

## Chord Symbols

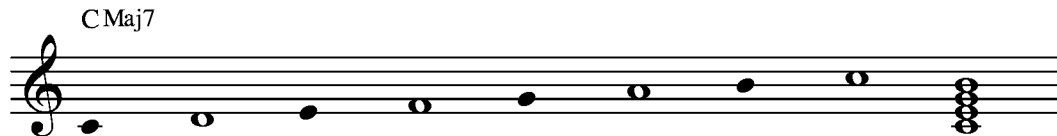
Matt Olson, Furman University  
Conn-Selmer Endorsing Artist

For the beginning improviser, one of the more frightening aspects of improvisation is deciphering traditional chord symbols. In reality, learning to read and quickly interpret the actual chord (and associated scale) is much like learning to read any language. What follows is a basic overview of chord symbols.

In jazz, the vast majority of chords come from three very basic chord types: the major seventh, the dominant seventh, and minor seventh chords.

### Major Seventh Chords

The major seventh chord is derived from the first, third, fifth, and seventh notes of a major scale, like this:



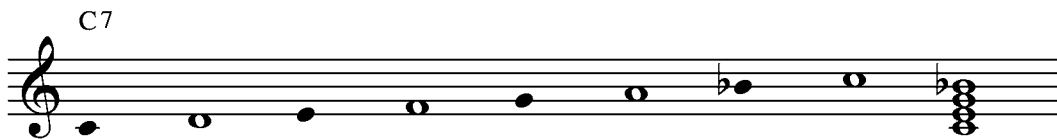
Major seventh chords are usually represented by four different chord symbols:

1. CMaj<sup>7</sup>
2. C△<sup>7</sup>
3. Cma<sup>7</sup>
4. CM<sup>7</sup>

When you write chord symbols, be especially careful of making a true triangle if you choose option 2 above. If you choose the fourth symbol, make certain that your M is clearly a capital letter. Personally, I try to use the first option, as it is quite clear.

### Dominant Seventh Chords

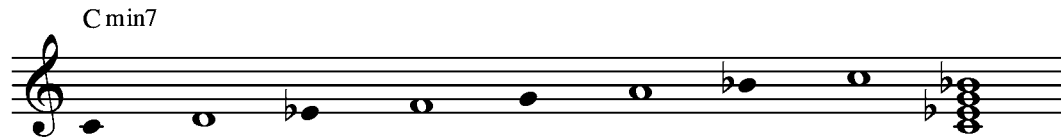
The dominant seventh chord keeps the root, third, and fifth of the major seventh chord, but lowers the seventh by a half step, like this:



Dominant seventh chords are always represented by the chord symbol C<sup>7</sup>.

## Minor Seventh Chords

The minor seventh chord root, fifth, and seventh of the dominant seventh chord, but lowers the third by a half step, like this:



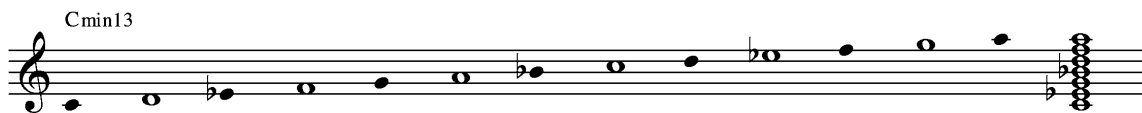
Minor seventh chords are usually represented by four different chord symbols:

1. Cmin7
2. C-7
3. Cmi7
4. Cm7

As was the case with the major seventh chord, when you write the minor seventh chord symbol, make sure your m is lowercase in option 4. I usually opt for the first or second option here.

## Extensions

Jazz musicians typically employ chords that have more than four notes. The notes above the seventh are known as extensions, and typically include the ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth of the chord. These are the same notes as the second, fourth, and sixth, but since they are typically added to the top of the chord, they are usually indicated by higher numbers and appear on top of the basic chord shape. They are sometimes referred to as “upper structures.” For example, a C minor thirteenth chord (Cmin13) looks like this:



We assume from the presence of the number 13 that all chord tones below that are included in the chord.

## Alterations

Jazz musicians also frequently alter the notes of a chord. Alterations are most often indicated in parentheses after the chord, as in the example below.



Obviously, there are virtually hundreds of possible chords and associated symbols. Consult the helpful chord symbol guide in *The New Real Book*, published by Sher Music, or Jamey Aebersold's scale syllabus, which he publishes in a few different volumes of his play-along series and his free publication, *Jazz Aids*. Both of these resources will show you many more chord symbols.