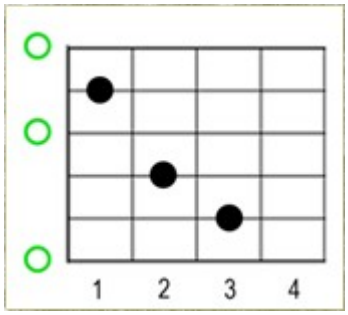
www.MyGuitarLessons.co.uk

Guitar Chords with My Guitar Lessons.

An explanation of chords is very easy – a chord is simply a bunch of notes that sound good together, all played at the same time - basically like when a bunch of singers all sing harmonies together at the same time. At first, it might seem a little intimidating that there are so many different chord names – but don't worry! There are simple theories behind all of them, and rather than have to learn and remember each chord individually, in a lot of instances you'll just be learning the places your fingers go for that certain type of chord, or remembering which note to change to make THAT type of chord. Let's start nice and easy.

Chord Charts

Chords on the guitar are often shown in the form of a 'chord chart'. You might have seen one of one on our 'My Guitar Lessons' teaching documents before – they look like this:



...and they're very easy to understand. Here's how they work:

The horizontal lines represent the strings of the guitar - your lowest 'E' string is the bottom line. Your highest-pitched 'E' (the 'top E string') is the top line. The vertical lines are the frets on your guitar neck, and the black dots are where your fingers need to go to play the chord. To the left of the furthest-left vertical line (which represents the nut of the guitar unless stated otherwise) you'll often see 'X' or 'O' ... these are a guideline as to whether you can play the open string below the 'X' or 'O' in the chord you're playing and still having it sound good. An 'X' would mean "Don't play it! It'll sound awful!" and 'O' means "Feel free to hit this string too!"

NOTE: Sometimes, these chord charts will be displayed vertically, rather than horizontally – both ways are fairly common. If you see one presented vertically, don't worry! It's exactly the same, just on its side.

Often the chord chart will also have numbers running alongside the 'bottom E' line – this is the number of the fret you're at. Don't get these confused with the numbers that (often) appear inside the black dots – the numbers inside the dots (if you see them) are showing you which finger to use to fret that note. On your left hand, your index finger is '1', your middle finger is '2', your ring finger is '3' and your pinky is '4'.

Major Chords, Minor Chords and 7th Chords

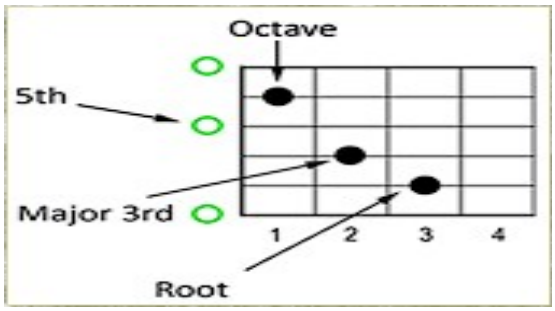
The two most common types of chords, and inevitably the first ones you'll learn, are the 'Major' and 'Minor' Chords. It's very easy to tell them apart – a major chord will have a "happy" sound, and a minor chord will have a "sad" sound. When you see chords written, whenever it's just

written as a letter – i.e. 'A', 'D', 'G'...these are major chords. They don't say 'major' after them. If you just see a letter, it's referring to the major chord.

A minor chord will have 'm' after it. For example – 'Am', 'Dm' and 'Cm' are referring to the chords of A minor, D minor and C minor.

Every major chord contains:

- The Root Note
- The Major Third
- The Fifth
- and usually...an Octave



The root note is the note that the chord is built upon. For example, in a C major chord, the root note is C. In an A minor chord, the root note is A. In this particular chord – C major – the major 3rd is a G. In this particular case it's played as an open string but could be played differently in other chords.

NOTE: While a circle next to an open string shows that it can be played, it usually best applies only to note ABOVE the root note (i.e. higher in pitch). In this C major chord, for example, you could hit the bottom string if you wanted to, because it's an E, but it might sound a bit lame because it's going to take the emphasis off the root note. Not the end of the world if you do. Just because you CAN hit an open string, doesn't necessarily mean you would want to. It just won't sound hideous if you do. Play around with the chords here a bit and decide what you think sounds best. You could, if you really wanted to, stick a G on the bottom string, as all you'd be doing is adding another G (the 5th). Because it's a note already in the chord, it'll sound fine – it'll just sound slightly different. It's up to you!

When playing guitar you will come across notes described as 'major thirds' 'minor sevenths' etc...this description basically refers to its quality and interval number. Let me explain that - in a C major chord, the 'major third' is the third note in the C major scale. Being the THIRD note in the MAJOR scale (starting from the root note); it is therefore a major third when played together with the root. If you wanted, for example, to add a minor seventh into a chord, you would simply add in the seventh note from a minor scale starting from the root note.

