a much different mood from the first section than the progression **IV-I-vi-V**.

## **Developing your musical sense**

This document is intended to provide guidelines to begin creating progressions; however, it is ultimately the development of your own understanding of each chord's unique sound that enables you to create progressions which reflect the ideas you have in mind. Diatonic chords provide a solid foundation for progressions; once you feel confident using them, you can incorporate new, non-diatonic chords into the structures you know.