

CONVENTIONAL (MOSTLY) CHORD PROGRESSIONS OVERVIEW

GENERAL

We call chord progressions "progressions", as opposed to "combinations" or "a series of..." (or something like that) because with most music based around typical scales and chords, the chords are organized to arrive eventually at a resolution. They have a sense of *progress* moving towards this resolution, and that resolution is the tonic (I or i) chord - the home chord.

Different styles of music, and/or composers organize their chords in different ways (i.e. forming their own versions of *progressions*), kind of like different languages having their own, logical grammar structures. Each style of music has its own harmonic grammar.

THE TONIC & DOMINANT (I/i & V [& vii°])

No style has a "more-proper" kind of musical grammar, but as it happens, many styles do recognize the tonic (I/i) as the chord to imply the strongest sense of resolution and completion. And many styles prioritize the idea of the music finding a resolution (although it does not HAVE to...). Similarly, many traditional styles, at least, use the dominant (major V) as the chord having the most targeted direction and tension in terms of needing to resolve. Having a chord progression of V (or V⁷ having even more tension) going to I (or i) is an especially resolving/satisfying kind of chord movement. The vii° chord also moves to the I/i very directly, as an alternative/substitute for V).

One reason this is considered such a strong/satisfying resolution is that the V chord has the leading tone in it, and the tonic chord of course has the tonic in it. As the V moves to the I/i, the leading tone melodically moves up to the tonic pitch - a very *melodically* satisfying motion.

PRIMARY CHORDS

The chords built off of scale degrees 1, 4 & 5 are often referred to as the key's "primary chords", because these three are so often used and collectively contain all the notes of the scale. In fact, the tonic and dominant chords are by far the most commonly used two chords in many styles of music. A great example of this is ABBA's "Take a Chance on Me", where the chorus uses just B-major and F#-major chords (I & V).

B (I)

If you change your mind, I'm the first in line
Honey I'm still free, take a chance on me

F# (V)

If you need me, let me know, gonna be around
If you've got no place to go, if you're feeling down

B (I)

If you're all alone when the pretty birds have flown
Honey I'm still free, take a chance on me

F# (V)

Gonna do my very best and it ain't no lie
If you put me to the test, if you let me try

B (I)

Source: <https://tabs.ultimate-guitar.com/tab/abba/take-a-chance-on-me-chords-1053599>

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SEQUENCE/PROGRESSION OF 5THS/4THS

The distance that V travels to I/i (the distance between their respective roots) is up an interval of a 4th (or down a 5th); think in the key of C, a G (V) moving to a C (I). This movement sets up a model of how other diatonic chords might move: in the way V goes to I (up a 4th), ii can move to V (up a 4th), vi can move to ii, etc.

When a series of chords has their roots move by the same interval amount, we call it a *sequence*. Almost any kind of sequence, being a pattern, is appealing to the ear due to its repetitive and predictable nature, but the aforementioned sequence (root movement up by 4ths) is especially appealing (or at least popular) because it is modeled after the "satisfying" V to I/i resolving motion we already recognized. In traditional jazz, for example, the most common final three chords in a progression are ii - V - I (they are most often 7th chords).

We encounter this "up a 4th" sequence in The Beatles' "You Never Give Me Your Money", and Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive". The full implementation of this sequence winds up using all seven chords in a key.

Major keys: I IV vii^o iii vi ii V I (in the key of C maj: C F Bdim Em Am Dm G C)

Minor keys: i iv VII III VI ii^o V i (in the key of C min: Cm Fm Bb Eb Ab Ddim G Cm)

Even though music combines chords in many other ways, the final/ending, resolving portion of a progression is often V to I/i in many styles.

When V⁽⁷⁾ resolves to I/i at the end of a phrase, we call it an **AUTHENTIC CADENCE**.

OTHER WAY TO RESOLVE (IV/iv to I/i)

That said, another common way to resolve to the tonic chord is from the IV (or iv) chord. Instead of the chord movement going UP a 4th, it goes DOWN a 4th. This is considered still a strong resolution, but just not as strong as V to I/i. This kind of progression aligns with the classic "amen" chord progression in some religious music, so the progression can be referred to as an "amen" progression. The more academic name for this is "plagal" progression.

The final three chords in The Beatles' "Let it Be" are G - F - C (V - IV - I in the key of C), which are clearly derived from the Gospel music tradition.