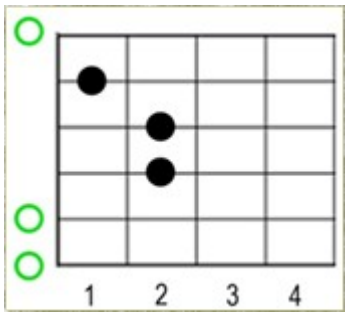
A fifth, you may have guessed, is the fifth note in the scale starting from the root note. It's neither major nor minor, as the fifth note in both the C major and C minor scales is G. So the three notes in every C major chord would be C (root note) E (major third) and G (fifth). The proper musical term for three notes forming a chord like this is a 'triad'.

An octave is simply the root note again, but played a full scale higher than the root note. For example, in the C major chord, 3rd fret on the 'A' string would be your root note. The octave would be 1st fret on the 'B' string – also the note of C, but an octave higher than the root note.

You can build any major chord this way. To make the chord a minor, simply move the third down a fret. This can make the chord a little tricky to play (i.e. playing C, Eb and G can be a bit of a fiddle) and might mean it would be a better idea to play a barre chord (I'm getting to those – bear with me)...

Minor Chords

Minor chords are fairly instantly recognisable, as they have a 'sad' sound as opposed to the 'happy' sound of the major chord. Try one out – here's the fingering for an A minor chord:

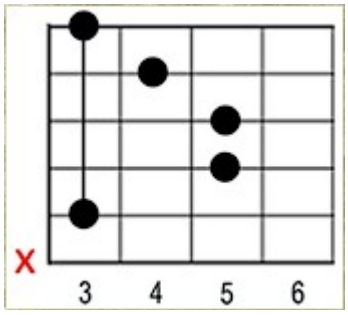


Once you understand how to make a major chord, making a minor chord is pretty much the same – just with one little difference. All you need to do is drop the third in the chord down by a fret – so to make a C minor chord, the correct triad to use would be C-Em-G. For chords like this, it's often more convenient to get used to playing barre chords. C minor, for example, is a bit awkward to play in an 'open position' (an 'open position' is where you play the chord without a barre, in that you are using open strings – they would be strings that you're not pressing any frets on – within the chord you're playing). The two chords we've played so far – C major and A minor – are in 'open position'. Not sure what a barre chord is? Well here we go:

Barre chords

Barre chords are often also known as 'moveable chords' – because once you've learned how to play them, you can move any one position up and down the fretboard to play different chords. For example, if you were to play a C minor barre chord at the 3rd fret, simply move it up two frets to 5th fret to play a D minor chord. Move it up another two frets to 7th fret and you're playing an E minor chord, and so on. This is very handy because you only need to learn one shape to be able to play lots of different chords!

The technique is quite simple. Your first finger is going to stretch across all the strings on the fretboard – acting like the nut of the guitar (or indeed acting like a capo) to enable you to play chords further up the neck than the open position. The 2nd, 3rd and 4th fingers are then going to fret the rest of the notes. Here's an example for that C minor chord we just talked about:



That line between the bottom C note and the G on the top string shows where your first finger is going to go – i.e. across every string, holding all the strings down. So if you didn't bother putting any other fingers down, you'd be able to strum all of the notes at 3rd fret by fretting them with just one finger. Make sense? Barre chords inevitably take the longest time to learn, and you are probably going to get a lot of fret buzzing/dead notes when you're learning them. Again, there's no easy way around this except to keep practising Take your time and once you've fretted the chord, strum through it really slowly and make sure you can hear each note individually. If you hear notes buzzing, you're either going to have to move your fingers around slightly (make sure they're slightly behind the frets, not on top of them) or press your fingers down a little harder!

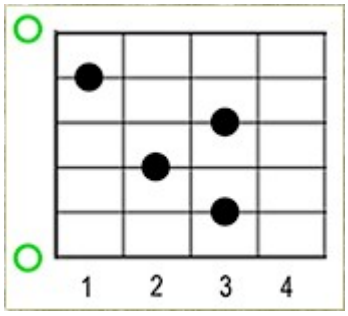
This might seem awkward at first, but as your fingers get a little strong and with practice, you'll be wondering what the fuss was all about in no time.

Seventh Chords

Now that you have got the hang of those, we're already able to play a whole load of songs. It's just a case of practising until your fingers can jump without thinking between the chords and you've finally managed to get rid of that irritating note-buzzing and can hear every note of the chord clearly (there's no easy way around that – with practice your fingering will be more precise and your fingers will get a little stronger).

