Music Theory

Suspended Chords

You should know the basic Major and Minor chords to understand this course.

To put it simply, **suspended chords are chords where the third (minor or major) has been replaced by a major 2nd or a perfect 4th**. We call a chord where the third has been replaced by a 2nd a sus2 chord. A chord where the third has been replaced by a 4th is called a sus4 chord. For example, a A suspended 2nd is noted this way : Asus2.

A suspended chord has a neutral quality because the most important note, the 3rd that defines the chord quality and makes it sound bright or dark, has been removed.

Now that we have an good understanding of how suspended chords are created, we can deduce their main functions (we can find much more applications !) :

1. embellish chords
2. passing chords - mostly used this way
3. create ethereal music

Embellish chords : since a suspended chord can be seen as a variation of any given chord, you can switch any chord from its basic form to a suspended form. This can add more interest and more colors to your compositions. For example, a progression such as Am - F - C - G could be turned in Am - Fsus2 - C - Gsus4. The progression is not changed fundamentally but its color is different.

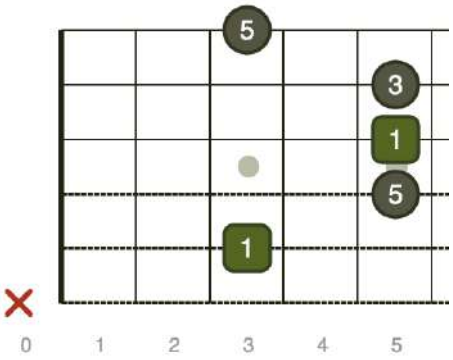
Passing chords : you can use suspended chords to get smoothly to any chord or to oscillate between any given chord. Instead of playing F - G7 - C - C a softer version would be F - G7 - Csus4 - C. Then you can oscillate between the two suspended forms to create interesting sounds like this F - G7 - Csus4 - C / Csus2 / Csus4 / C.

Create ethereal music : forget about major and minor chords. Try to only play suspended chords in a simple chord progression : Esus2 - Dsus2. This creates cloudy, vast and neutral music.

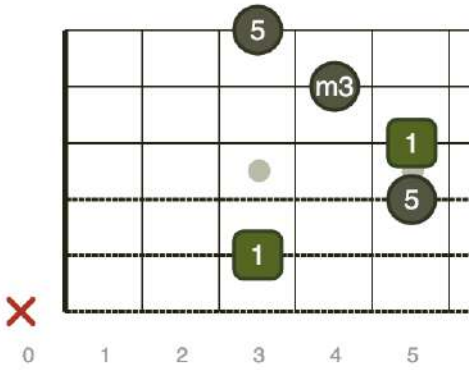
Basic suspended chords shapes

Chords with the root on the A string (eg : C chords) :

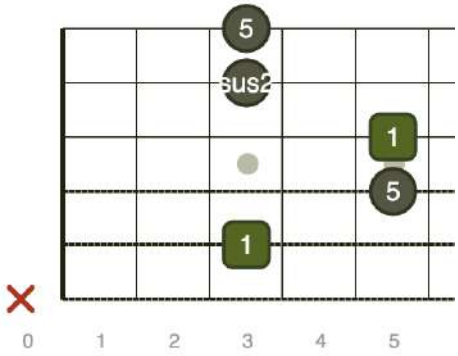
C



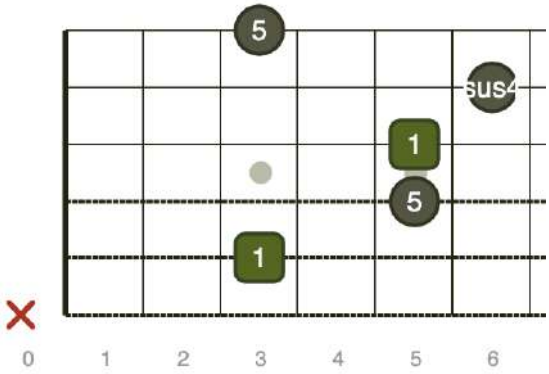
Cm



Csus2

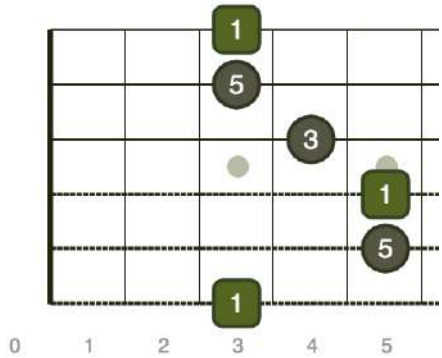


Csus4

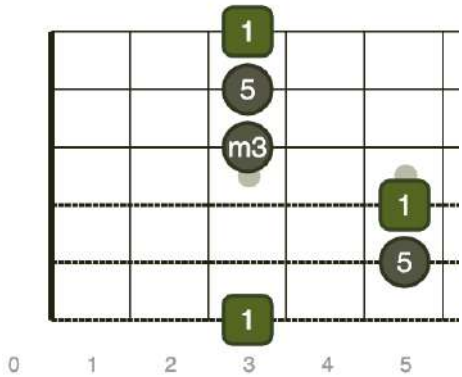


Chords with the root on the E string (eg : G chord) :

