Chord Progressions 101

Written by Nathan Wilson

E-Book Outline

The following outline is a listing of all material associated within this e-book. Please be sure to follow the material as it appears.

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   b. Alteration of notes
II. Getting Started
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   b. Understanding diagrams
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III. Formulas
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I – Terminology

A. Introduction to note names

While many of the terms I refer to in this e-book are most likely terms you’re already familiar with, I’d much rather examine at least a few basic terms to guarantee we are on the same page. First I would like to begin with the names of the notes in their purest forms, which are primary notes and secondary notes.

**Primary Notes:** These notes are the first *seven* letters of the English alphabet. These notes are A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. There are spaces between some of these notes, and are named as secondary notes.

**Secondary Notes:** These notes are variations on the same primary notes that have been altered. In the language of guitar, secondary notes have dual names – an “alias” if you will - that basically mean the same thing. Secondary notes will always be referred to as either a “sharp” or a “flat,” depending on the music associated with it. There are a total of *five* secondary notes.

- A sharp will always have this symbol directly after the primary note name: #
- A flat will always have this symbol directly after the primary note name: b

The secondary notes, when referred to as SHARPS, are: A#, C#, D#, F#, G#

The secondary notes, when referred to as FLATS, are: Bb, Db, Eb, Gb, Ab

During lesson-based studies you will usually see these secondary notes listed together, such as this:

A#/Bb, C#/Db, D#/Eb, F#/Gb, G#/Ab ----- where the “/” indicates “or”.

**The Order of Primary and Secondary Notes**

Just like the English Alphabet, the order is the same. However, because the guitar has six strings that are always tuned to a certain note, depending on the tuning required, these notes will have their own “starting point” on the guitar. This will be explained in a moment. For now, the standard order of both the primary and secondary notes are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>A#/Bb</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>C#/Db</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>D#/Eb</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>F#/Gb</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>G#/Ab</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“P” stands for primary and “S” stands for secondary. You’ll notice that between the notes B and C, as well as E and F, there are NO secondary notes. Basically this means that there is no such thing as a B#/Cb or an E#/Fb – at least on guitar.

If you were to place these notes on the fretboard of the guitar, assuming that we are in “standard” tuning of E – A – D – G – B – e (where the upper case “E” is the lowest/thickest string and the lower case “e” is the highest/thinnest string) we then need to adjust our English Alphabet based on where our starting point on the guitar is located.
Without fretting a single note on the guitar, assuming we are tuned to “standard” tuning, the lowest string, the “E” string, would follow this order:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note</th>
<th>E/e</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>F#/Gb</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>G#/Ab</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>A#/Bb</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>C#/Db</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>D#/Eb</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fret</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The asterisk (*) indicates the octave of the original open note, which in this case is E. In other words, when you reach the 12th fret on the guitar, the entire pattern repeats again. You’ll also notice that on fret “zero” (or “0”) I have labeled an E/e. Because the low E string and the high E string are both tuned to E, the notes on the fretboard are identical. They are just tuned to different octaves.

If you were to place every note on the fretboard based on standard tuning, you would then have the following result:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>F#/Gb</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>G#/Ab</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>A#/Bb</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>C#/Db</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>D#/Eb</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Note</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C#/Db</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D#/Eb</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F#/Gb</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>G#/Ab</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A#/Bb</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>G#/Ab</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A#/Bb</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C#/Db</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D#/Eb</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F#/Gb</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D#/Eb</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F#/Gb</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>G#/Ab</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A#/Bb</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C#/Db</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A#/Bb</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C#/Db</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D#/Eb</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F#/Gb</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>G#/Ab</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F#/Gb</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>G#/Ab</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A#/Bb</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C#/Db</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D#/Eb</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fret</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Why this matters:** Because we are working with chord progressions, we must first understand that a “true” chord consists of at least three notes. The term “triad” is often used in place of the term chord, and in the word “triad” we have the Latin form of the meaning of “three.” Usually (but NOT always) the root note is the basis of the lowest tone applied to a chord. There are times that you would be playing what are called “inversions” which mean that the root note is NOT the lowest tone produced within a chord. I will of course inform you if and when this happens.

