

# UNDERSTANDING CHORD SYMBOLS

Jazz chord symbols can be confusing for learners, but fortunately they follow a pattern, albeit a messy one. Still, it's what we've got, so let's get cozy with it.

## CHORD SYMBOL ANATOMY

Chord symbols are made of *up to* 5 parts.

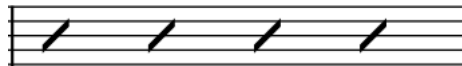
- Part 1: the basic triad

To this, you can add...

- Part 2: a 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup>
- Part 3: natural extensions including 9, 11, and 13.
- Part 4: altered notes including b9, #9, #11, b5, #5, b6, b13.
- Part 5: alternate bass notes written under a slash.

Here's an example with all 5 parts present.

CΔ9(#11)/D



Part 1: C = a C major triad = **C E G**

Part 2: Δ = major 7 = **B**

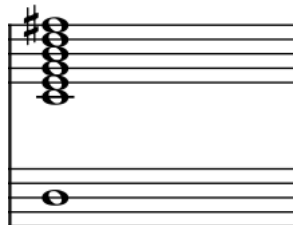
Part 3: 9 = the natural 9<sup>th</sup> = **D**

Part 4: #11 = the 11 raised a ½ step = **F#**

Part 5: /D = put a **D** in the bass

The Result: C E G B D F# with D in the bass

CΔ9(#11)/D



This example is just one of many possibilities, but it contains many of the things you might run into. Notice anything strange? The Δ for instance? Its indicating a major 7, but we don't actually see the 7 mentioned here. There are lots of quirks like this which you'll just have to memorize.

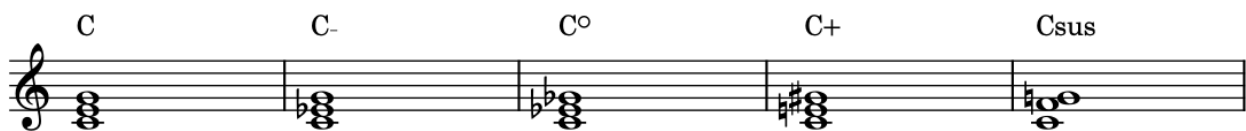
On the following pages, we'll get more detailed with each part of the symbol and bring your attention to the patterns and oddities.

# UNDERSTANDING CHORD SYMBOLS

## PART 1: THE TRIAD

Every chord symbol starts with a triad. The triad is built from the root (1), third (3), and fifth (5).

- **Major**
  - Written with only the root name.
    - C = C major = C E G
    - Ab = Ab major = Ab C Eb
  - NOTE: occasionally you'll see maj, Δ, or M, but avoid this! These symbols are used to indicate major 7s and can confuse your musicians.
- **Minor**
  - Written as a root with min, mi, m, or my preferred –.
    - C– = C minor = C Eb G
    - Emi = E minor = E G B
- **Diminished**
  - Written as a root with o or dim.
    - Co = C diminished = C Eb Gb
    - D#dim = D diminished = D# F# A
- **Augmented**
  - Written as a root with + or aug.
  - C+ = C augmented = C E G#
  - Bbaug = Bb augmented = Bb D F#
- **Suspended**
  - Ok, so technically this isn't a triad, but in chord symbols, it sits in the same place.
  - Written as a root with sus.
  - Csus = C suspended = C F G
  - It's common to write sus after the 7<sup>th</sup>, even though it affects the 3<sup>rd</sup>.



# UNDERSTANDING CHORD SYMBOLS

## PART 2: ADDING A 6<sup>th</sup> OR 7<sup>th</sup>

In jazz, chords typically have an added 7, or the less common though still widely used 6. This is the messiest part due to inconsistent patterns and odd rules.

