Chord Symbols

Chord symbols are vital for rehearsal sight-reading and transposing at sight. Use chord symbols to represent the entire harmonic texture; the highest note in the treble to the lowest note in the bass until the next harmony (and its chord symbol) appears.

Chord	Example	Notes
Major	D	Capitalize the root
Minor	Dm	Capitalize the root; lower case m
7th chord	D^7	
Major 7	$DMaj^7$	Superscript with capital M; lowercase aj
Minor 7	Dm^7	lower case m and a superscript 7
Diminished	D^o	
Diminished 7	D^{o7}	
Augmented	D^+	
Augment 7	D^{+7}	
Half-diminished	$D^{m7(b5)}$	Don't use half-diminished; instead, use minor-seven, flat five
9th, 11th, 13th	D^9, D^{11}, D^{13}	Be aware that a 9th chord also contains the 7th; 11th chords contain the 7th and 9th; and 13th chords theoretically contain the 7th, 9th and 11th.
Sus	D^{sus4}	The symbol sus always indicates the third of the chord is absent. *See footnote.*[1]
Complex chords	$D^{m7(add\ 11)}$	If the fifth is flatted, use ^{b5} rather than $^{\#4}$. (Triads don't contain the 4th scale degree.) When you're adding other scale degrees, use their harmonic function rather than the note name: $^{(\#4)}$ rather than $^{(add\ G\#)}$

Three basic rules:

Keep all notes (and accidentals) as close to the key signature as possible.[2]

When ascending, use sharps, when descending, flats.[3] [4]

When using chord symbols, spell the chord according to the symbol. This rule trumps the others, at least for accompaniments. If you spell the chords according to this rule, rules one or two should cover the rest of the notes.

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[1] Use sus 4 for sustained fourths. For 7th chords, use the 7 followed by sus4 ($C7^{sus4}$). There is no such thing as a Cm7sus4, or a CMaj7sus4 as there would be no third present to define whether the triad is major or minor. If you want these chords, use $^{(add4)}$. Likewise, use only sus2 if the third is truly absent; otherwise, use $^{(add2)}$. If you want to add the 9th scale degree without including the 7th, use $^{(add9)}$. Use $^{(add9)}$ if the note will be voiced to the top of the texture, $^{(add2)}$ if it is meant to be in the middle of a cluster.

[2] That means if you're in a flat key, use only flats (and naturals) as accidentals; in a sharp key, use only sharps (and naturals).

[3] This rule makes great sense when writing melodically (horizontally), but is irrelevant for chord spelling (writing vertically).

[4] These first two rules apply primarily to melodic writing. They conflict when the melody is descending in a sharp key or ascending in a flat key; then you're on your own. The final rule applies only vertically, that is, to chords and full textures. If you can apply it to the melody without contradicting the first two rules, do so; otherwise ignore it when writing melodies.

Tips for chord analysis

The lowest note in the bass is the strongest voice in defining the harmonic center. In context, we may understand this note to be something other than the root of the chord (e.g., in the middle of an extended bass pedal passage), but our ear will always try to organize the chord around a low bass, first as the root of the chord, then as the other members of the triad.

Triads are made up of stacked thirds except for the fourth/inverted fifth between five and one. Even though they are spread out all over the texture, you should be able to stack up those thirds, look for the five/one fourth/inverted-fifth, and figure out which chord member is the root.

You needn't account for passing tones or neighbor tones in the chord symbol unless they are part of a countermelody. This is especially true if the passing or neighbor tones are unaccented.

You needn't account for notes in the bass other than the root of the chord if they are basic I,V oom-pah figures or basic "walking bass" figures. We don't hear these figures as changing harmonies.

It is helpful to account for accented passing and neighbor tones and chord tensions *in the vocal part* not represented elsewhere in the accompaniment. Again, this is not true for unaccented passing and neighbor tones, but it is very helpful for accented notes, especially those those that occur at the change of harmony.

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