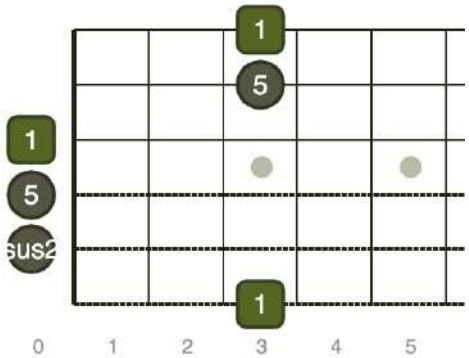
G



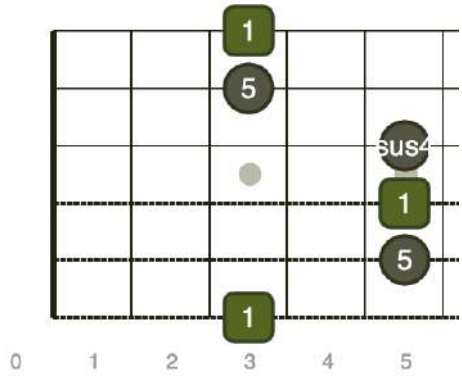
Gm



Gsus2



Gsus4



Suspended chords and the Major scale

Establishing connections between a new concept (here a new chord type) and things you already know (especially scales in that case) should be something natural. Let us explore the link between the Major scale and suspended chords.

In the Major scale, most notes can induce suspended chords **without leaving the key**. This is nice because this means that you can create chord progressions using the basic major / minor chords and suspended chords without worrying about accommodating notes outside of the key.

Introducing notes outside of a key when composing in a given key can be a complicated topic. If this is a new idea for you, do not panic ! Simply note that this is something that is common in reality in music in order to create more interesting sounds. However, mainstream musics we listen to everyday hardly ever do that.

Each note in the scale, identified by its scale degree, induces a sus2 chord if the note at the major 2nd interval from this note belongs to the Major scale. The same logic applies for sus4 chords (with the perfect 4th interval).

If we expand that logic for all degrees, here is what we find for each degree :

i. **sus2 and sus4**
ii. **sus2 and sus4**
iii. **only sus4**
iv. **only sus2**
v. **sus2 and sus4**
vi. **sus2 and sus4**
vii. **None**

Three things need to be understood here :

- The degrees 1, 2, 5 and 6 induce both a sus2 and a sus4 chord.
- The degrees 3 and 4 only induce respectively a sus4 and a sus2 chord and nothing more !
- The 7th degree does not have a perfect 5th interval so no suspended chord can be created from this degree.

Songs that use Suspended chords

Here are some examples of songs that use suspended chords. Thank to these example you will be able to better understand their use in a real musical context, in an achieved piece of music.

- **Oasis - Wonderwall** : this music is really well known and most guitarists learn this song at some point or at least know it. This music is particularly interesting when studying suspended chords because it contains several suspended chords and added tone chords. Here is a link to a description of the chord progression.

  The chord progression goes like this (capo on 2nd fret so in F#m not in Em). Below the chords are the chord degrees.

  Verse : Em7 - G - Dsus4 - A7sus4
  i III VII iv

  Chorus : Cadd9 - Em7 - G - Em7
  VI i III i

  If you have never seen seventh chords, the A7sus4 might be weird to you. Do not be afraid ! You can simply see that seventh note as an ornement to embellish the chord for the moment.

- **Tom Petty - Free Fallin'** : This song is pretty simple and illustrate the use of the suspended chord as a way to embellish the tonic or the home chord. Plus, we find the traditional dominant chord at the end of the progression that pulls us back to the tonic.

  The chord progression goes like this (capo on 3rd fret so in F not in D) :

  Verse / Chorus : D - Dsus4 - D - A
  I I I V

Added tone chords

When learning new songs, you will soon or later encounter add2, add4, add9 or add11 chords. They are noted with "*add*" because the 2nd / 4th is added to the basic major or minor chord. **They are different from the suspended chords** !

In added tone chords, the major 2nd or the perfect 4th is added while the third is still there. This is different than the suspended chords in the sense that in suspended chords, the third has been replaced by the major 2nd or the perfect 4th : there is no third in suspended chords. In added tone chords however, the third is present and the 2nd or 4th is also present.

In general, we mostly see add9 and add11 chords. The 9th is the same as the 2nd an octave higher and the 11th is the same as the 4th an octave higher too. These chords are really interesting because they offer variations to the basic major / minor chords. They *add* more colours to them.

Here are some example of added tone chords :