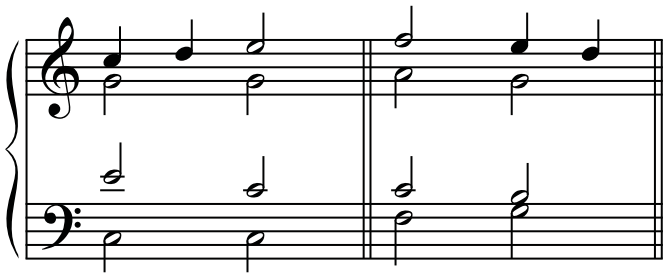
Non-Harmonic Tones

Within a musical texture, the various voices (and especially the melody) will often have a mix of notes that belong to the prevailing chord and notes that do not. The notes that do not belong to the chord are called non-harmonic tones (NHT's).

Non-harmonic tones belong to the following types. As you will see, almost all resolve by step to chord tones.

The Passing Tone (P)

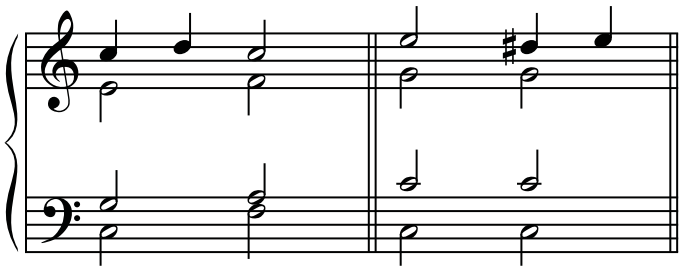
Passing tones generally fill in a skip of a third between two chord tones. Occasionally two passing tones may fill in a fourth. A passing tone moves away from a chord tone by step and continues by step in the same direction to another chord tone.



Passing tones may be either accented or unaccented, they may be diatonic or chromatic, and they may occur e ither within a single chord or over a change of chord.

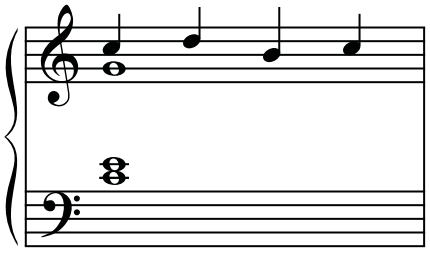
The Neighbor Tone (N)

Neighbor tones move away by step from a chord tone and return by step to that same chord tone. Neighbor tones may be either upper or lower neighbors, they may be either accented or unaccented, they may be diatonic or chromatic, and they may occur either within a single chord or over a change of chord.



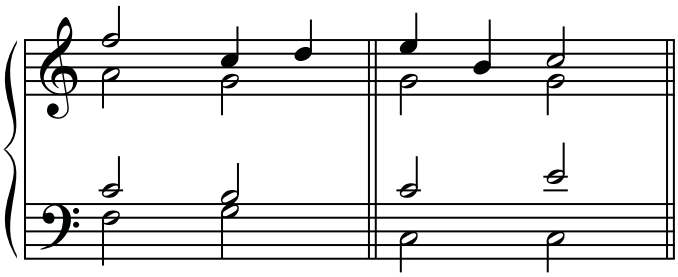
The Double Neighbor (DN)

Double neighbor figures move away from a chord tone by step to an upper neighbor, skip down to the lower neighbor, and then resolve to the chord tone from which they started. They may also start with the lower neighbor and skip to the upper, they may be either accented or unaccented, they may be diatonic or chromatic, and they may occur either within a single chord or over a change of chord.



The Incomplete Neighbor (IN)

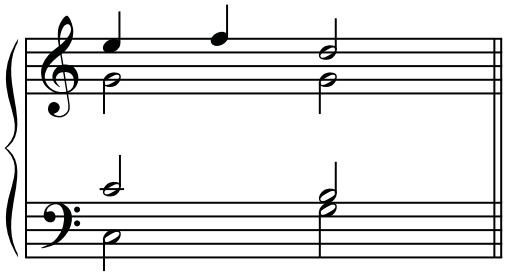
An incomplete neighbor leaps or skips from a chord tone to a note and then resolves by step to a second chord tone. Incomplete neighbors may occur either above or below the notes to which they resolve, they may be either accented or unaccented, they may be diatonic or chromatic, and they may occur either within a single chord or over a change of chord.



A metrically-strong incomplete neighbor is sometimes called an appoggiatura; be aware, though, that this term has a second, less common meaning.

The Escape Tone (E)

Escape tones are exceptional in that they do not resolve by step to chord tones. An escape tone moves between two chord tones; it moves by step from the first chord tone in the opposite direction of the second chord tone, and then reverses course to leap or skip to the second chord tone (hence the term escape tone).

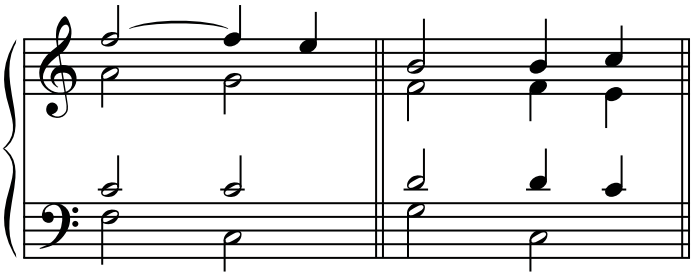


Escape tones are sometimes named in French, Échappeé.

The Suspension (S)

Suspensions always occur over chord changes. In the suspension, a tone from the old chord is held over into the new chord and then resolves by step. The held-over note may be tied, or it may be re-attacked together with the new chord.

Suspensions in tonal music may resolve either up or down (though down is most normative). Historically, music theory has given a special place to suspensions that have interval patterns 7-6, 4-3, 9-8, or 2-3 with respect to one of the other voices; but for our purposes, suspensions may involve any intervals with respect to other voices. (When you study counterpoint you will use the term 'suspension' in a much more restrictive sense.)



It is often emphasized that suspensions are metrically strong with respect to their resolutions, with the exception of suspensions in triple meter that occur on beat 2 and resolve on beat 3. But if you never write syncopated harmonic rhythm, you will not need to remember those rules.

The Anticipation (A)

Anticipations are the reverse of syncopations: a chord tone from a new chord arrives early, either by step or by leap.

Occasionally all voices may move together to tones of the new chord. In such cases it is the alignment of harmony with meter that indicates the use of anticipations rather than syncopated harmonic rhythm.