### Adding a Minor 7

- 7 added to a triad means add the minor 7 interval to the chord.
  - C7 = C E G Bb = a major triad with a minor 7 = dominant 7
  - C-7 = C Eb G Bb = a minor triad with a minor 7 = minor 7
- 7s over augmented triads are the same but often get written out of order.
  - Ex. C+7, which follows the pattern. I have seen C7+ but it's rare.
  - Ex. C7aug, can also be written Caug7.
  - Ex. C7#5, is how I prefer to write this chord.
    - We'll look at this again in Part 4.
  - All of these = C E G# Bb = augmented 7
- 7s over suspended chords can be written two different ways. Both are common.
  - Ex. Csus7 and C7sus both mean C F G Bb = suspended 7

The image shows four chords on a treble clef staff: C7 (C, E, G, Bb), C-7 (C, Eb, G, Bb), C+7 (C, E, G#, Bb), and C7sus (C, F, G, Bb).

### Adding a Major 7

Confusingly, our chord notation system prioritizes the minor 7 interval over the major 7. We need an additional symbol to indicate major 7<sup>th</sup>s.

- To add a major 7, write maj7, ma7, M7, or my preferred Δ7.
  - You can add Δ7s to any triad.
    - Usually, this is over major, minor, and occasionally diminished.
  - Ex. C-Δ7 = C Eb G B = a minor triad with a major 7 = minor major 7
  - Ex. C<sup>o</sup>Δ7 = C Eb Gb B = a diminished triad with a major 7 = diminished major 7
- NOTE: now you see why, if we only want a triad, we don't write CΔ. As Δ affects the 7, not the triad, many folks will assume you meant to add the major 7 also.
- Augmented and suspended major 7 chords, while possible, are rare.
  - Ex. CaugΔ7 or C+Δ7 are more commonly written CΔ7#5 or as a slash chord.
    - We'll see this again in Part 4: Adding Altered Notes.
  - Ex. CsusΔ7 or CΔ7sus are extremely rare. I can't think of a single example.

The image shows five chords on a treble clef staff: CΔ7 (C, E, G, B), C-Δ7 (C, Eb, G, B), C<sup>o</sup>Δ7 (C, Eb, Gb, B), C+Δ7 (C, E, G#, B), and CΔ7sus (C, F, G, B).

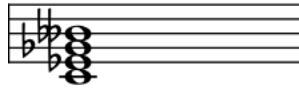
# UNDERSTANDING CHORD SYMBOLS

## Adding the 7 to a Diminished Triad

7<sup>th</sup>s over diminished triads are special cases too.

- 7 written after a diminished triad adds a *diminished* 7 to the chord.
  - Ex. C $\circ$ 7 = C Eb Gb Bbb = fully diminished 7
  - NOTE: “Bbb” is correct, but folks will simplify this to “A” most of the time.

C $\circ$ 7

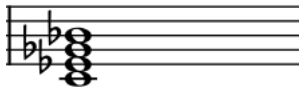


## The Half-Diminished Chord ( $\circ$ 7)

A diminished triad with a minor 7 is called half-diminished. As writing the 7 symbol over a diminished triad indicates the fully diminished chord, when we want half-diminished, we write it differently. There are two options.

- C $\circ$ 7 = means a diminished triad with a minor 7
- C-7b5 = means a minor 7 chord with a flatted 5<sup>th</sup>, giving us the same notes.
- Ex. C $\circ$ 7 and C-7b5 = C Eb Gb Bb
- As I like shorthand symbols, I prefer  $\circ$ 7.

C $\circ$ 7



## Adding 6<sup>th</sup>s

The 6 is common in Trad and Swing music, but you'll still see it in modern songs.

- 6 after any triad adds a major 6 interval, but is really only used on major and minor.
  - Ex. C6 = C E G A
  - Ex. C-6 = C Eb G A
  - While there's no rule against adding a 6 to other triads, it's not common practice. I'd avoid it as there's probably a better way to write what you want.
- In practice, a 6 is used *instead* of a 7.
  - If you want a 6 and 7, you'd write 13 which we'll discuss later.
- NOTE: when improvising, you can almost always treat a 6 chord like a major 7 chord. We typically build our melodies with the same scales and vocabulary.

