

The Advanced Guide to Chords for Ukulele

by Curt Sheller

Beyond learning basic ukulele chords, most ukulele players struggle with advanced chords. These more sophisticated voicings, commonly called “jazz” chords, find a wide use in all forms of music.

This article presents an organized and efficient approach to the mysterious subject of advanced chords. Chord dictionaries are not the answer. Even chord theory does not offer any insight into unraveling the complexity of advanced chords.

Building Chords

There are several ways to build chords - but the best way to build chords on a ukulele or guitar is by using numeric formulas based on the scale degrees of the fifteen major scales. These numeric formulas are taken from the major scales by numbering each scale degree 1 through 13, skipping the octave (8), 10 and 12th scale degrees, as these are duplicates of the fundamental triad chord tones, the root or one, third and fifth and are not used to create chords.

Example: C Major Scale

C	D	E	F	G	A	B	D	F	A
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	11	13

This can also be applied to any of the 15 major scales:

Example: G Major Scale

G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	A	C	E
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	11	13

Example: F Major Scale

G	G	A	Bb	C	D	E	G	Bb	D
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	11	13

(See the Chord Building Chart for all major keys)

What is a Chord?

A chord is three or more notes sounded simultaneously. These three note chords are called *triads*. Two notes are usually referred to as an *interval* or *dyad*. Each note of a chord is called a *chord tone*.

Chords are categorized into one of four types: Major, Minor, Diminished or Augmented.

Major Triads

A major triad is created using the **1**, **3** and **5** of a major scale. Example: for a C Major triad the notes would be C, E, and G. For F Major the notes F, A, and C and for G Major the notes G, B and D, etc... Common notation for a major chord is a capital letter only or maj, MA, Δ.

Minor Triads

A minor triad is created using the **1**, **b3** and **5** of a major scale. Example: for a C Minor triad the notes would be C, Eb and G. Any minor triad can be created by lowering the third of a major triad one fret. Common notation for a minor chord is a capital letter and a lowercase m, mi, min, -.

Diminished Triads

A diminished triad is created using the **1**, **b3** and **b5** of a major scale. Example: for a C diminished triad the notes would be C, Eb and Gb. Any diminished triad can be created by lowering the fifth of a minor triad 1 fret. Common notation for a diminished chord is a capital letter and a lowercase dim or degree sign °.

Chord Building Chart

Column 1 is the Root or 1 of the key.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	11	13
C	D	E	F	G	A	B	D	F	A
G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	A	C	E
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C#	E	G	B
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G#	B	D	F#
E	F#	G#	A	B	C#	D#	F#	A	C#
B	C#	D#	E	F#	G#	A#	C#	E	G#
F#	G#	A#	B	C#	D#	E#	G#	B	D#
C#	D#	E#	F#	G#	A#	B#	D#	F#	A#
F	G	A	Bb	C	D	E	G	Bb	D
Bb	C	D	Eb	F	G	A	C	Eb	G
Eb	F	G	Ab	Bb	C	D	F	Ab	C
Ab	Bb	C	Db	Eb	F	G	Bb	Db	F
Db	Eb	F	Gb	Ab	Bb	C	Eb	Gb	Bb
Gb	Ab	Bb	Cb	Db	Eb	F	Ab	Cb	Eb
Cb	Db	Eb	Fb	Gb	Ab	Bb	Db	Fb	Ab

Augmented Triads

An augmented triad is created using the **1**, **3** and **#5** of a major scale. Example: for a C augmented triad the notes would be C, E and G#. Any augmented triad can be created by raising the fifth of a major triad 1 fret. Common notation for an augmented chord is a capital letter and a lowercase aug or a plus sign +.

A Few Rules

When lowering or raising a scale degree to create a chord tone the name of the note can not change. Example C must remain C either C#, Cb Cx (double sharp) or Cbb (double flat). Lowering a sharp note removes the sharp, C# becomes C. Raising a sharp note becomes a double sharp, C# becomes Cx (double sharp). Raising a flat note removes the flat, Bb becomes B. Lowering a flat note becomes a double flat, Bb becomes Bbb (double flat). These double flats and double sharps are the theoretically correct spelling for the note. F# the note produces the same tone as Gb the note.

