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.

\[ G = \text{the notes } G-B-D \]

(sometimes \text{GM or Gmaj}, but these are best avoided)

A letter followed by \text{m} or \text{min} or \text{−} indicates a minor triad.

\[ G\text{ min} \]
\[ G\text{ m} = \text{the notes } G-\text{B}^\flat-D\]
\[ G- \]

A letter followed by \text{dim} or \text{o} or (less commonly) \text{min} 5 indicates a diminished triad.

\[ G\text{ dim} \]
\[ G\text{ °} = \text{the notes } G-\text{B}^\flat-\text{D}^\flat \]
\[ G-5 \text{ (or Gm}^5, \text{Gmin}^5) \]

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

\[ G+ \]
\[ G+(5) = \text{the notes } G-\text{B}-\text{D}^\sharp \]

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 \textit{above} the staff. 
  \textit{RN’s are most often notated below.}
- Lead-sheet symbols use \textit{letter names} to indicate the root.
  \textit{RN’s refer to scale degrees within a given key.}
- Lead-sheet symbols are \textit{independent of key and key signature}. For example, “Gm” always means the same notes, G-\text{B}^\flat-D, regardless of key signature, melody pitches, etc.
  \textit{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: }^7 \text{ is major-minor, while IV}^7 \text{ and I}^7 \text{ are normally major-major.}
- Lead-sheet symbol roots should always use \textit{capital letters}; chord quality is indicated by suffixes.
  \textit{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.
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:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
D/F^\# & A_b/E_b & G_m/B & G/D & A/C^\# \\
\text{\includegraphics{D_F_sharp.png}} & \text{\includegraphics{A_b_E_b.png}} & \text{\includegraphics{G_m_B.png}} & \text{\includegraphics{G_D.png}} & \text{\includegraphics{A_C_sharp.png}} \\
\text{Cm: } V^6 & \text{E: } IV^6 \\
\end{array}
\]

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:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
G/C & E_b/F & F_m/B_b \\
\text{\includegraphics{G_C.png}} & \text{\includegraphics{E_b_F.png}} & \text{\includegraphics{F_m_Bb.png}} \\
\end{array}
\]

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:

\[
\begin{array}{cc}
A/G^\# & A/G \\
\text{\includegraphics{A_G_sharp.png}} & \text{\includegraphics{A_G.png}} \\
\end{array}
\]

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 “♭6” or “♭13”.)

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
E^6 & E_{add6} & E_m^6 & E_m{♭6} \\
\text{\includegraphics{E_6.png}} & \text{\includegraphics{E_add6.png}} & \text{\includegraphics{E_m_6.png}} & \text{\includegraphics{E_m_♭6.png}} \\
\end{array}
\]
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:

\[ C^7 = \text{the notes C-E-G-Bb} \]

(sometimes also written C dom7, but this is not necessary)

\(\text{min7 or m7 or} -7\) indicates a minor-minor seventh chord:

\[ C_{\text{min}}^7 \]
\[ C_{\text{m}}^7 \]
\[ C^7 \]

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

\(\text{maj7 or ma7 or} M7\) or \(\Delta 7\) indicates a major-major seventh chord:

\[ C_{\text{maj}}^7 \]
\[ C_{\text{ma}}^7 \]
\[ CM^7 \]
\[ CA^7 \]

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

\(\text{min7b5}\) (or similar w/ an alternate “minor” indicator) indicates a half-diminished seventh chord:

\[ C_{\text{min}}^7_{\text{b5}} \]
\[ C^7_{\text{b5}} \]
\[ C^7_{\text{-b5}} \]

Notice how different this is from classical RN nomenclature! Many non-pop/jazz theory texts advise incorrectly to indicate this chord as \(C^67\) in lead-sheet notation. While experienced musicians will know what it means, the notation \(\sigma 7\) is a rare exception, not the norm. Note also that “b” in “b5” means lowered, not necessarily a flat in staff notation (see example below).

\(\text{dim7 or o7}\) indicates a fully-diminished seventh chord:

\[ C_{\text{dim}}^7 \]
\[ C^7 \]

(The B♭ might be spelled as A in staff notation.)

Note: in practice the symbol \(C^0\) 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 \(C^0\) (triplet only), for clarity.

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

\(\text{C}^+7\) or \(\text{C}^7\#5\) = the notes C-E-G♯-B_b
\(\text{Cm}^{\text{MA7}}\) or \(\text{Cm}^\Delta^7\) or \(\text{C}^-\Delta^7\) = the notes C-E♭-G-B

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