



Chord Functions

The job each chord does in a key

Chords have jobs. Some feel like home, some move away, and some create tension that wants to return home. These three functions explain why certain progressions feel satisfying.

The three primary functions

Function	Roman	In C	Role
Tonic	I · vi	C · Am	Home / rest / resolution
Subdominant	IV · ii	F · Dm	Departure / gentle movement
Dominant	V · vii°	G · Bdim	Tension / wants to resolve

How they work together

Tonic (I) feels stable — the place of rest.
Subdominant (IV) moves away from home without strong tension.
Dominant (V) creates the strongest pull back to the tonic.

Most progressions are simply journeys between these three roles.

Classic patterns using functions

I – IV – V – I (home away tension home)
I – V – vi – IV (home tension relative minor away)
ii – V – I (subdominant family dominant home)

Once you hear the functions, you can predict where a progression wants to go.