~ The Major Key Triad Chord Formula ~

Now that you know how to build triads, it's time to learn how they are used in music, so you can use your knowledge to become a much more creative guitar player. To understand how triads are applied, you need to learn how they are grouped into keys. There are several types of keys in music, and in this lesson we will talk about major keys.

In major keys, there are 7 notes (these notes are called "scale degrees"), and from each of these notes (scale degrees), we can build a chord that will belong to that major key.

The scale degrees are indicated by the Arabic numerals (1 2 3 4 5 6 7) and the chords built from these scale degrees are indicated by Roman numerals (I ii iii IV V vi vii°)

Here is how this looks (example from a C major scale):

C major scale notes:	C	D	E	F	G	A	B
Major Scale notes (scale degrees):	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Triads of a Major key:	I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii°

Example 1

Upper case roman numerals represent major triads (chords)
Lower case roman numerals represent minor triads (chords)
Lower case roman numerals with "°" represent diminished triads (chords)

Therefore:

These chords are major chords:
I, IV, V

These chords are minor chords:
ii, iii, vi

This chord is a diminished chord:
vii°

The above is true for ALL major keys. In other words, it doesn't matter if you are in C major, A major, G major, F# major, Bb major, etc. - the chord formula for major keys is always this: I ii iii IV V vi vii° (the chords are: major, minor, minor, major, major, minor, diminished - in that order).

Here are some more examples:

The notes in the key of A major are: A B C# D E F# G#

Now here are the chords in the key of A major:
A major B minor C# minor D major E major F# minor G# diminished

The notes in the key of E major are: E F# G# A B C# D#

Now here are the chords in the key of E major:
E major F# minor G# minor A major B major C# minor D# diminished

Many musicians get confused when first learning about Roman numerals and scale degrees (Arabic numerals) together. It is important to understand that these labeling systems are used to convey DIFFERENT things. The scale degrees (Arabic numerals 1 2 3 4 5 6 7) refer to **notes within a scale.** In the key of C major, it looks like this:

C major scale notes:	C	D	E	F	G	A	B
Scale degrees	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

When Roman numerals are used, they refer to the **chords belonging to that scale (key)**. So in major keys (following the formula at the top of this page), it looks like this:

C major	D minor	E minor	F major	G major	A minor	B diminished
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii°

You still use the scale degrees 1 3 5 to construct major triads regardless of what key they are in. To build a C major chord, you use the notes 1 3 5 of the C major scale (C E G). To build an F major chord, you use notes 1 3 5 of the F major scale (F A C). To build a G major chord, you use the notes 1 3 5 of the G major scale (G B D).

To build minor triads, you use the 1 b3 5 formula regardless of the key you are in. So to build a D minor triad, you use the notes 1 b3 5 of the D major scale (D F A). To build an E minor triad, you use the notes 1 b3 5 of the E major scale (E G B). To build an A minor triad, you use the notes 1 b 3 5 of the A major scale (A C E).

To build a diminished triad, you use the 1 b3 b5 formula regardless of what key you are in. So to build a B diminished chord, you use the notes 1 b3 b5 of the B major scale (B D F)

So when you think about building chords (using notes within a scale), think about Arabic numerals. When you put together chord progressions within a key, think in Roman numerals.

What should you do now?

You should now apply the major key chord formula to your guitar playing. Come up with several chord progressions in a variety of major keys, play through them several times and get used to their sound. A "chord progression" is simply a group of chords in the same key. For the purposes of this lesson, start and end all your chord progressions on the I chord in the key and the chords in the middle can be in any order. There can also be any number of chords making up the progression. All that matters is that you use the chords that belong to the same key.

Here are some examples of chord progressions in C major:

C major	F major	G major	C major			
I	IV	V	I			
C major	A minor	D minor	B diminished	C major		
I	vi	ii	vii	I		
C major	F major	C major				
I	IV	I				
C major	A minor	F major	G major	C major		
I	vi	IV	V	I		
C major	E minor	D minor	G major	A minor	F major	C major
I	iii	ii	V	vi	IV	I

You don't need to memorize anything for this lesson - I simply want you to *go through the process* of creating as many chord progressions as you can think of in as many keys as you can.

What I want you to notice (as you play a variety of chord progressions in many keys) is the following:

1. A chord progression that uses the same Roman numerals always sounds and feels exactly the same regardless of the key you are in. For example, I vi ii vii I chord progression sounds EXACTLY the same in F major, Eb major, C# major, D major, etc. Even though the triads you are playing in each key have different names, the *feeling* of each progression is the same because you are playing the same *Roman numerals* (chord functions) across those keys. Pay attention to this - this will become very important in future lessons.

2. You will find that you like the sound of some chord progressions better than others - this is totally normal. You may also recognize that some chord progressions sound very similar to some famous songs that you know. This is also to be expected, because the major scale chord formula has been used by songwriters for decades to write millions of songs.

Get creative, experiment and have fun! We are going to expand upon this topic in much more detail in future lessons.

This lesson's Practice Generator category is: Music Theory > Study Harmony (Chords).
Practice this lesson when this category comes up in your schedule.