C6

C-6



# UNDERSTANDING CHORD SYMBOLS

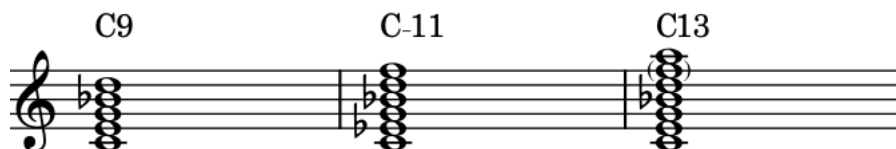
## PART 3: ADDING NATURAL EXTENSIONS

Natural extensions include the 9, 11, and 13, which are the same tones as 2, 4, and 6, up the octave. We can play these notes anywhere in the chord, but we notate them with 9, 11, and 13.

### NATURAL EXTENSIONS WITH 7<sup>th</sup> CHORDS

Most commonly, extensions are added to chords that also have 7<sup>th</sup>s. Our system reflects this. Chord symbols with natural extensions *assume* that a minor 7<sup>th</sup> is included. Additionally, they include all extensions below the highest one you write. So...

- A 9 chord has a natural 9 but assumes the minor 7 is there too.
  - Ex. C9 has C E G (triad), Bb (minor 7), and D (9).
    - Notice that the 7 isn't in the symbol but is implied?
- An 11 chord has the 11 and assumes the minor 7 *and* 9.
  - Ex. C-11 has C Eb G (triad), Bb (minor 7), D (9), and F (11)
    - See how the Bb and D are both implied?
- A 13 chord "officially" has the 13 and assumes the minor 7, 9, and 11.
  - Ex. C13 has C E G (triad), Bb (minor 7), D (9), F (11), and A (13)
    - Like the others, the 13 implies the notes below.
- NOTE: "Officially," right? Two things...
  - In practice, if a 13 chord has a *major* 3<sup>rd</sup> in it, we won't play the 11.
    - Ex. C13 will likely be played C E G Bb D A. Notice there's no F?
    - If we want the 11, then omit the 3 or play the 11 below the 3. But this is rare, so use your ear and do what sounds best.
    - No major 3<sup>rd</sup> in the chord? No problem.
  - Comping musicians typically play incomplete versions of these big chords.



How about **augmented** and **suspended** chords?

- Treat these just like the chords with minor 7s above.
  - Ex. C<sup>+</sup>9 or C9<sup>aug</sup> or even C<sup>+</sup>9
  - Ex. C<sup>sus</sup>9 (C9<sup>sus</sup>) is C F G (sus. triad) with Bb (minor 7), and D (9)
  - As before, its common to write sus or aug after the natural extensions.

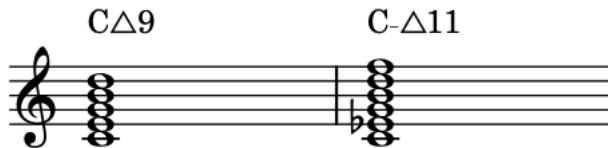


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## NATURAL EXTENSIONS ON OTHER 7<sup>th</sup> CHORDS

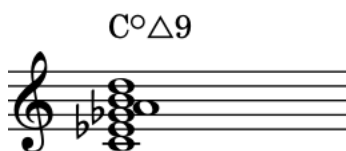
Want a **major 7**? Write one of our symbols for major before the natural extension.

- Ex. Cmaj9 is C E G (major triad) with a B (major 7) and a D (9)
- Ex. C-Δ11 is C Eb G (minor triad) with a B (major 7), a D (9) and an F (11)



Want a major 7 on a **fully diminished** chord?

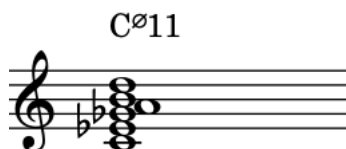
- For fully diminished, it's the same, but remember it has a diminished 7<sup>th</sup>.
  - Ex. CoΔ9 is rare, but it'd have a B in it (major 7)—very Herbie Hancock!



