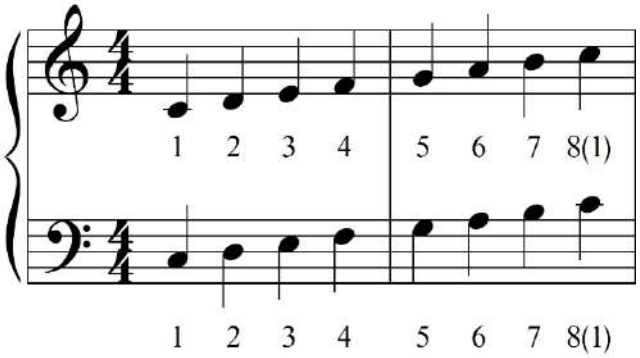
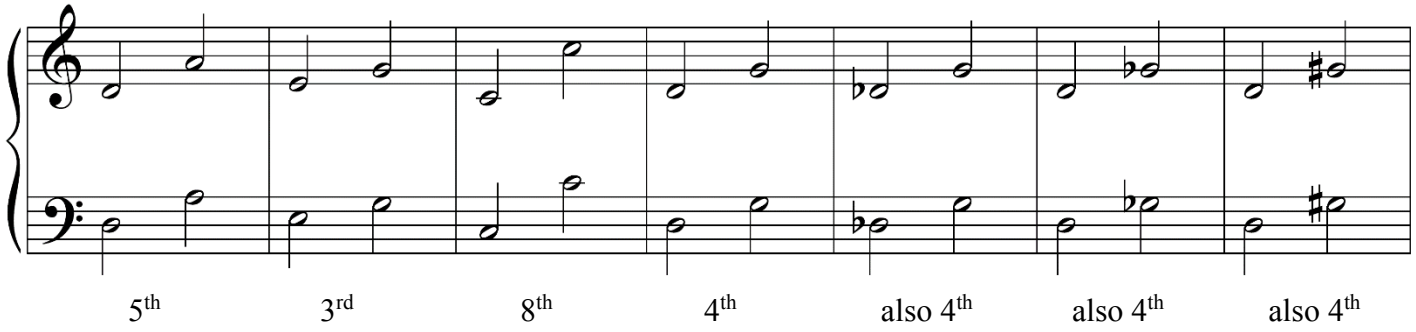
Introduction to Chords
For Jazz Band

First, let's start with a major scale and review the scale degrees.



We refer to the distance between two notes as an interval, and an interval has two aspects: the distance and the quality. The distance is measured by counting from one name to the next, counting the first note as 1.



The quality of an interval is a little trickier, but most intervals will fit into a major or minor pattern. Using the Concert C Major scale above, most of the pitches above the C create a major interval with the C.

C to D Major 2nd
C to E Major 3rd
C to A Major 6th
C to B Major 7th

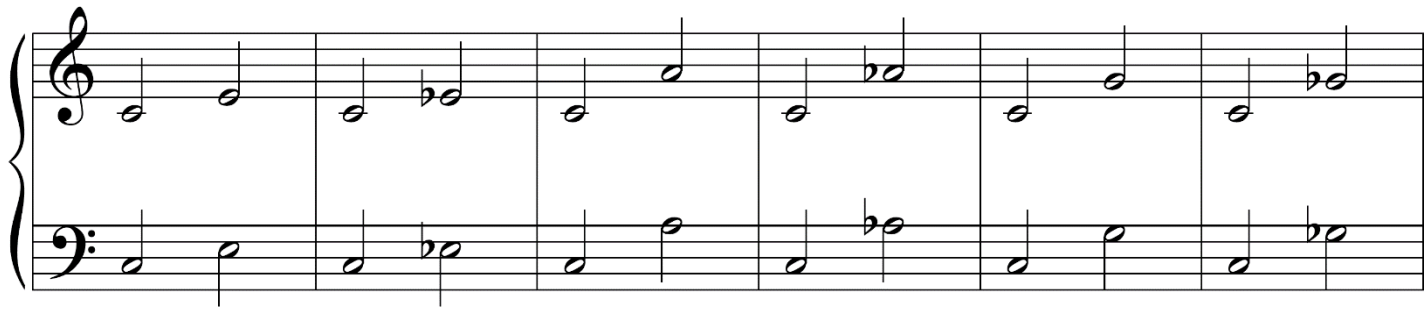
A few of the intervals are given the term *perfect*, rather than major.