When a IV/iv chord resolves to a I/i chord at the end of a phrase, we call it a **PLAGAL CADENCE**.

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THE DOMINANT (V) CHORD USED TO IMPLY NON-RESOLUTION/CONTINUATION

Sometimes a chord progression intentionally stops in a way that feels unresolved. This is intentional so that more music will follow, kind of like adding the word "but" or "however" at the end of a spoken/written sentence - it's a continuer. In most cases, when a phrase or section stops on a chord other than the tonic, we know there is more music to come. The most common chord used for this effect is the dominant (V) chord. Often if one section of music ends on the V chord, a different section will end on the I/i chord in a complimentary manner.

When a phrase finishes on a V chord (an unresolved feeling), we call it a **HALF CADENCE**.

THE DOMINANT "FAKE OUT"

As stated above, the V (dominant) usually moves to the I/i (tonic), but it can also do a "fake-out" and move instead to the vi/VI (up a step in the key). This is traditionally called a *deceptive* progression (or **deceptive cadence** if it occurs at the end of a phrase). Like the half cadence, a deceptive cadence sounds very unresolved and causes a feeling that there is more music to come. If this occurs during a progression, it allows for the music to keep on flowing. A good example of this is the chorus of Bob Marley's "No Woman No Cry":

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C   G/B       Am F [I V6 vi IV]
  No woman no cry
C   F         C   G [I IV I V]
  No woman no cry
C   G/B       Am F [I V6 vi IV]
  No woman no cry
C   F         C           [I IV I ]
  No woman no cry
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Also notice that the cadence at the end of the chorus is IV to I (plagal).

CADENCES (A SUMMARY)

(a cadence is the stopping/pausing point at the end of a phrase; cadences differ depending on the chords involved)

AUTHENTIC CADENCE

Most resolved-feeling way to end a chord progression: $V^{(7)}$ (or vii^o) to I/i

PLAGAL CADENCE

Somewhat resolved-feeling way to end a progression: IV to I (or iv to i)

HALF CADENCE

Makes a progression intentionally finish with an unresolved feeling: end on V

DECEPTIVE CADENCE

Feels unresolved because the V did not go to the I/i as expected: $V^{(7)}$ to vi/VI

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PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

A lot of attention has gone to how progressions END. The middle portion of a progression is often less predictable and more free to combine chords in various ways. 18th century Western European music has plenty of "rules" for how chords might combine (some of them covered above), but in more recent styles, things have been less restrictive. That said, the beginning of a progression is more likely to have a I/i chord, or a V (as a pickup) followed by I/i.

The stages of a progression can be generalized like so:

BEGINNING

- Tonic (I/i)
- Dominant (as a pickup) to tonic (V -> I/i)

MIDDLE

- Less specific, but movement by ascending 4ths is common
- Movement by other sequences and/or interval patterns

"FALSE" END

- Cadencing on a V chord [half cadence]
- Cadencing from V to vi/vi [deceptive cadence]

RESOLVING END

- V⁽⁷⁾ (or vii^o) -> I/i [authentic cadence]
- IV -> I, iv -> i [plagal "amen" cadence]

Within these stages is a lot of room for variation and creativity. Progressions can have a lot or just a few chords. The chords can vary by duration, inversion and voicing. And the impact of a chord can vary depending on the voice leading.

USE THIS QUICK REFERENCE CHART FOR HOW CHORDS MOST TYPICALLY PROGRESS

maj key chord	goes to	less often
I	anywhere	
ii	V or vii ^o	
iii	VI or IV	vii ^o
IV	V or I	ii
V	I or vi	IV then I
vi	ii	V
vii ^o	I	V

min key chord	goes to	less often
i	anywhere	
ii ^o	V or vii ^o	
III	VI or iv	V
iv	V or i	ii ^o
V	i or VI	
VI	ii ^o	V
vii ^o	i	V
VII	III	

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EXAMPLES

Beatles: "You Never Give Me Your Money"

This chord progression follows a sequence of 4ths pattern in the key of A minor. Each chord can be understood to move up an interval of a 4th (or down a 5th) to the next one:

i	iv	VII	III	VI	ii ^o	V	i
Am	Dm	G	C	F	Bdim	E	Am

This phrase ends in a strong resolution to the tonic of A minor, an authentic cadence.