**Half Diminished** chords are trickier. 11<sup>th</sup>s work just like above but there's a lot of inconsistency in the handling of 9<sup>th</sup>s and 13<sup>th</sup>s.

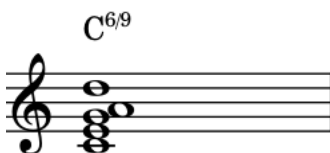
Half diminished is usually paired with the locrian scale which has a minor 2<sup>nd</sup> and minor 6<sup>th</sup>. In practice, people handle extensions on these chords inconsistently. Let's take a closer look.

- Ex. Cø13 is C Eb Gb (dim. triad) with Bb (minor 7), D (9?), F (11), Ab (13)
- Why 9? Well, Db is technically the correct 9<sup>th</sup> for this chord, but in practice we'd leave it out as it's an unpleasant clash with the root.
  - If the composer asks for a 9, they probably mean the major 9 interval.
- The 13 is fine as an Ab but this is so rare I don't know what your musicians will play.
- Because these things aren't consistent, you'll just have to trust your ears.
- But the good news is, you'll almost never see these in the wild.



## The 69 Chord

Want to add a 9 to your 6-chord? Add the 9 to a 6-chord symbol which can be written as 69 or 6/9. Easy!

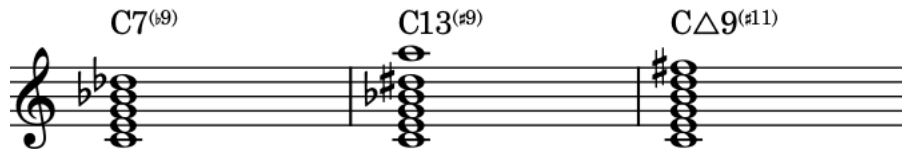


# UNDERSTANDING CHORD SYMBOLS

## PART 4: ADDING ALTERED EXTENSIONS

If you want a note not found in the natural chord or its extensions, they are indicated after the natural ones. We simply list them right after any 7<sup>th</sup>s and natural extensions.

- C7#9 = C E G Bb (the chord up to the 7<sup>th</sup>) and D# (the #9)
- C-9b6 = C Eb G Bb (the chord up to the natural 9<sup>th</sup>) and Ab (the b6)



Notice that they're just placed right after the natural extensions? These are often put in parentheses to provide some visual separation but it's not necessary. It's just a matter of style.

- C7#9#5 or C7(#9#5)



There really isn't a correct order to list altered extensions, but 9s are usually before 5s, and anything else typically comes after that. Also, note, European musicians occasionally use things like 10<sup>th</sup>s and 12<sup>th</sup>s. In the US, you'll get funny looks and questions. Stick to 5, 9, 11, and 13.

# UNDERSTANDING CHORD SYMBOLS

## PART 5: SLASH CHORDS

Slash chords can be one of two things:

- **Inversions:** chords that have a one of their notes other than the root in the bass
  - Ex. C/E = C E G with an E in the bass, so low to high, E G C

Musical notation showing three slash chords on a treble clef staff. The first chord is C/E, the second is C-7/G, and the third is C9/Bb. Each chord is represented by a vertical line with notes above and below it, indicating the bass note.

- This can also be used to make a melodic bass line.
  - The example below is a common use of melodic bass slash chords.

Musical notation showing four slash chords on a treble clef staff. The first chord is C-, the second is C-/B, the third is C-/Bb, and the fourth is C-/A. Each chord is represented by a vertical line with notes above and below it, indicating the bass note.

- **Complex sounds:** chords where the bass note isn't a typical note to the chord.
  - Slash chords can notate exotic dissonances.
    - Ex. CΔ7/Db = C E G B with Db in the bass, or, low to high, Db E G B C
  - We often use these when natural and altered extensions would look odd.
    - Ex. writing the CΔ7/Db chord above would be a mess any other way.
      - Ex. Dbø7(addΔ7)...maybe? Or DbΔ7#13...ouch!
  - Let's try another one.
    - EΔ9/C or CΔ7#9#5#11. Which would you rather read?
  - It's also worth mentioning, your players are likely to play these two chords very differently, and the EΔ9/C requires less mental gymnastics to play.