C to C Perfect Unison (same note)
C to F Perfect 4th
C to G Perfect 5th
C to C' Perfect Octave

Use the following chart to help identify the quality of an interval that isn't major or perfect.

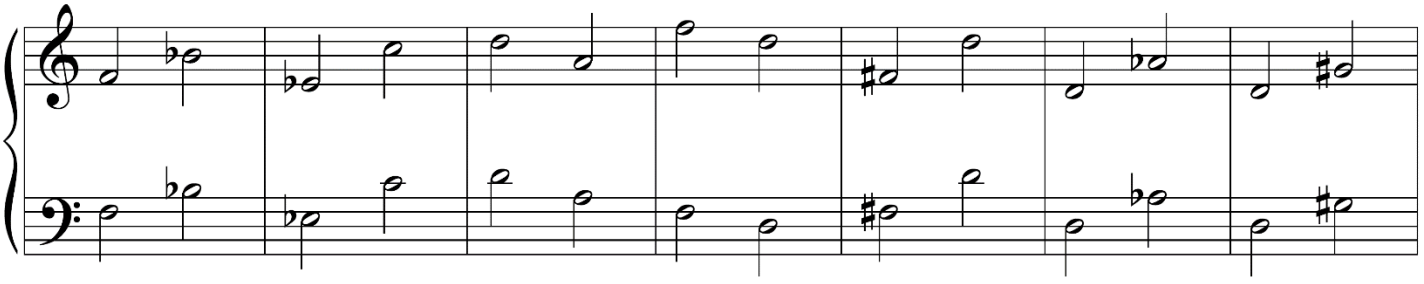
If the interval in a major key would be	but it's altered in this way (with the same letters/interval distance)	then it becomes
Major	lowered a 1/2 step	Minor
Perfect	lowered a 1/2 step	Diminished
Perfect	raised a 1/2 step	Augmented

See the examples below. (M = Major, m = Minor, P = Perfect, dim = Diminished, Aug or + = Augmented)



M3 m3 M6 m6 P5 dim5

All of the examples given have the starting (and lower) note as C, but not all intervals will be between C and another note. To find the interval between any notes, use the lower note (not always the first note) to determine which key/scale to use to identify the quality of the second note.



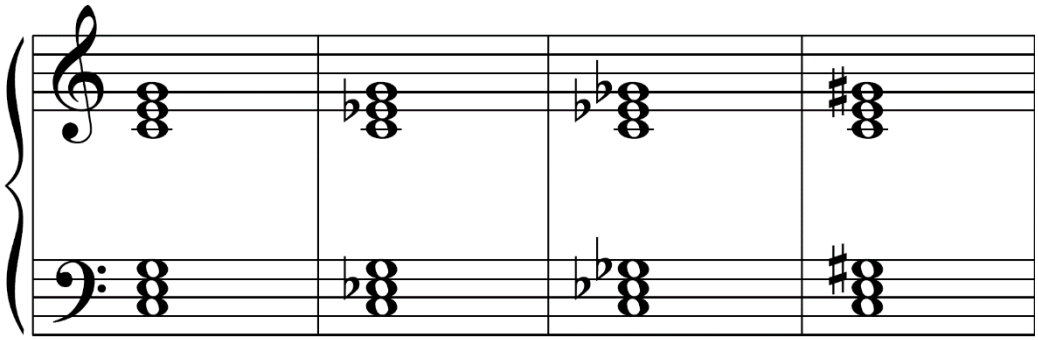
Think in: F Eb A D F# D D

Figure out the interval (both distance and quality) of the notes within each measure above.