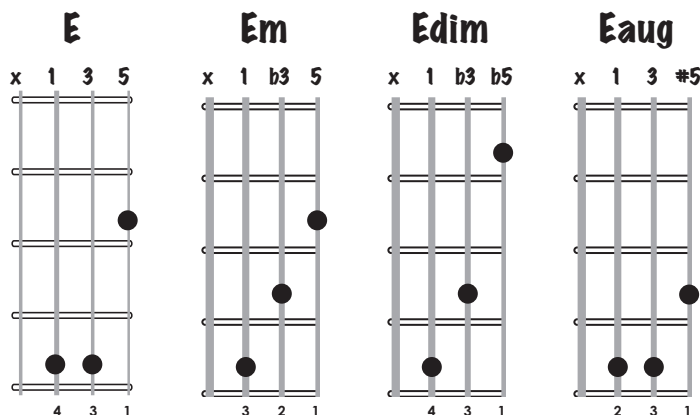
Seventh Chords

There is one other chord beyond triads that can be considered a basic chord. This is a seventh chord, created by adding the flat seventh to a major triad giving us the formula **1, 3, 5 and b7**.

Example Using the Chord Building Chart (D7)

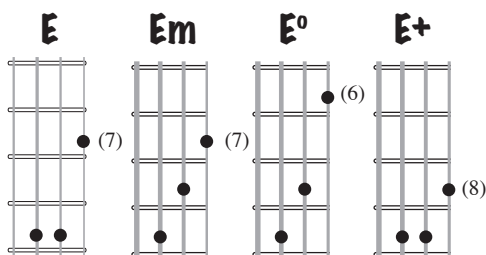
1. Find the Intervallic Formula for the chord. Example D7 is a Major chord type and specifically a 7th chord. It's formula is 1 3 5 b7
2. Find the key of the chord based on the root or letter name of the chord. The root of a D7 chord is D.
3. Lookup the intervals 1 3 5 and 7 for the key of D (D F# A C#). Now flat the seventh as required for a 7th chord. This will make the C# a C. The notes of a D7 chord are D F# A C.

Creating the 4 Basic Chord Types



Standard “C” or Low “G” Tuning

The above chords are for a standard “C” tuning “g C E A” or low “G” tuning “G C E A”. For the Baritone ukulele or standard tuned guitar transpose each note of the chord up five frets for the following.



Baritone Tuning D G B E

Starting with a three note major triad, create a minor triad by lowering the third of the chord one fret. To create a diminished

triad lower the fifth of a minor triad one fret. To create an augmented triad raise the fifth of a major triad one fret.

By keeping track of the location of the chord tones you can create other chords from known chords.

Transposing Chords and Chord Progressions

By moving each note of the chord up and down the neck the same number of frets, this is called transposing. This can be done using the following charts.

- a) All chord progressions can be transposed to any key.
- b) In order to transpose a progression you must transpose each individual chord by the same distance, in the same direction.
- c) Following the Transposition Chart below, experiment with any progression in any key.

Transposition Chart

Ascending Keys (Moving UP the neck)

B
A#, Bb
A
G#, Ab
G
F#, Gb
F
E
D#, Eb
D
C#, Db
C

Descending Keys (Moving DOWN the neck)

C
B
Bb, A#
A
Ab, G#
G
Gb, F#
F
E
Eb, D#
D
Db, C#

How to Use the Transposition Chart

- a) Pick a progression.
- b) Find its key on either chart.
- c) To transpose upward, use the ascending keys chart.
To transpose downward, use the descending keys chart.
- d) Each new key is 1 fret above or below the original key.
- e) Don't forget to transpose each chord of a progression.
- f) Remember that the chord type remains the same for each chord. Example: m7 stays m7, 7 stays 7, etc...

Examples

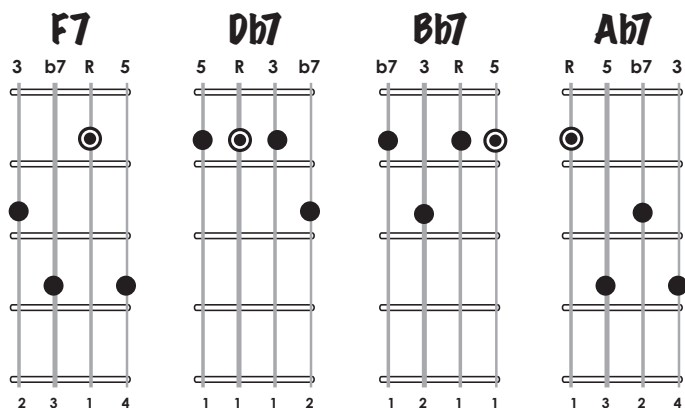
If you are in the key of C and move all chords down 3 frets, you are now the key of A.

If you are in the key of E and move all chords up 3 frets, you are now in the key of G.