**B. Alteration of notes**

When I refer to “alteration” we are taking a “true” chord and adding or removing one or more given notes to a chord, creating a few different combinations such as:

- Minor
- Sharp/Flat
- Seventh
- Sixth
- Ninth

For the purpose of this particular e-book we won’t be going too deep into the reasoning behind why alterations are taking place. These alterations take a great deal of time to explain. Just know that we will be altering some of our chord names. I will be giving you a quick reason as to why these alterations take place when we approach them.
II – Getting Started

A. The three steps

I’ve chosen three steps that must be used to create our variety of chord progressions. You could consider more steps in this process, but I believe these three steps will help you succeed at creating mostly any chord progression you want to use for any style of music.

Step 1: Pick ANY chord

There isn’t a “wrong” way to begin creating chord progressions, but it’s always a good idea to think about what type of chord you want to start with. If you are looking for a bright song (happy, uplifting, fun, etc.) then you’ll probably want to start with a Major chord. If you are looking for a dim song (sad, depressing, thought-provoking, impacting, etc.) song then you should consider a minor chord. However, this isn’t always the case. You can take a song that begins with a Major chord, but includes a minor chord, and the emotion found in the song can change. The same applies with a song that begins with a minor chord, where when a Major chord is added, the song’s emotion could also change. This is the reason why I mentioned that there is no real wrong way to begin. The best thing to do is decide after you examine the possible progressions and go from there.

Step 2: Pick ANY formula

Much like with the chord you pick, there is no “wrong” formula to use, but the ease of the chord progression formula, as well as the chords found within each formula, does make a difference as to whether or not the chords that are possible are logical. You may choose a formula that contains chords that aren’t real “guitar-friendly” – as music in general makes no real distinguishable relation to the type of instrument being played. In other words, if you aren’t familiar with some “diminished” chords then you might run into an issue. The good news is that I do provide a diagram of each and every possible chord, so you will still have the option to consider the lesser known chords.

Step 3: Arrange/Re-Arrange

This step could be considered the most “fun” part of the 3-step process, but can also become the most time consuming. Depending on how picky you are about your arrangement, you could spend hours, days, weeks, or even months playing around with the progression(s) you want.

B. Understanding diagrams

I will be presenting you with a few different types of diagrams. The most common diagram you will see is a basic chord diagram. Because this e-book is not a “beginner” one, I won’t go into extreme detail on how to read a chord diagram. You should know how chord diagrams are presented. If you aren’t familiar with how to read a chord diagram, email me at: nathan@ezstrummer.com and I will be glad to help you.

You will also come across basic tab sheets. I am also providing you with these tab sheets under the assumption that you can read basic tablature. The same applies here if you aren’t familiar with how tablature is read.
Important: I will NOT be providing you with any actual rhythm studies, because each and every chord, as well as their respective progression(s) will be based on how YOU want to play them. I will give you sample strumming patterns that you can use for practice, but the goal here is to allow you to come up with your own unique patterns as well as progressions. I will be providing you with a PTB sheet that contains a series of possible chords and progressions, but the notes in each PTB are based on absolute basic note values, such as whole and half notes. These are very easy to understand and play along with. You can choose to fill in the “gaps” with your own note values, strums, added notes to a given chord, and more.

C. Before you begin

Rule #1: There are no rules. This e-book is mostly based on mathematical formulas and possible solutions, so always feel free to add your own personal flavor to a given progression. I may provide you with a progression that moves from G – C – D (I – IV – V) but feel free to alter this as much as you see fit. As long as you coincide with the formula being presented, as well as make your own necessary adjustments then you’re good to go. Sometimes chord progressions that are “out of the box” so to speak sound extremely cool – and most important – DIFFERENT. Tons of musicians from both the past and present use this method to create a completely original composition that otherwise wouldn’t have come together without “breaking the rules” in the confusing world of mathematical formulas.

Rule #2: I said there weren’t any rules, but one thing I do recommend is at least starting with the basic progressions made available. Too much tinkering can cause a very awkward and confusing progression – such as changing keys multiple times – and might leave you too frustrated. Always remember that some of the most popular music in the world is based around a simple I – IV – V combination. However, I think we’ve ALL been down that road so many times it gets rather boring. We’re looking for more here.

