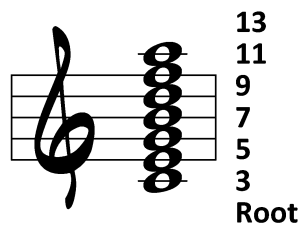


The Chord Symbol

The *major* scale is used for chords, so you'll want to be comfortable and fluent with all twelve major scales. The vast majority of chords are formed using the *odd* numbered notes of the major scale. For chords formed on the note C, these would be C (the root), E (the third), G (the fifth), B (the seventh), D (the ninth), F (the eleventh), and A (the thirteenth). If you move up in thirds from the root (every other note of the scale), you will produce the root, 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th, 11th, and 13th in their unaltered state. (Example 1)

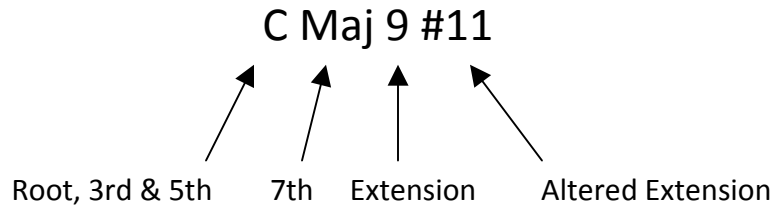


Example 1: Basic Chord Components

All of the chords described below use C as their roots along with the notes that apply to each of the C chord qualities. You will, however, always want to be aware of the chord components as *numbers* of the major scale referenced by the root in the chord symbol. Accordingly, when looking at a chord such as a Maj9#5, for example, your interpretation should be that the chord symbol gives us the root, the 3rd, the sharped 5th, 7th, and 9th *of the major scale of the particular root given by the chord symbol*. So if the chord's root is Ab, we would understand the chord content is Ab (the root), C (the third), E natural (the raised 5th), G (the seventh), and Bb (the ninth). The numbered scale components defined by the chord symbol give us access to all 12 transpositions of each and every chord quality.

Remember that the ninth is the same as the second note in the scale, the eleventh is the same as the fourth note in the scale, and the thirteenth is the same as the sixth note in the scale. Also, the basic chord construction (described by the chord symbol) is unrelated to the chord voicing, which could put the notes into any possible arrangement. The extensions (the ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth), for example, might actually be lower than the third, fifth, and/or seventh. The notes in a chord could be in any order when a chord voicing is created. The root, however, is usually the lowest note of the voicing as the bass note except in inversions and slash chords.

The chord symbol tells us, in order, the *root*, the triad (the *third* and *fifth*), the *seventh*, the *extensions* (if any), and the *alterations* (if any), including *altered extensions*. All of these make up the chord *quality*. If more than one note is altered, the alterations are ordered from the lowest possible altered chord component (the fifth) to the highest (the thirteenth). Example 2)



Example 2: Chord Symbol Components

If the chord has an extension and an alteration (or more than one of each), the altered extension(s) come after the *highest unaltered extension* in the chord. For example, the chord symbol C9b5 tells us to play a C major triad with a flatted-fifth (C, E, Gb), a flatted-seventh (Bb, since there is no “Maj” after the C), and a ninth (D, an extension). Notice that since the fifth is altered, it comes *after* the ninth in the chord symbol. The ninth is unaltered. If the chord had an altered ninth, such as C7b5b9, the b5 would precede the b9.

The study of intervals is essential to an understanding of chord construction. When looking at a particular chord, notice the intervallic relationship between the root and the tones above it, along with the intervallic relationship between each adjacent note. Chord theory is based on a *tertian* system, meaning that the principle interval governing the formation of chords is the *third*. *Chord voicings*, however, create many different arrangements of the basic chord producing a wide variety of intervals.

Rather than trying to memorized all chords and chord symbols (although eventually you probably will), try to grasp the principles that govern the interpretation of chord symbols. These include the meaning and interpretation of terms such as min (minor), Maj (major), dim, add, sus, and how the interpretation of the symbol always refers to the major scale, even though the chord may relate more directly to a different scale.

In some respects choosing chord symbols is an art and may depend on the style and the desire for simplicity and clarity. If you’re unsure about what chord symbol should be used for a chord you are writing, it’s always best to include *more* information in the chord symbol rather than less. This will help avoid confusion. Words like *add* and *omit* contribute to your ability to do this.

Sometimes in jazz, chord symbols are deliberately left vague, giving the performer the option of choosing the chord. Triads are seldom used as a stand alone chord. A chord symbol of Cmin in a jazz setting, however, allows the reader to choose from a variety of possible chord qualities such as Cmin6, Cmin7, Cmin9, CminMaj7, and others. Different chord symbols are often used for the same chord type (e.g., m, mi, min, the hyphen (-), etc., for minor chords).

Do a thorough study of intervals. Become knowledgeable and fluent with all of the intervals in the major scale, i.e., major second, major third, the perfect fourth, and so on. An awareness of intervals lays a strong foundation for the understanding of the triads and seventh chords that are embedded in chords with two or three extensions, such as eleventh and thirteenth chords. If you know your intervals (very important), major scales, and you are familiar with basic chords, you will be able to understand and play almost any chord on all twelve roots.