Building More Advanced Chords

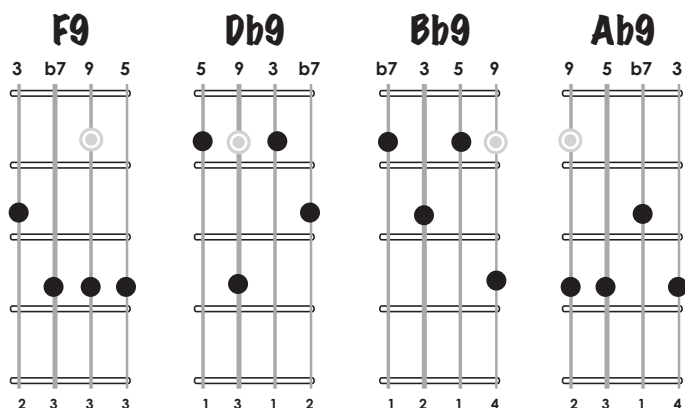
Building more advanced 4-part chords can be accomplished using the same principles that were used to create the four triads. For these more advanced chords, sometime called “jazz” chords we will use a seventh chord as the starting point.

A 4-part chord, as the names implies, contains 4 notes and on a 4 string ukulele four different voicings of this chord can be played. Here are four seventh chords played at fret one.

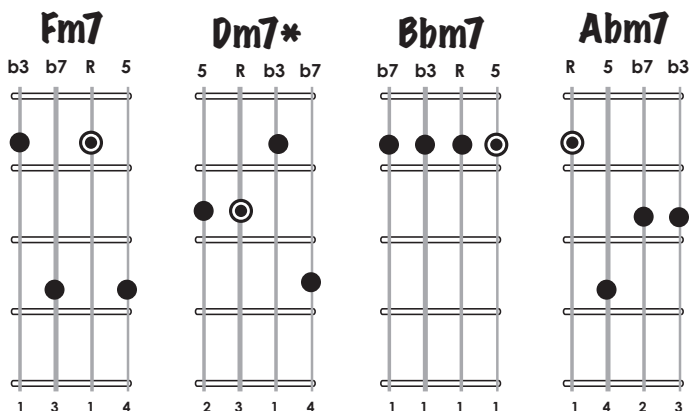


⊙ *Root of Chord*

By raising the root of each chord we get four 9th chords.



From the four 7th chords we can create four m7 (minor seventh) chords.



* To have these chords easily transposed up and down the neck we'll not use any open strings.

Here are the formulas to build the basic 4-part chords and some of the common notations that you will encounter.

Major Chord Types

Major	Scale degree formula: 1 3 5 Notation*: Capital letter only or MAJ. maj, Δ
Dominant 7	Scale degree formula: 1 3 5 b7 Notation: 7, dom7
Major 7	Scale degree formula: 1 3 5 7 Notation: maj7, MAJ7, MA7, Δ7
Major 6	Scale degree formula: 1 3 5 6 Notation: 6, maj6, MAJ6, MA6, 6

Minor Chord Types

Minor	Scale degree formula: 1 b3 5 Notation: m, mi, min, -
Minor 7	Scale degree formula: 1 b3 5 b7 Notation: m7, mi7, min7, -7
Minor-Major 7	Scale degree formula: 1 b3 5 7 Notation: m ^(L7) , min ^(maj7) , m7: m ^(maj7) , - ⁽⁷⁾

Minor 6

Scale degree formula: **1 b3 5 6**

Notation: m6, -6, mi6, min6

Diminished Chord Types

Diminished

Scale degree formula: **1 b3 b5**

Notation: o, dim

Half-Diminished 7

Scale degree formula: **1 b3 b5 b7**

Notation: Ø⁷, half dim⁷

Diminished-Major 7

Scale degree formula: **1 b3 b5 7**

Notation: o^(L7), dim^(L7)

Diminished 7

Scale degree formula: **1 b3 b5 bb7**

Notation: °7, dim7

Augmented Chord Types

Augmented

Scale degree formula: **1 3 #5**

Notation: +, aug

Augmented 7

Scale degree formula: **1 3 #5 b7**

Notation: +7, aug7

Augmented-Major 7

Scale degree formula: **1 3 #5 7**

Notation: +L7, aug^{L7}, L7⁽⁺⁵⁾

* A root note is presumed to be in front of each notation.

Example: **C, C7, Cm, Cm7, Cdim, Co7, C7+, Caug7**

For more information on building 4-part chords, shameless plug coming, see my book *The Advance Guide to Ukulele Chords and The Advanced Guide to Ukulele Chord Progressions*. These two books will get you well on your way to using more contemporary aka “jazz” chords. 🎵