

Introduction to lead-sheet chord symbols (page 1 of 3)

Most commercial sheet music and “fake books” use a system of letter-based symbols to indicate chords. These are referred to variously as lead-sheet, commercial, popular, or guitar chord symbols.

This first sheet describes how to read and notate **simple triads** using lead-sheet symbols.

A letter with nothing added indicates a **major triad**.

G = the notes G-B-D
(sometimes **GM** or **Gmaj**, but these are best avoided)

A letter followed by **m** or **min** or **—** indicates a **minor triad**.

G min
G m = the notes G-B^b-D
G—

A letter followed by **dim** or **°** or (less commonly) **min^b5** indicates a **diminished triad**.

G dim
G° = the notes G-B^b-D^b
G—^b5 (or **Gm^b5**, **Gmin^b5**)

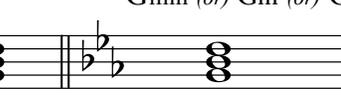
A letter followed by **+** or **(#5)** indicates an **augmented triad**.

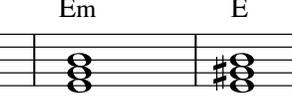
G+
G(#5) = the notes G-B-D[#]

The parentheses serve to separate the **#** from the root name; otherwise the symbol would appear to refer to a G[#]-major triad.

Note that lead-sheet chord symbols differ from standard roman numeral symbols in several ways:

- Lead-sheet symbols are written **above** the staff.
RN's are most often notated below.
- Lead-sheet symbols use **letter names** to indicate the root.
RN's refer to scale degrees within a given key.
- Lead-sheet symbols are **independent of key and key signature**. For example, “Gm” always means the same notes, G^b-B^b-D^b, regardless of key signature, melody pitches, etc.
RN's refer to a key, though they may indicate pitches outside the normal scale (for ex., the major V chord in a minor key, which requires the LT). The quality of a RN seventh is sometimes dependent on context: V⁷ is major-minor, while IV⁷ and I⁷ are normally major-major.
- Lead-sheet symbol roots should always use **capital letters**; chord quality is indicated by suffixes.
RN's use uppercase for major and augmented triads, lowercase for minor and diminished.
- Lead-sheet symbols are primarily a vernacular notation and are not 100% standardized. You need to recognize a number of variants for each triad type.

G	Gmin (or) Gm (or) G-	B ^o (or) Bdim (or) Bm ^{b5}	Eb+ (or) Eb(#5)
			
Cm: V	Cm: v	Cm: vii^o	Cm: III+

A ^o	A	Em	E	E
				
Bm: vii^o	VII (sometimes written:) ^bVII	iv	IV	D^b: ??

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This sheet describes how to read and notate **inversions** using lead-sheet symbols.

Inversions in lead-sheet notation are indicated with “slash notation,” in which the bass note is written following the chord:

D/F# Ab/Eb G#m/B G/D A/C#

Cm: V₄ E: IV₃

Note that this notation allows for **any** bass note, not just pitches that belong to the chord. Therefore slash notation permits combinations beyond basic triads and their inversions:

G/C Eb/F Fm/Bb

Just as with the chord roots, the bass note indication is independent of key signature. You must notate in the bass the exact note called for by the symbol, whether it is in the key or not:

A/G# A/G

The added-sixth chord

The notation “6” following a chord symbol does **not** indicate first inversion. Rather, it refers to the so-called “added sixth” chord (“add 6” in jazz parlance), an enrichment of the basic triad sonority which entered the musical vocabulary in the late 1800s and became a staple of popular-music harmony in the 20th century. The “6” always refers to a **major** sixth above the root, regardless of the triad quality (major or minor). (In the uncommon case that a minor added sixth is desired, it is indicated “b6” or “b13”.)

E⁶ (or) Eadd6 Em⁶ (or) Emadd6 Em^(b6) (rare)

Introduction to lead-sheet chord symbols (page 3 of 3)

This sheet describes how to read and notate **seventh chords** using lead-sheet symbols.

The simplest way to learn seventh-chord symbols is to think of the major-minor seventh chord—the most common quality—as the “default.”

Thus, for efficiency, the symbol **7** alone indicates a **major-minor seventh** chord:

C^7 = the notes C-E-G-B \flat
(sometimes also written **C dom7**, but this is not necessary)

min7 or **m7** or **-7** indicates a **minor-minor seventh** chord:

C^{min7}
 Cm^7 = the notes C-E \flat -G-B \flat
 $C-^7$

To remember, think: since “7” alone already indicates *major-minor*, the “min” refers to the triad.

maj7 or **ma7** or **M7** or **Δ 7** indicates a **major-major seventh** chord:

C^{maj7}
 Cma^7 = the notes C-E-G-B
 CM^7
 $C\Delta^7$

To remember, think: since “7” alone already indicates *major-minor*, the “maj” refers to the seventh.

min7 \flat 5 (or similar w/ an alternate “minor” indicator) indicates a **half-diminished seventh** chord:

$C^{min7\flat5}$
 $Cm^{\flat5}$ = the notes C-E \flat -G \flat -B \flat
 $C-^{\flat5}$

Notice how different this is from classical RN nomenclature! Many non-pop/jazz theory texts advise *incorrectly* to indicate this chord as $C^{\phi7}$ in lead-sheet notation. While experienced musicians will know what it means, the notation $\phi7$ is a rare exception, not the norm. Note also that “ \flat ” in “ $\flat5$ ” means *lowered*, not necessarily a *flat* in staff notation (see example below).

dim7 or **o7** indicates a **fully-diminished seventh** chord:

C^{dim7}
 C^{o7} = the notes C-E \flat -G \flat -B $\flat\flat$ (The B $\flat\flat$ might be spelled as A in staff notation.)

Note: in practice the symbol C^o is often realized with a fully-diminished seventh chord, though strictly speaking it indicates the diminished triad with no 7th. If it is important that the seventh *not* be played, it is advisable to write C^o (**triad only**), for clarity.

Other seventh chords commonly encountered (you do not have to know these for now):

C^{+7} or $C^{7\#5}$ = the notes C-E-G \sharp -B \flat
 Cm^{MA7} or $Cm\Delta^7$ or $C-\Delta^7$ = the notes C-E \flat -G-B

Seventh-chord symbols behave exactly as triads with regard to key signatures and slash notation:

The image shows a musical staff with four measures of chords. The first two measures are in F major (one sharp, one flat) and both are labeled F7. The first measure shows the chord in a standard voicing (root position), and the second shows it in a slash voicing (root on the bass line). The last two measures are in C# minor (three sharps) and both are labeled C#m7b5/G. The first measure shows the chord in a slash voicing (root on the bass line), and the second shows it in a standard voicing (root position).