



Understanding the Chord Number System

What the numbers mean

Chord formulas use scale degrees — numbers that tell us which notes of a scale to play, counted from the root (the 1). The major scale is the reference point for almost every chord formula you will meet.

C major scale · the reference

C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 (or 1)

Any chord can be written as a list of these numbers. For example, a major triad is simply 1 3 5. The same formula works in every key — only the letter names change.

Accidentals — the letters that appear before the numbers

Sometimes we need a note that is not in the major scale. We use two simple symbols to raise or lower a scale degree:

b
flat

Lowers a note by one semitone (half step)

#
sharp

Raises a note by one semitone (half step)

bb
double-flat

Lowers a note by two semitones (whole step)

Why we say “a flattened third”

In the major scale the 3rd degree is a major third above the root.

When we lower that note by a semitone we get a minor third.

Musicians therefore say we have “flattened the third” — the number stays 3, but the b tells us it has been moved down.

Example in C:

- Natural 3rd = E C major triad = C E G
- Flattened 3rd = Eb C minor triad = C Eb G

Common alterations at a glance

Symbol	Name	Effect	Example (from C)
3	major 3rd	natural third	E
b3	minor 3rd	flattened third	Eb
5	perfect 5th	natural fifth	G
b5	diminished 5th	flattened fifth	Gb
#5	augmented 5th	sharpened fifth	G#
7	major 7th	natural seventh	B
b7	minor 7th	flattened seventh	Bb
bb7	diminished 7th	double-flattened seventh	Bbb (= A)

Once you can read the numbers and the accidentals, every chord formula on the main Chord Interval Chart becomes clear. The numbers stay the same in every key — that is the power of the system.