

ROMAN NUMERALS:

Roman numerals are used to define every possible chord progression that can occur in a piece of music. They're used to change songs from one key to another, to figure out songs by ear, to write and improvise music from scratch, and in general to understand how characteristic harmonic sounds occur in every type of music.

To understand why roman numerals are useful, it's important to understand that they're simply a way of notating chord progressions. Chords themselves are basically a shorthand way of simply defining the groups of notes that make up a piece of music. They don't provide any melodic information, but they tell you the groups of notes from which a melody comes, and the notes that can be used to accompany any given melody. Roman numerals are an even more fundamental way of notating chord progressions within a key. They provide the most useful and practical way of understanding and hearing how chords are grouped together to make up common harmonic progressions. Professional musicians often use roman numeral labels such as "I IV and V", instead of chord names such as "G C and D" to speak about which chords and note groups make up a piece of music. This guide will teach you how to convert roman numerals to bar chords on the guitar fretboard.

Roman Numerals tell you the same things that chord labels tell you: the root note (letter/fret position) of a chord and the sonority (shape) of the chord. There are 7 roman numerals used in music:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Large:	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Small:	i	ii	iii	iv	v	vi	vii

The numbers are laid out on the fretboard as follows (this finger pattern can be moved to any fret):

starting on the 6th string:	starting on the 5th string:
7	4
14	17
	51
25	
	62
36	
	13

For example, the numbers in the key of G (starting on the note G) are:

starting on the 6th string:	starting on the 5th string:
F#	C
GC     3rd fret	F#
	DG     10th fret
AD	
	EA
BE	
	B

1=G, 2=A, 3=B, 4=C, 5=D, 6=E, 7=F#

(G is at the 3rd fret of the 6th string, and at the 10th fret of the 5th string.)

The numbers in the key of C (starting on the note C) are:

starting on the 6th string:	starting on the 5th string:
B	F
CF     8th fret	B
	GC     3rd fret
DG	
	AD
EA	
	E

1=C, 2=D, 3=E, 4=F, 5=G, 6=A, 7=B

(C is at the 8th fret of the 6th string, and at the 3rd fret of the 5th string.)

Below are the notes on each string, to help assign letters (chord names) to roman numeral progressions:

Fret #:	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
6th string:	E	F	F#	G	G#	A	Bb	B	C	C#	D	Eb	E
5th string:	A	A#	B	C	C#	D	Eb	E	F	F#	G	G#	A

The notes on every string start over at the 12th fret (the note on the 12th fret is the same as the open string, the note at the 13th fret is the same as the 1st fret, the note at the 14th fret is the same as the 2nd fret, etc.)

IMPORTANT: as shown above, the number indicated by a roman numeral tells you the root note (letter) of the chord to play. The type of roman numeral written tells you type of chord to play:

- A large roman numeral means play a MAJOR chord.
- A small roman numeral means play a MINOR chord.
- A large roman numeral with a 7 means play a 7th ("dominant") chord.

If the number (roman numeral) is on the 6th string, use an "E" shape (E, Em, or E7):

	E major	E minor	E7
Bar:	++++++	++++++	++++++
	+		+
	++	++	+
			+

If the number (roman numeral) is on the 5th string, use an "A" shape (A, Am, or A7):

	A major	A minor	A7
Bar:	++++++	++++++	++++++
		+	
	+++	++	+

Examples:

- I in the key of G = G major (large roman numeral on the 1st note in the G scale)
- vi in the key of C = A minor (small roman numeral on the 6th note in the C scale)
- V7 in the key of C = G 7th (large roman numeral with a 7, on the 5th note in the C scale)

IMPORTANT: any other chord type can be labeled with a roman numeral - just add the chord type to the roman numeral (Imaj7#11=Cmaj7#11 in the key of C). The only difference between using roman numerals and letter names to label chords is that letters are replaced by the roman numbers within a key, as described above (ie., relative to a starting note). By doing that, every potential chord progression moves within the framework of a key note. Using that point of reference, it becomes clear that all chord progressions form recognizable patterns and move in simple, predictable ways. This makes learning songs, playing by ear, composing, improvising, and understanding every potential harmonic sound in music a much simpler process.

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CHORD CATEGORIES:

Chords are grouped into several categories: diatonic, borrowed, secondary dominant, and blues. Each category produces familiar harmonic sounds.

DIATONIC CHORDS:

Diatonic chords are used in virtually every type of music. They are most common in traditional, folk, classical and pop music. The I IV and V(7) chords are used in virtually every piece of music you hear, regardless of style. Learning those three chords in every key is fundamental to understanding and recognizing chord patterns of every type.

I ii iii IV V(7) vi (V can be either major or 7th)

G: G Am Bm C D Em  
A: A Bm C#m D E F#m  
C: C Dm Em F G Am

I V(7) I IV  
Happy Birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy Birthday (Whoever).

I V I  
Happy Birthday to you.

BORROWED CHORDS - flats mean move the chords down 1 fret:

Borrowed chords are used heavily in rock music. You'll see them used regularly with distorted guitar sounds in heavy mainstream pop music. You'll also see them used in bluegrass and other model styles.

bVII bIII bVI (bV bII)  
G: F Bb Eb (Db Ab)  
A: G C F (Eb Bb)  
C: Bb Eb G (Gb Db)

OTHER BORROWED CHORDS:

iv (usually used in a IV iv I progression)  
v (usually used in a v I7 IV progression)

## SECONDARY DOMINANTS:

Secondary dominant chords are 7th (also 9th, 11th, and 13th dominant) chords that come from other keys ("secondary keys"). They create an interesting, unexpected harmonic "twist" - a bit of temporary harmonic tension when added to a chord progression. You'll see secondary dominants most in jazz and classical music, but also in pop ballads that have a "playful" sound.

I7 II7 III7 VI7 VII7

## BLUES:

Blues are basically defined by dominant 7th (also 9th, 11th, and 13th) chords on the numbers I, IV, and V. You'll see them most in bluesy music :)

I7 IV7 V7

## MINOR CHORD PROGRESSIONS:

Minor chord progressions tend to sound sad, dark, and more serious than other types of chord progressions. To create a minor chord progression, just START and end on the vi chord, and use any of the chords from other categories to form a progression. Minor chord progressions typically contain the secondary dominant "III7" chord - that chord helps to create a harmonic focus on the vi chord.

## PRACTICE PROGRESSIONS:

### Diatonic:

I IV I V  
I vi IV V7  
I iii IV V  
vi IV ii V  
I V IV V  
I IV I V  
I ii iii IV V  
I iii vi ii V

### Borrowed:

I bVII IV IV  
I IV bVII V7  
I bVII bIII I

I ii bIII I  
 I bVI bVII I  
 I bIII IV bVI bVII  
 I bII bV V  
 I iii IV iv

Secondary Dominant:

I I7 IV iv  
 I III7 vi IV  
 I ii III7 IV  
 I vi II7 V7  
 I VII7 iii III7 vi VI7 II7 IV  
 I VI7 II7 V7  
 I iii II7 IV

Blues:

I7 IV7 I7 I7 IV7 IV7 I7 I7 V7 IV7 I7 V7  
 I7 IV I I7 IV #IVdim7 I ii iii bIII ii V7 I

Minor (just start on vi):

vi V7 IV III7  
 vi IV ii V  
 vi ii V I IV VII7 iii III7  
 vi iii ii III7