Beatles: "Octopus's Garden"

[Verse 1]

E	C#m
I'd like to be under the sea	
A	B
In an Octopus's Garden in the shade.	
E	C#m
He'd let us in, knows where we've been,	
A	B
In his Octopus's Garden in the shade.	
C#m	B
I'd ask my friends to come and see	
A	B
An Octopus's Garden with me.	

[Chorus]

E	C#m	
I'd like to be under the sea		
A	B	E
In an Octopus's Garden in the shade.		

In the key of E major, this song is *simple* only in the sense that the chords of the verse and chorus are diatonic (belonging to one key).

Verse: Like the introduction, it finishes on a V (B) chord and feels incomplete. It's a half cadence.

Chorus: follows a very similar progression to the verse, but manages finally to finish with V to I (B to E) and feels resolved. It's an authentic cadence.

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Grateful Dead: "Ripple"

[verse]

 G C
If my words did glow with the gold of sunshine
 G
And my tunes were played on the harp unstrung,
 C
Would you hear my voice come thru the music?
G D C G
Would you hold it near as it were your own?

 G C
It's a hand-me-down, the thoughts are broken;
 G
Perhaps they're better left unsung.
 C
I don't know, don't really care.
G D C G
Let there be songs to fill the air.

[chorus]

Am D G C
Ripple in still water, when there is no pebble tossed,
 A7 D
Nor wind to blow.

In the key of G major, with very few chords (not all diatonic).

Verse: this is a nice example of a plagal (IV to I) progression/cadence at its conclusion. The last two chords of the verse are C to G.

Chorus: leans away from the home key by starting on an Am chord, and concludes with an A7 to D. The A7 is a chromatic (non-diatonic) chord, but the D chord is an inconclusive V (half cadence). Ending a chorus this way is the opposite of the previous examples.

VOICE LEADING

Voice leading is the academic term for describing how notes move from one to the next, usually in a chordal context, with notes in one chord moving to notes in the next chord in a particular (not random) way. It takes the perspective that each note in a chord is like its own individual line (or voice), and as the chord changes, each note will move in a meaningful direction, or sometimes stay in the same place.

Voice leading can be smooth (conjunct), or not-smooth (disjunct or "choppy"), or somewhere in between. It can also change from moment to moment. Voice leading tends to be smooth more often than not, where chord transitions are tightly connected to maintain a sense of continuity. But sometimes disjunct voice leading can be the right thing to make more of an impact in the music, if that's what the mood calls for.

In the examples below:

- The first measure features choppy, disjunct voice leading in both the treble and bass clefs.
- In the second (middle) measure, the voice leading is very smooth in the treble clef (with the top note "G" being a *common tone* throughout), but still disjunct in the bass clef (allowing for the chords to be in root position).
- In the third measure, the voice leading is smooth in both clefs, and we experience an upward stepping bass line as well as treble clef chords/voices that mostly step in the opposite direction (downward) of the bass line.

The musical notation shows three measures of music. Above the staff, the chords are labeled: C, G, C in the first measure; C, G, C in the second measure; and C, G/D, C/E in the third measure. The bass clef shows the bass line moving from C to G to C in the first measure, C to G to C in the second, and C to G/D to C/E in the third. The treble clef shows the chord voicings for each measure.

Another way to think of this process is to (unofficially) call it "finger leading" at least when it comes to playing chords on the piano or guitar. In this way, just think about the fingers moving from one chord to the next: are they moving a lot, a little, not at all?

VOICING A CHORD

Based off the idea of voice leading, the term "voicing" a chord refers to how the notes in a chord are distributed (spread out) in terms of how close/far the notes are from each other, but also in terms of which notes are on top, or on bottom, and which notes are doubled (appearing in multiple octaves).

In the example below, each measure is a different "voicing" of a C major triad. Notice the variety of possibilities with the number of notes ranging from three (no doubling) to six (lots of doubling), the distance between the notes varying, and the highest note being either a C, E or G.

The musical notation shows seven measures, each containing a different voicing of a C major triad. The notes are distributed in various ways across the treble and bass clefs, including doubling and different octaves. The first measure has three notes (C, E, G) in the treble clef. The second measure has three notes (C, E, G) in the bass clef. The third measure has six notes (C, E, G, C, E, G) in the treble clef. The fourth measure has six notes (C, E, G, C, E, G) in the bass clef. The fifth measure has six notes (C, E, G, C, E, G) in the treble clef. The sixth measure has six notes (C, E, G, C, E, G) in the bass clef. The seventh measure has three notes (C, E, G) in the treble clef.