Chords

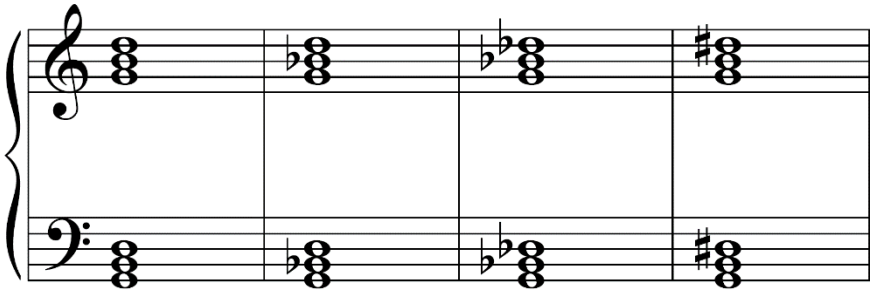
Most chords start with a basic *triad* (three notes) that include the root, a 3rd, and a 5th. In most classical/traditional music, we use Roman numerals to list the root of a chord. In jazz, we often just list the note name, which makes things easier.

A major chord/triad is built on the root (1st note), 3rd, and 5th of the major scale of the root.
A minor chord/triad is built on the root (1st note), 3rd, and 5th of the minor scale of the root, or it's a major chord with a lowered 3rd.
A diminished triad is like a minor triad, but it has a lowered 5th.
An augmented triad is like a major triad, but is has a raised 5th.

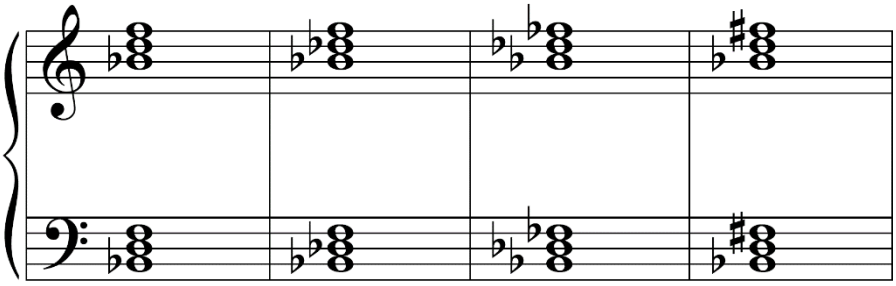


	C Major	C Minor	C Diminished	C Augmented
Shown:	C	c or Cm	c dim or c°	C+

Other Examples:



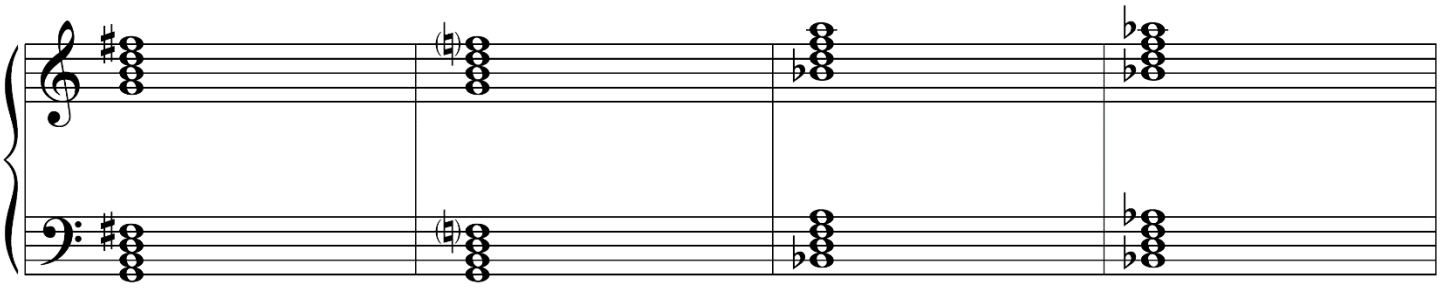
G g g° G+



Bb bb bb° Bb+

7th Chords

7th chords take the basic triad (root, 3rd, 5th) and add the 7th scale degree. However, the most common type of 7th chord is the dominant 7th, which has a lowered 7th scale degree (it's also called the major/minor 7th chord because it has a major 3rd above the root, but a minor 7th above the root).