III – Formulas

A. The Roman Numerals

When working with formulas, we don’t use the English alphabet as a system. We don’t use ANY alphabetical relation at all – and there is a very good reason for this. Going back to when I explained that music can be thought of as purely mathematical, we all know that mathematics IS the “universal language.” So, instead of using letters (which change from geographical locations) we use Roman Numerals. Don’t let the term “Roman” confuse you. The numbers are STILL just numbers.

Roman Numerals:

- I = 1 = “one”
- II = 2 = “two”
- III = 3 = “three”
- IV = 4 = “four”
- V = 5 = “five”
- VI = 6 = “six”
- VII = 7 = “seven”
The good news is that we never go ANY farther than VII (“7” or “seven”) no matter what. The only thing that changes in this numeric system is the use of capitalization.

About Capitalization

The easiest way to understand why a Roman numeral is either in UPPER case or lower case is to understand the same reasoning behind a Major chord and a minor chord. You may have noticed that I almost always capitalize the “M” in the term “Major” – and likewise – I almost always keep the “m” in the term “minor” in lower case. This is the same reasoning behind the use of the Roman numeral system.

Here is an additional example using the same listing as above, but this time I am also using “lower” case:

- I = Major 1st | i = minor 1st
- II = Major 2nd | ii = minor 2nd
- III = Major 3rd | iii = minor 3rd
- IV = Major 4th | vi = minor 4th
- V = Major 5th | v = minor 5th
- VI = Major 6th | vi = minor 6th
- VII = Major 7th | vii = minor 7th

Example 1: I – IV – V (Major 1st, Major 4th, Major 5th)
Example 2: i – iv – v (minor 1st, minor 4th, minor 5th)
Example 3: I – ii – IV – V – vi (Major 1st, minor 2nd, Major 4th, Major 5th, minor 6th)

As you can see it’s not really all that hard to understand. The key is to make sure you pay CLOSE attention to the capitalization, because this makes all the difference in the world.

B. The Circle of Fifths/Fourths/Circle Chart

The chart is much easier to understand than most people make it out to be. I’ll explain this “Circle” chart the easy way. As you examine the possible progressions using this e-book later on, you’ll begin to understand it MUCH easier.

C. Choosing your formula

This is the part where I must explain how the Roman Numerals coincide with the circle chart BEFORE I present the chart to you. Don’t worry, it’s not too difficult.

Let’s use the G Major chord as our “I” (or “one”).

Because I – IV – V is so popular we will use that to begin. I will be providing you with an additional example in a moment.

The chart below has now been assigned the Roman Numerals, starting with the first note/chord in question. You’ll see an “I” inside the G note/chord.
Because the formula here is I – IV – V, where the note/chord G is labeled as I (one) we now need to find the IV. How do we know that the C is the IV?

IMPORTANT: Any time we start with a PRIMARY note/chord, we must ALWAYS move to the left, or counter-clockwise, when looking for the IV. The IV will ALWAYS be directly beside the I. The only difference will be whether or not the IV is to the left or the right of the I (one).

When you look at the chart, you’ll see that from the “I” we have found the “IV” to be a C note/chord. We know this because we started with a Major chord, so we need to move to the left.

Now we need to find the V. The V will ALWAYS be to the immediate left or right of the original I (one) note/chord in question. Again, it just depends on which way you are going in the circle. The same applies to what I mentioned earlier in terms of finding whether or not the V will be to the left or right. If you are starting with a primary note then the V will always be to the right.

Believe it or not you just created your first I – IV – V chord progression using the G Major chord. You can now assume that I – IV – V is G – C – D. If you were to change this to I – V – IV the progression would then become G – D – C. Easy huh?!

This is only a tip of the iceberg, but as a quick example you need to be sure you understand what has happened. Here’s a recap:

1. We chose the G Major as our “I” (one)
2. We used the formula I – IV – V as our basis, where I is the G Major
3. Because the starting chord/note (G) is a primary note, we move to the LEFT to find the IV.
4. We know that the IV is always either to the right or left of the I (one) in every instance.
5. We know that the V is always either to the right or left of the I (one) in every instance.