So what's next? Let's have a look at seventh chords. Slightly misleadingly, whenever you see a chord referred to as a 'seventh chord; it actually means a major triad with a flat seventh in there (the seventh is one fret lower than you might expect - which basically makes it a major chord with a minor 7th) – this is also known as a "dominant seventh chord". For example, to make the C major into a C7, we' are going to stick a Bb in there instead of the G, which means your little finger's going to be getting in on the action too! Check this out:

A C7 chord will contain the note C, E and Bb (then stick an octave on the top) and it will be played like this:



NOTE: You may have noticed that when we play the chord this way, the G note from the major triad is missing! You may have spotted that adding in a seventh would make the notes of a C7 chord C, E, G and Bb and you'd be right – but to avoid the king of all fingering nightmares this would be the standard way to play a C7 on the guitar. On an instrument like the piano, however, you'd stick that extra note in.

A maj7 chord would be the same idea, but the note you're adding in is one fret higher than in a 7th chord. The easiest way to remember this is:

To make a maj7 chord from a major chord just move the octave down one fret.

Whenever you hear of a flat fifth/flat seventh or anything along those lines – it basically means the fifth/seventh is one fret lower than normal. A raised/sharp fifth/seventh/whatever would mean you just shift that note one fret higher than normal.

Whenever you see a number after a chord, the number refers to the position of the note in the scale you should add into the chord. This will give it a different sound.

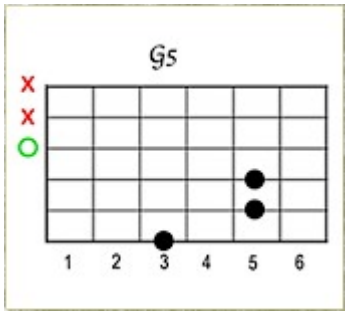
To make a maj7 chord, simply move the octave down a fret. For example, the C major 7 would therefore be played as C, E, G, B.

Fifth Chords (also known as "Power Chords")

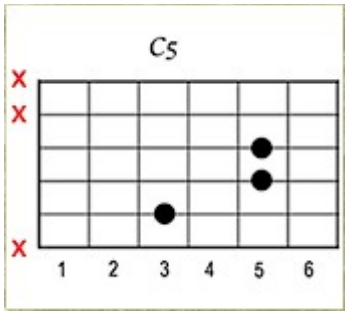
A fifth chord is very simple. Traditionally, it only consists of two notes – the root note, and (you guessed it) the fifth. As the fifth is neither major nor minor, neither is a fifth chord – and can in practice be used to substitute either a major or minor chord. They've been used a lot in rock n roll music since the 50s, but more recently - and certainly ever since grunge music exploded onto the scene - a lot of bands seem to use power chords pretty much exclusively (check out the

intro to Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit", The Sex Pistols' "Pretty Vacant", or the verse in Metallica's "Enter Sandman" for examples). Really, fifth chords tend to be more of an electric guitar thing – because they might sound great in a rock band, but if you try to strum along to Bob Dylan's back catalogue using only fifth chords you may find they don't work quite as well.

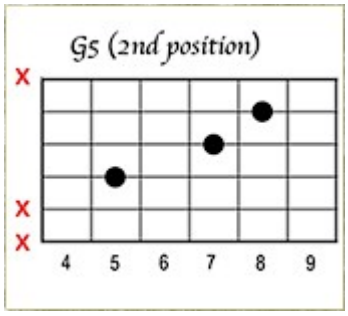
It is very common, and often preferable to make sure you add an octave into a fifth chord too – this will create a slightly more 'full' sound as playing only two notes can sound a bit weak. Here's what I mean – just three notes, (root, 5th and octave) which is neither major nor minor, and should sound pretty meaty when you hit it.



Here's how you play a fifth chord with the root note on the A string:



...and here's how you play one with the root note on the D string! Whenever you play a 5th chord in this way it's going to be referred to as 'second position', because you could have, if you wanted to, played it an octave lower. This chord here, for example, is an octave higher than the G5 we've just covered.



When playing a power chord with the root note on the bottom string, make sure you don't hit the top three strings at all – because in most cases this will sound awful! Once you've mastered the fingering on the bottom string, to play power chords with the root note on the A-string, just move the position up a string! But note – when playing a power chord with the root note on the A string, you still don't want to hit those open strings at the top – but make sure you don't hit the bottom string either. Some guitarists get around this by lightly touching their first finger against the side of the bottom E string to deaden it. You could do the same thing against the other side of the string by bringing your thumb around the back instead.

When practising these chords, pay special attention to the where your fingers are and which notes you're hitting with the pick – with a power chord, you should only be playing the strings

that you have fingers pressed down on.

Being a moveable chord, it is important that you should learn the notes on at least the bottom two strings to really get the hang of them. For example, a fifth chord with the root note at 3rd fret on the bottom string would be a "G power chord". A power chord starting at 7th fret would be a "B power chord" and so on. With a bit of practice, this is something you'll soon be able to do without thinking. If someone was to say "Play an F power chord!" Do you know where it is? It's at the first fret on the bottom E string or an octave higher at 8th fret on the A string!