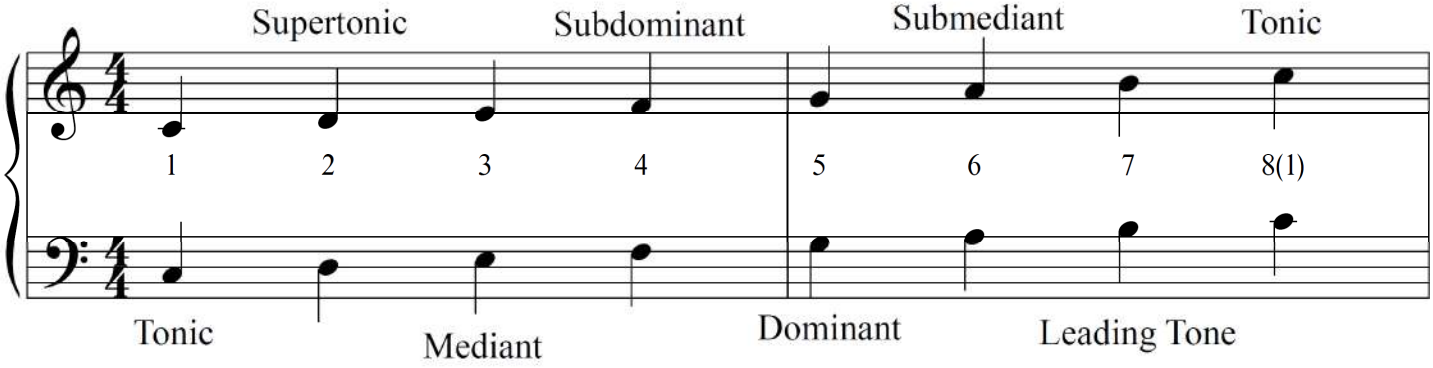
This is a G chord with a major 7th

This is a G chord with a minor 7th (the dominant 7th, written just as G7)

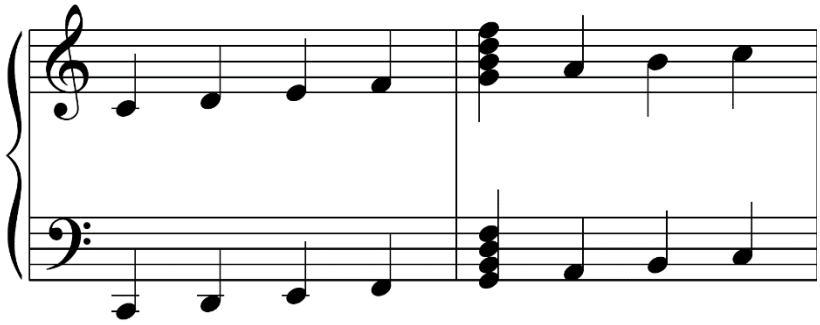
This is a Bb chord with a major 7th

This is a Bb chord with a minor 7th (the dominant 7th, written just as Bb7)