Musical notation showing two slash chords on a treble clef staff. The first chord is CΔ7/Db and the second is EΔ9/C. Each chord is represented by a vertical line with notes above and below it, indicating the bass note.



# UNDERSTANDING CHORD SYMBOLS

## SPECIAL CASES

In rare cases, we need symbols that aren't easily captured using the system above. While it's often best to just write out what you want, that hasn't stopped folks from trying.

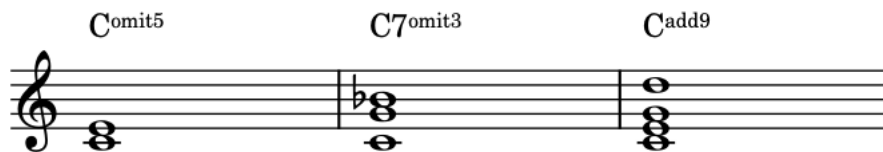
### Incomplete Chords

For chords that are missing notes or need extensions without the implied notes beneath you can use *omit* or *add*.

- Want a chord with no 5<sup>th</sup>? Write Comit5
- Want a dominant chord with no 3<sup>rd</sup>? C7omit3
- Want a 9 chord without the 7? Cadd9

To me, the first two are easier by just writing the notes on the staff. But in the third case, that chord has become popular, especially in the theatre and gospel worlds.

- Here's a few other common ones.
  - Ex. Cadd2 = another way to write the one above
  - Ex. C5 = this one is common in rock music. They call it a "power chord."



Note here that in every case, the notation makes what's intended very clear, while the symbol is somewhat vague. Use symbols like this with care and caution.

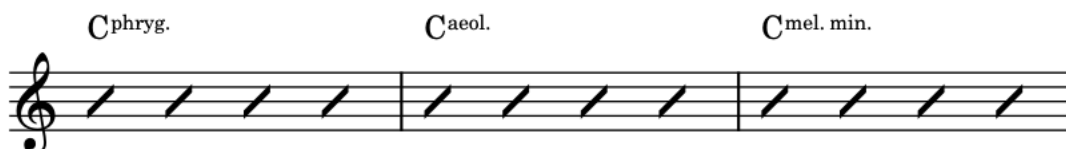
### Modal Names as Chord Symbols

Many composers have adopted writing abbreviated versions of modes as chord symbol.

- C dorian or C dor.
- C phrygian or C phryg.
- C Lydian or C lyd.
- C myxolydian or C myx.
  - If you write this, someone will glare at you. Just use C7 (or 9 or 13).
- C aeolian or C aeol.
- C locrian or C loc.

I've even seen a few non-major modes.

- C melodic minor, usually written C mel. or C mel. min.
- C harmonic minor, as C harm.
- And how about C phryg. dom. for the 5<sup>th</sup> mode of harmonic minor?



# UNDERSTANDING CHORD SYMBOLS

Three things worth noting when using modal names:

1. These aren't technically chords. These names are for full scales. This is a very different way of portraying harmony than all the other techniques.
2. There really isn't a standard voicing for a modal scale. Instead, you're telling your chordal folks to explore within the scale. This can create amazing results but be prepared for the high level of freedom and unpredictability from your players.
3. I only use modal names when I can't find a better way to represent what I want, but it's common enough to have made it into the chord libraries of the major notation software out there. And even celebrated big band composer Maria Schneider uses these from time to time.

## Polychords

This rare technique looks almost like a slash chord but is actually two chords stacked on top of each other. A slash chord has a diagonal slash (/), while polychords look like a fraction.



Here we have a D triad over a C triad which is a type of Lydian sound, and an F# triad over a C triad which is a different way of writing C7b9#11. I've seen more of these recently, but if you choose to write this, be ready to get questions from some of your players. Incidentally, it's a great way of indicating triad pairs which are hard to represent any other way.