
Roman Numeral Analysis of Chord Progressions

When we talk about chords, we always refer to their number with roman numerals. This is to distinguish them from individual notes, which are referenced with normal numbers. **So, the first chord in a key is the “I” chord and the second is the “ii” chord – etc.**

Roman numerals are always written either as uppercase (such as IV for 4) or lowercase (such as vi for 6). This tells us if the chord is major or minor. When the general music-writing rules are being followed, the same chord numbers will be the same type of chord in every key. “ii” chords are minor, “vi” chords are minor, “V” chords are major and so on. This is very often the case in popular music with some notable exceptions, for now we’ll consider it to be a hard-and-fast rule. **The full major/minor pattern is: “I ii iii IV V vi vii°”,** and you can safely ignore the “vii°” chord and its weird symbol for now.

The “I” chord is the home chord of the key. For instance: a C chord in the key of C is the “I”, or a G chord in the key of G. The key (and home chord) is typically the first chord of a song, and even more often the last chord of a song. It’s very commonly both. **Check out some of the songs you’re working on to figure out what the key is!**

The rest of the chords in a key can be determined by counting up from the “I” chord.

For instance:

Key of C: “I” chord is C, “ii” chord is Dm, “iii” chord is Em, “IV” chord is F, “V” chord is G, etc.

Key of G: “I” chord is G, “ii” chord is Am, “iii” chord is Bm, “IV” chord is C, “V” chord is D, etc.

In analyzing different songs with this method, it becomes clear that a handful of progressions make up the vast majority of popular songs. Many songs are “C F Am G”, many songs are “G C Em D”, many songs are “D G Bm A”, but these are all “I IV vi V”.

If you play these progressions you may hear how similar they feel.

Common progressions:

I vi IV V

(Common in folk and pop music, extremely common in 50's music.)

Applied to keys:

Key of C: C Am F G

Key of G: _ _ _ _

Key of D: D Bm G A

I V vi IV

(Common in folk music, especially 60's and 70's. Shows up often in "Don't Think Twice".)

Applied to keys:

Key of C: _ _ _ _

Key of G: G D Em C

Key of D: D A Bm G

ii V I vi

(Extremely common in jazz music, shows up in Rainbow Connection!)

Applied to keys:

Key of C: _ _ _ _

Key of G: Am D G Em

Key of D: Em A D Bm

I IV V IV

(The progression of extremely poppy music, think "Walking On Sunshine".)

Applied to keys:

Key of C: _ _ _ _

Key of G: _ _ _ _

Key of D: D G A G

I've left some blank for you to figure out yourself.

Other things worth thinking about:

- The fact that “I”, “IV”, “V”, and “vi” show up so often is not a coincidence. Those four are by far the most common chords in all modern music, and for good reason: they sound really nice together.
- The same song will often be played by different people in different keys. **This means each person’s version will be made up of different chords, but the roman numerals of the chords will be the same.** I might play the song “Don’t Think Twice” beginning with the chords G D Em C and you might play it starting with C G Am F, but they are both very much still “I V vi IV”. Knowing this means that if we want to play it together, we can just decide on the key (and thus the “I” chord) and figure out the rest of it from there.
- I’ve focused on the keys of C, G, and D for two reasons: they are the most common, and they involve the fewest barre chords. We will eventually be able to do these progressions in all 12 keys, and I promise that’s not as daunting as it sounds. There are some good tricks to be learned!

Useful applications of all this:

1. Communicating with other musicians. When my band is learning a new song the songwriter will just say something like “this one’s a normal I vi IV V in F” and we’ll be set.
2. Moving songs to a new key for an easier singing range or more comfortable chords, my limited singing range means I find this very useful.
3. Learning common chord progressions in many keys to be prepared for future songs.
4. Increasing chord vocabulary via #3
5. Learning what common chord progressions sound like so that you can recognize them and play songs by ear. This is a large part of my musical life.
6. Material for practicing new strumming/picking patterns outside of the context of a song, again via #3. We’ll be doing a bunch of #3.