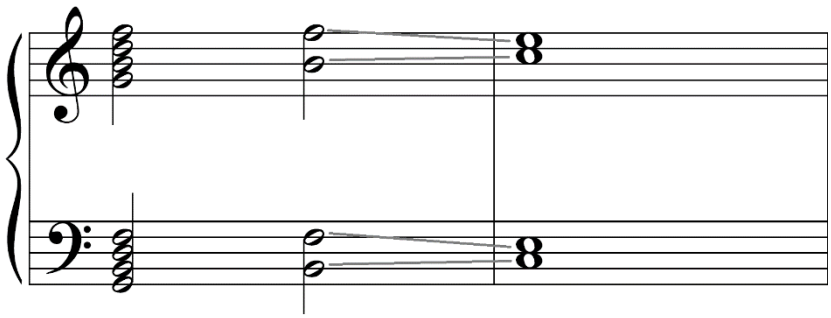
In a given major key/scale, we have specific names for each scale degree.



The dominant 7th chord naturally occurs in a scale/key when it's built on the 5th note of the scale.



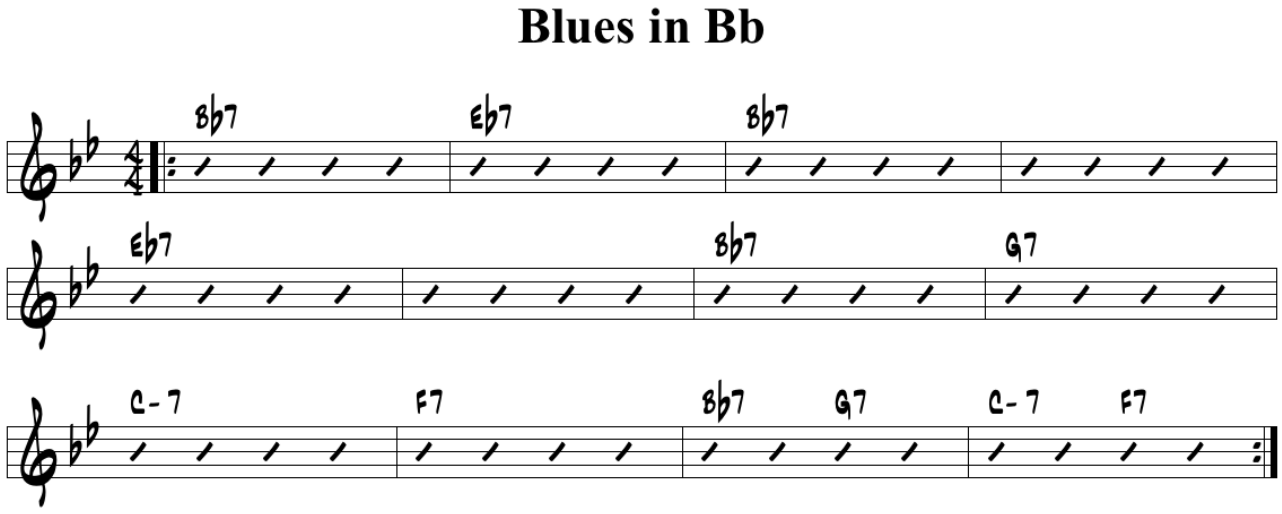
The dominant 7th chord, which is built on scale degree 5 (also called the dominant), has a special function because of two particular notes.



In the key of C, the G7 chord (dominant 7th) has two notes that lead very well back to the C chord. The third of the G7 chord (B natural) leads up to the C, while the minor 7th (F natural, which is the lowered 7th from G) leads back to E. Both C and E are in the C chord, which makes the G7 chord great as a second to last chord. If we didn't lower the 7th in a dominant 7th, we'd lose the effect of that note leading down.

