

Lesson 17: Chords in a Key

Basic Music Theory for Guitar

What you will learn: the 7 chords that belong to every key, and the chord progressions used in thousands of songs.

Building chords from a scale

Take the major scale, and build a **triad** (Lesson 15) on **each note**, using only the notes of that scale. In C major, you get 7 chords:

Degree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Triad	C E G	D F A	E G B	F A C	G B D	A C E	B D F
Kind	major	minor	minor	major	major	minor	dim
Chord	C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	Bdim
Numeral	I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii°

These are the **chords in the key** (musicians say **diatonic chords**). They always follow the same pattern in every major key:

major minor minor major major minor diminished

Roman numerals

Musicians use **Roman numerals** to name the chords by their degree: **BIG letters** (I, IV, V) = major, **small letters** (ii, iii, vi) = minor, and ° = diminished. Numerals are useful because they work in **every key**.

Chords in the common guitar keys

Key	I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii°
C	C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	Bdim
G	G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#dim
D	D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm	C#dim
A	A	Bm	C#m	D	E	F#m	G#dim
E	E	F#m	G#m	A	B	C#m	D#dim
F	F	Gm	Am	Bb	C	Dm	Edim

The most important chords are **I, IV and V** (the 3 major chords). In G they are G, C and D: the same 3 chords as the neighbors on the Circle of Fifths (Lesson 12). The **vi** chord is the **relative minor** (Lesson 13).

With seventh chords

Build 4-note chords (Lesson 16) on each degree, and you get:

Numeral	I maj7	ii7	iii7	IV maj7	V7	vi7	viiø7
In C	Cmaj7	Dm7	Em7	Fmaj7	G7	Am7	Bm7b5

Famous chord progressions

A **chord progression** is a group of chords played in order. These are used in thousands of songs:

Name	Numerals	In G	In C
The 3-chord song	I - IV - V	G - C - D	C - F - G
Pop progression	I - V - vi - IV	G - D - Em - C	C - G - Am - F
50s progression	I - vi - IV - V	G - Em - C - D	C - Am - F - G
Jazz ii-V-I	ii7 - V7 - Imaj7	Am7 - D7 - Gmaj7	Dm7 - G7 - Cmaj7

The 12-bar blues

The most famous progression in blues and rock. It uses only I, IV and V, as dominant 7 chords, in 12 measures:

Bar	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Chord	I	I	I	I	IV	IV	I	I	V	IV	I	V
In A	A7	A7	A7	A7	D7	D7	A7	A7	E7	D7	A7	E7

Chords in a minor key

Do the same with the natural minor scale. In **A minor**: **Am Bdim C Dm Em F G** (i ii° III iv v VI VII). These are the same chords as C major, starting on A! Many songs change the v chord (Em) to **E** or **E7**, using the **harmonic minor** (Lesson 9), for a stronger "going home" sound.

Practice

1. Play the chords of C major in order: C Dm Em F G Am. Can you hear that they all belong together?
2. Play I - IV - V - I in G: **G C D G**. Then in C: **C F G C**.
3. Play the pop progression: **C G Am F**, 4 beats each, many times.
4. Play the 12-bar blues in A with the metronome: 4 beats per measure.
5. Choose a key from the table, and make your own progression with its chords.

Congratulations!

You have finished **Basic Music Theory for Guitar**. You now know the notes, rhythm, scales, keys, intervals and chords: the language of music. Keep practicing with the Scales, Modes, Arpeggios and Chords lessons on the Training page, and you will see this theory everywhere on the fretboard.