

# Chord voicing introduction

## What are jazz chords?

**There are five basic jazz chords.**

In jazz there are only five basic seventh chords, off which every other chord is built. If one knows all their major scales, the five basic jazz chords are easy to access using scale degrees.

For the purpose of explaining, we will use the root C on every chord. The chords are spelt as follows:

Major 7 - 1 3 5 7

7 - 1 3 5  $\flat$  7

mi7 - 1  $\flat$  3 5  $\flat$  7

mi7( $\flat$ 5) - 1  $\flat$  3  $\flat$  5  $\flat$  7

o7 - 1  $\flat$  3  $\flat$  5  $\flat$   $\flat$  7

Musical notation showing five basic jazz chords in C major: Cmaj7, C7, Cmi7, Cmi7( $\flat$ 5), and Co7. Each chord is shown in root position on a grand staff with scale degrees labeled.

Chord	Scale Degrees
Cmaj7	1, 3, 5, 7
C7	1, 3, 5, $\flat$ 7
Cmi7	1, $\flat$ 3, 5, $\flat$ 7
Cmi7( $\flat$ 5)	1, $\flat$ 3, $\flat$ 5, $\flat$ 7
Co7	1, $\flat$ 3, $\flat$ 5, $\flat\flat$ 7

The two most common voicings of these basic seventh chords are root position and second inversion. From hereon in these two voicings will be called "A" and "B" voicings respectively.

Musical notation showing two voicings of the Cmaj7 chord: "A" voicing (root position) and "B" voicing (second inversion).

# What are extensions? What is a tall chord?

First off, to find a chord from a scale, one must simply skip notes within that scales, stacking in “thirds” instead of “seconds”. For example, in basic classical harmony, the I chord and the V7 chord are both spelt by stacking thirds up from their respective scale degrees.

8 C G7

I V

Stack it up on lines or spaces.

The image shows two measures of music on a grand staff. The first measure is for the C major chord (I), with notes C4, E4, G4, and C5 stacked in the treble clef. The second measure is for the G7 chord (V), with notes G4, B4, D5, and G5 stacked in the treble clef. The bass clef in both measures has a whole rest. The text 'Stack it up on lines or spaces.' is written between the two measures.

Tall jazz chords are found the same way - just stacked a little taller. For instance, here would be the beginnings of a Cmaj13 chord. C, stacked thirds all the way up to high A, the 13 of C.

10

11 3

This voicing presents some issues, however. It's bulky, and has a harsh dissonance in it. Namely, the minor 9 dissonance created between the 3 and the 11.

The image shows two musical examples. The first is a tall Cmaj13 chord with notes C4, E4, G4, Bb4, D5, F5, Ab5, and C6 stacked in the treble clef. The second is a voicing of the same chord with notes C4, E4, G4, Bb4, and C6 in the treble clef, and F5 and Ab5 in the bass clef. The text explains that the interval between Bb4 and C6 is a minor 9th, which is dissonant.

So, what we commonly do is either remove the 11 altogether, or sharpen it. Both of these actions get rid of the dissonance in the chord. Thus the chord will spell as such:

12 Cmaj13 Cmaj13(#11)

The image shows two measures of music on a grand staff. The first measure is for the Cmaj13 chord, with notes C4, E4, G4, Bb4, D5, F5, and Ab5 stacked in the treble clef. The second measure is for the Cmaj13(#11) chord, with notes C4, E4, G4, Bb4, D5, F5, Ab5, and Bb5 stacked in the treble clef. The bass clef in both measures has a whole rest.

So, if a chord says "13" it includes all the chord tones beneath the thirteen, like the #11, 9, and 7. If you want a thirteen with no 9, you will write the chord like this:

14 Cmaj7(13)

Musical notation for Cmaj7(13) in treble clef. The chord is represented by a single block of notes on the staff, including the root (C), major third (E), perfect fifth (G), major seventh (Bb), and thirteenth (Eb).

If you want to write a chord with an extension, but no seventh, do something like this:

C(9)

Musical notation for C(9) in treble clef. The chord is represented by a single block of notes on the staff, including the root (C), major third (E), perfect fifth (G), and ninth (D).

Here are the major 7, minor 7, and dominant 7 chords again, this time stacked up in thirds as tall chords.

16 Cmaj13 C13 Cmi13

Musical notation for three tall chords in treble clef: Cmaj13, C13, and Cmi13. Each chord is represented by a single block of notes on the staff, including the root, major third, perfect fifth, and thirteenth.

It should be noted, if a chord symbol tells you to add something, put it in the chord! Be familiar with where your 9s, 11s, and 13s are. Here are some examples of how specific chord symbols can be:

19 Cmaj9(#11) Cmi7(11) C7(#11,b9,#5)

Musical notation for three specific chords in treble clef: Cmaj9(#11), Cmi7(11), and C7(#11,b9,#5). Each chord is represented by a single block of notes on the staff, including the root, major third, perfect fifth, and various extensions.

## How can I divide these chords up?

The voicings presented above for these chords are extremely bulky and boring.

So, we divide chords into three categories, to compartmentalize them and experiment in more interesting ways with the sounds - the three categories are:

Root tones - 1 and 5.

Guide tones - 3 and 7.

Color tones - 9, 11, 13, and any variation emanating therefrom.

So, in Cmaj13:

22      Root tones                      Guide tones                      Colour tones

The image shows three measures of musical notation for the Cmaj13 chord. The first measure, labeled 'Root tones', shows the root (C) on the first line of the treble clef and the third (E) on the second line. The second measure, labeled 'Guide tones', shows the third (E) on the second line and the seventh (B) on the second space. The third measure, labeled 'Colour tones', shows the third (E) on the second line and the ninth (D) on the first space. The bass clef in all three measures contains a single flat symbol on the second line, representing the bass note (F).

These notes can be arranged and rearranged to create rootless SATB spread voicings - the most basic and versatile voicings when comping for a horn player, or playing in a big band.