7th Chords in Jazz and Pop Music

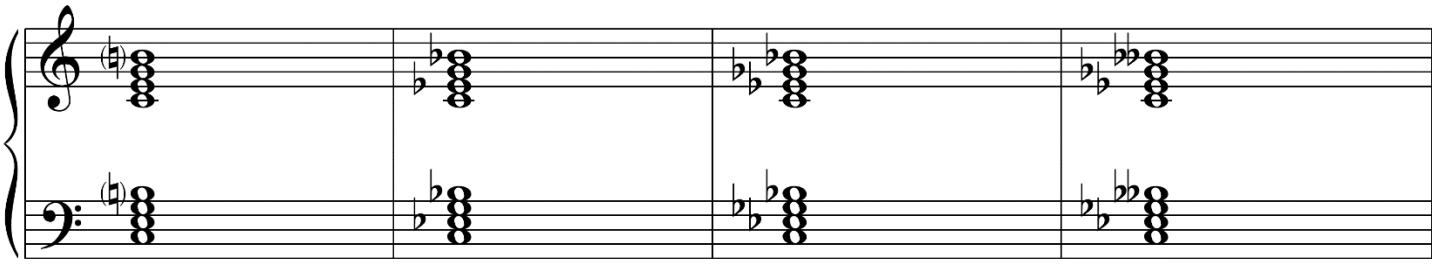
The explanation above explains why we lower the 7th in a 7th chord as standard practice, but it also implicates that only certain chords within a key should be dominant 7th chords. For jazz, because the dominant 7th chord sounds slightly unstable and like it leads to something else, we often use the dominant 7th on multiple chords in a key, not just the chord based on the 5th/dominant of the scale.



The main take-away is that when you see a chord symbol with just a 7 after it, it should be read as the major triad on that note plus a *lowered* 7th.

Other types of 7th chords

A 7th chord listed without any other listed (C7, F7, Bb7, Ab7, etc.) should be interpreted as a major triad with a lowered 7th (dominant 7th). The following chords are alterations based on the dominant 7th.



CΔ7 Cm7 $C^{Ø7}$ C^{o7}

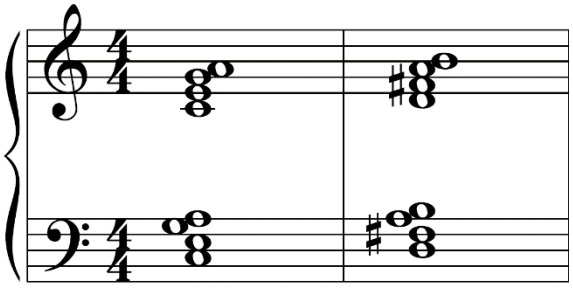
The chart below explains.

Chord Symbol	Other Ways of Writing	Chord Quality
CΔ7	CM7, Cmaj7	*Major 7th* : The triangle means major, so this is a 7th chord with a major 7th (vs. lowered 7th in a dominant 7th chord).
Cm7	C-7, Cmin7, c7	*Minor 7th* : This is similar to a dominant 7th chord, but built on a minor triad.
$C^{Ø7}$	Cm7(b5)	*Half Diminished* : This is similar to a dominant 7th, but has a lowered 3rd and lowered 5th (making a diminished triad).
C^{o7}	Cdim7	*(Fully) Diminished* : This is similar to a Half Diminished, but the 7th is lowered another half step, which is a full whole step below the major 7th. A minor 3rd exists between each neighboring pair of notes.

6ths, 9ths, 11ths, 13ths, etc.

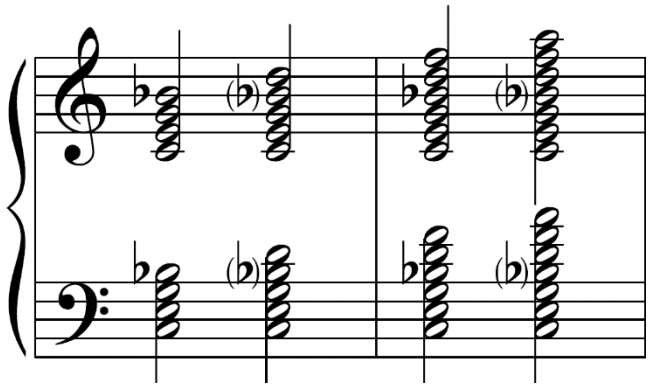
There are many other chords that come up regularly in jazz, but most are built on a major or minor triad and just add on every other note.