As we progress through this e-book I will be giving you much in-depth instruction so be sure everything you’ve read up until now is firmly understood. If you have a general idea on what is happening you can proceed, but if you are absolutely lost be sure to contact me and mark this spot to come back after I’ve explained what is confusing you. It only gets more comprehensive.
IV: Major Triads

A. Natural Major

Now we are getting into some serious material. The first thing I will be providing you with is an ordered list of SOME of the possible chord progressions based on the key/scale/chord/note progression. This CAN change, depending on which chord you choose to use in a progression, but the general idea will still remain.

Scale: C Major
C Major scale: C, D, E, F, G, A, B
Application: Major scale harmonized with triads/chords
Formula Association Used: I – ii – iii – IV – V – vi – vii*

Keep in mind that you DO NOT necessarily need to use all of these formula-based steps. You can always simplify it. Because we are focusing on chord progressions, we will now basically switch the word “scale” with chord and/or note because the same concept applies.

We can already assume that we will be starting with a C Major because the formula here has a capital “I” as the starting point. So, let’s assign the I (one) as the C Major. We can plot that on our Circle chart right now:
This is where the option becomes your own. I will cover all possible solutions as well as plot them, but your goal here is to practice the chords in a variety of formats to find the formula you enjoy the most.

I – ii – iii – IV – V – vi – vii*

Based on C Major being the “I” we can now view all possible solutions like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>C</th>
<th>Dm</th>
<th>Em</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>Am</th>
<th>Bdim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>ii</td>
<td>iii</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>vi</td>
<td>vii*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minor</td>
<td>minor 2nd</td>
<td>minor 3rd</td>
<td>Major 4th</td>
<td>Major 5th</td>
<td>minor 6th</td>
<td>minor 7th</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This means that ALL of these chords can be used in a C Major progression.

Let’s plot all of these right now, which will allow you to understand how we have come to this conclusion:

![Chord Diagram]

The only thing that might confuse you is the lack of “m” in the minor chords. However, there’s a good reason the “m” isn’t included. For now just check this out:

You already know the possible chords found using the C Major as the I, but here they are again:

C – Dm – Em – F – G – Am – Bdim

Before we move any further I want to explain what the the Bdim is. The “dim” added to the B means “diminished.” You’ll also sometimes see a degree sign (°) instead. The term “diminished” is NEVER a minor. There’s no such thing as a “minor diminished.” The concept of diminished chords is an ENTIRELY separate concept, but just keep in mind that a diminished is never a minor. Period.

(If you’re wondering what that * meant now you know!)
In other words, the vii* isn’t really a Bdim(m) at all. It’s just a Bdim.

Here’s the deal: I highly doubt you’ll ever use a diminished chord unless you are working on some seriously intricate progressions, so when you run across the option of a diminished chord I would just avoid it entirely. There are times that it is used, but for the purpose of this e-book try to avoid it.

Take a look at the chart again:

I want to explain WHY we don’t see the D as a Dm. You’ll recall the issue with upper and lower case Roman Numerals, right? The Roman Numerals actually tell the note/chord in question whether or not it will be a Major or a minor. So, in the case of how you view the Circle chart, while the D is showing as a Major (not as Dm) the Roman Numeral “ii” tells you that you must convert the original D to a Dm. The good news is that this chart actually labels the appropriate Major, minor, and diminished.

Always remember to view the Roman Numeral as the tell-tale sign of what the original note/chord will become.
Let’s Try It!

Here is the formula again, followed by a variety of possible combinations:

I – ii – iii – IV – V – vi – vii*

No matter what, I would like you to start with C Major as the “I” – or starting point. You can make the progression as complex as you want, but the examples I will be providing will be based on standard time and using a standard 4 measure bar. In other words, I’ll be giving you a combination of three to four chords to create a progression from.

Options (in “Threes”)

- C – Dm – Em (I – ii – iii)
- C – Em – F (I – iii – IV)
- C – F – G (I – IV – V)
- C – G – Am (I – V – vi)

Options (in “Fours”)

- C – Dm – Em – F (I – ii – iii – IV)
- C – Em – F – G (I – iii – IV – V)
- C – F – G – Am (I – IV – V – vi)
Important: These can be switched around! I’ve only showed you seven straight-forward combinations. You can easily switch these around to:

- C – Am – F – G (I – vi – IV – V)
- C – G – Am – F (I – V – vi – IV)
- C – F – Dm – F (I – IV – ii – IV)
- etc.