

6/4 chords

There are only four uses of 6/4 chords, and only three that you will use in partwriting. Make sure that you only use the chords in one of these ways.

Two general rules: 1) always double the bass note (the fifth) in a 6/4 chord; and 2) never use diminished triads in 6/4 inversion.

1) The passing 6/4

The passing 6/4 reveals the $V6/4$ as a linear chord to be a specific instance of a general principal: using a 6/4 chord to harmonize a passing tone between two bass notes a third apart. In most cases this expands a single chord moving between root position and first inversion, and in most cases a voice exchange is used. In analysis and partwriting, place a "P" below the roman numeral of any passing 6/4 to indicate your understanding of how the chord is being used.

I V_4^6 I_6 V_6 ii_4^6 V_7 IV_6 I_4^6 IV
P P P

Other cases are also possible, such as expanding motion from IV_6 to ii_6 in parallel sixths.

I IV_6 $I_6/4$ ii_6 V_7 I
P

In general, though, no skips are allowed in the outer voices either into or out of a passing 6/4.

Passing 6/4's are almost never used on downbeats, and only rarely on beat 3 in a quadruple meter.

2) The neighboring 6/4

Neighboring 6/4's are formed when the third and fifth of a root-position triad move up by step in neighboring motion and then back down again. The key feature of the neighboring 6/4 is the stationary bass. In analysis and partwriting, place an "N" below the roman numeral of any neighboring 6/4 to indicate your understanding of how the chord is being used.

I IV6/4 I V I6/4 V
N N

In one case, the bass may move at the end a neighboring 6/4 figure; this happens when the seventh is introduced in the bass when expanding V with a neighboring 6/4. The idea is that it is as if the neighboring 6/4 resolves first and then the bass moves, but instead these two events are compressed into one and the bass moves down to the seventh at the same time that the 6/4 resolves.

V I6/4 V 4/2 V I6/4 V4/2
N N

3) The cadential 6/4

We have already seen the cadential 6/4 several times in musical examples; when V chords are approached, suspensions and passing tones often create the notes of a tonic triad in second inversion – but it's not really I6/4, it's really V with non-harmonic tones.

I V I I ii6 V8---7 I

The notation for this chord is a bit confusing, because it leans partially on an older use of figured bass, the original use before there were roman numerals. As used then, there were no labels identifying the roots of chords, only the numbers indicating intervals above the bass. We label this chord V_{4-3}^{6-5} ; V because it's clearly a dominant chord from the start, and $_{4-3}^{6-5}$ because a sixth and a fourth above the bass move to a fifth and a third above the bass. (The dashes indicate that these motions each take place within a single voice.)

I V_{4-3}^{6-5} I I ii6 V_{4-3}^{6-5} I

The problem is that this looks quite a lot like the symbol for the dominant triad in second inversion, V_4^6 . In time this will cease to be confusing; when looking at chord symbols, the $_{4-3}^{6-5}$ will immediately identify the cadential 6/4, and when looking at music they are clearly completely different – to take only the simplest aspect, $\hat{2}$ in the bass versus $\hat{5}$. And when talking about this chord, call it “cadential 6/4”; reserve “V 6/4” for the dominant triad in second inversion.

As one of our examples has already shown, it is quite common for the doubled root to move to the seventh in parallel with the resolution of the 6/4. This may also happen in the bass, so that the root-position dominant becomes a $V_4/2$ as the 6/4 resolves. This can lead to what is called an evaded cadence – we expect a cadence, but the seventh in the bass leads to a weak inversion of the tonic, creating a nested tonic expansion and delaying the end of the phrase.

V_{4-3}^{6-5} $\frac{6}{4}$ I_6

Special considerations with the cadential 6/4:

Meter: it is often emphasized that the cadential 6/4 is on a strong beat relative to its resolution, or possible on beats 2 and 3 in triple meter. These rules collapse very simply into a more basic rule once we recognize that the cadential 6/4 is a V chord from its beginning through its resolution: the metrical rules follow from the prohibition of syncopated harmonic rhythm.

Dissonance treatment: the fourth above the bass in the cadential 6/4 is a dissonance, and as such is treated very carefully. Like the seventh in V_7 , it must resolve down by step. But unlike the seventh in V_7 it must also be prepared, which means that it must arise in one of two ways: as a common tone that is held over; or by stepwise motion from above. Because the sixth is a non-chord tone it must also move by step, but because it is consonant it may move either up or down. Down is the standard option, but Mozart was quite fond of moving it up to the seventh.



4) The arpeggiating 6/4 (for analysis only)

This is simply the apparent 6/4 chord of the oom-pah bass line, or of the Alberti bass pattern. Occasionally the arpeggiation may unfold so slowly that you are tempted to label a 6/4 chord; this is especially likely if second inversion followed first, in circumstances in which the move to first inversion seemed like a real change of inversion. But in all of these cases the 6/4 appears as an effect of texture, not voice leading, and it functions as an extension of and an embellishment of some more stable inversion, usually root position.