One exception is when you see a chord symbol with a 6, like C6. With this chord, take a major triad and just add the 6th above the root.



C6 D6

With 9ths, 11ths, 13ths, etc. we keep adding every other note above the 7th (which continues the pattern of odd numbered intervals above the root).



C7 C9 C11 C13

With these chords, when built on a major triad, only the 7th is lowered while the remaining chord tones (9th, 11th, 13th) remain in the major key. However, alterations can be made to specific chord tones when the chord symbol specifies it.

Cm9	Like a C9, but built on a minor triad (9th is still major)
C7(b9)	Like a C9, but has a lowered 9th*
C9(#11)	Like a C11, but the 11th is raised*

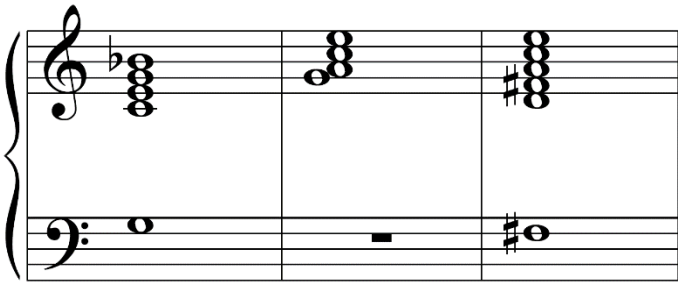
*A sharp or flat in a chord symbol means to raise or lower the chord tone, not necessarily to play the sharp or flat version of that note. For example, if you see the chord symbol Bb9(#11), the 11th is an Eb, and the sharp symbol would alter that to an E natural, not an E#.

Voicings

Depending on the "thickness" of the chord, not all chord tones need to be played. Also, chord tones can be moved to within in an octave and don't have to be played in root position as shown on the previous page. Rhythm section players should come up with voicings that work for the hands, instrument, and for chord changes from one to the next.

Specified Bass Notes

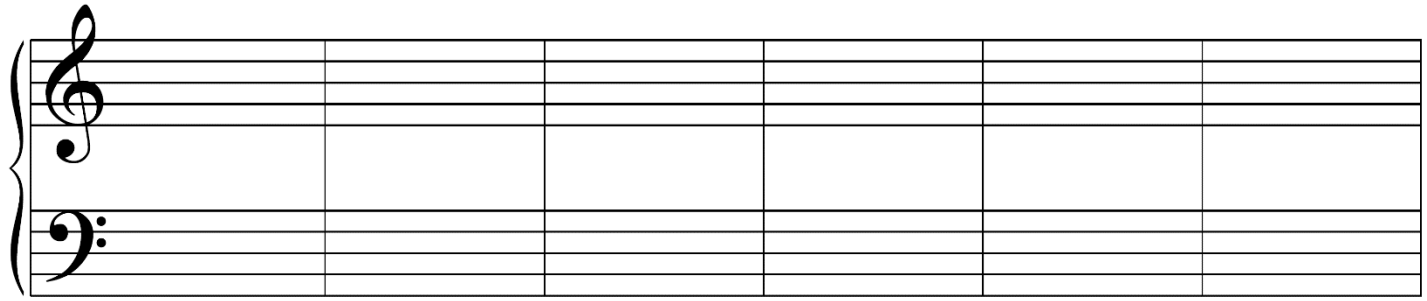
Sometimes chord symbols will be written with a slash over another note (C7/G, Am/G, D9/F#, etc.) which indicates playing the chord as written, but over a bass note of the slash.



C7/G Am/G D9/F#

Practice

Write out the following chords, feel free to use both clefs.



Gm7 Eb9 C7(b9) Bbm7/F AΔ7 D9(#11)

Tip for Solos

It may be a good idea to write in the chord tones in your music when given a chord symbol to help you shape your solo over the chord.