

# Understanding Chords

The Basics You Need to Know

You Will Learn:

- How Chords are Made and Why You Need to Know
- How to Work Out the Chords in a Key
- Which Chords Work Well Together
- Common Chord Progressions and be Able to Make Your Own
- The Main Open Chords using the Reference Sheet Provided
- The Main Barre Chord Shapes, which Ties in with the CAGED System.

The Diagrams and Exercises throughout will Help You Get Where You Want to Be!



**Sam Goffen Guitar**

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## Understanding Chords

Welcome to Understanding Chords.

Here are just some of the **benefits** to working through this part of the course:

- Understanding **how** chords are made
- Knowing when a chord should be **major** or **minor**
- Being able to **change** a major chord to a minor and vice versa
- Knowing which chords sound good together
- Understanding **chord progressions**
- Being able to **write your own** chord progressions
- Knowing which notes sound best over each chord – more on this is the **Scales** lesson
- Knowing the **5 main Barre Chord** Shapes
- Applying these **all over** the neck

### **Theory:**

First a little theory. Despite what you'll hear on many social media channels, a little **theory will** make you a **better player**.

There is lots of overlap between chords and scales, as chords can be seen as being made from scales. So here we need a little bit of practical theory and we touch on the Major scale so we can understand chord composition.

- In Western popular music, we have 12 notes. 7 Have names, the other five are sharps (#) or flats (b). So if we start on C we have:

C → C# or Db → D → D# or Eb → E → F → F# or Gb → G → G# or Ab →

A → A# or Bb → B → C

\*Notice there is no sharp (#) or flat (b) between the B and C or the E and F.

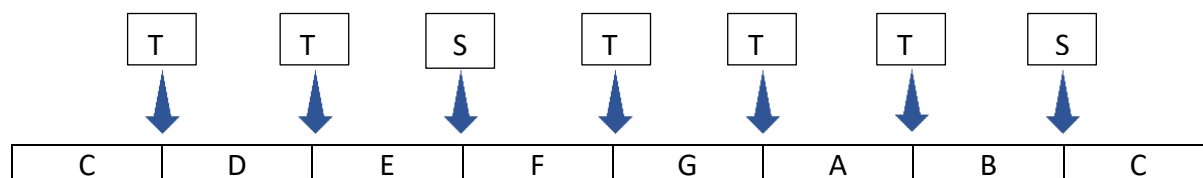
- The major scale is made up of 7 notes, and the **distance between each note** is called an **interval**. These intervals are either a whole tone (**T**) or a semi-tone (**S**), often called a half-tone.
- On a guitar, a to go up a **whole** tone simply move up **2 frets** e.g. fret 5 to fret 7, a **semi-tone** is **1 fret** e.g. fret 7 to 8.

In a major scale the intervals are:

T	T	S	T	T	T	S
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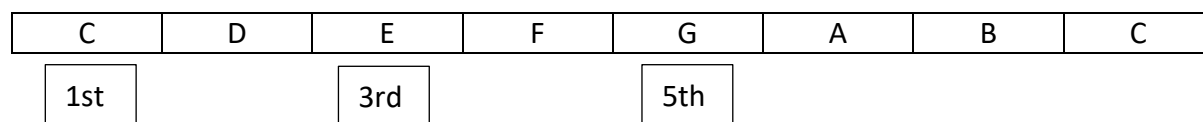
Let's see what this actually means by looking at the **C major scale**:

We start on a **C** note, then we have a whole tone interval, jumping the **C# / Db**, giving us a **D**; then another whole tone interval jumps the **D# / Eb**, giving us an **E** and so on.



### Why is this important?

- A chord is made from the **1<sup>st</sup>**, **3<sup>rd</sup>** and **5<sup>th</sup>** notes of the scale. So a C chord uses the notes **C, E** and **G**.



\*You should also notice that the distance from the **1<sup>st</sup>** note to the **3<sup>rd</sup>** is 2 whole tones, then the **3<sup>rd</sup>** to the **5<sup>th</sup>** is 1 ½ tones or 1 whole tone and a semi tone.

### Names:

- the **1<sup>st</sup>** note is usually called the **Root**
- the **3<sup>rd</sup>** in a major chord is called the **Major 3<sup>rd</sup>**
- the **5<sup>th</sup>** is called a **Perfect 5<sup>th</sup>**

### Exercises:

Using the ideas above, can you work out:

- The notes in the G major scale and chord
- The notes in the D major scale and chord
- The notes in an A major scale and chord

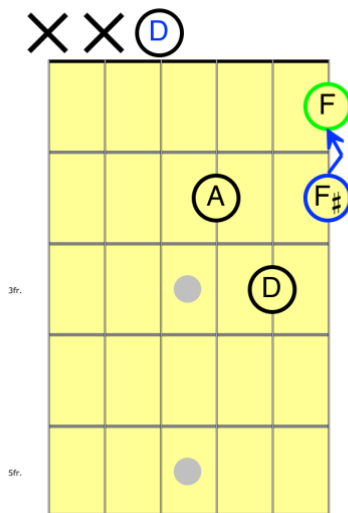
## What About Minor Chords?

To work out the notes in a minor chord, all we need to do is:

- Take the 3<sup>rd</sup> note of the scale, or the 3<sup>rd</sup> degree, and flatten it, making it a flattened 3<sup>rd</sup>. Instead of a **Major 3<sup>rd</sup>**, this is now called a **Minor 3<sup>rd</sup>**.

This just means moving it down one semi-tone, which on a guitar is easy because it just means moving the note down one fret.

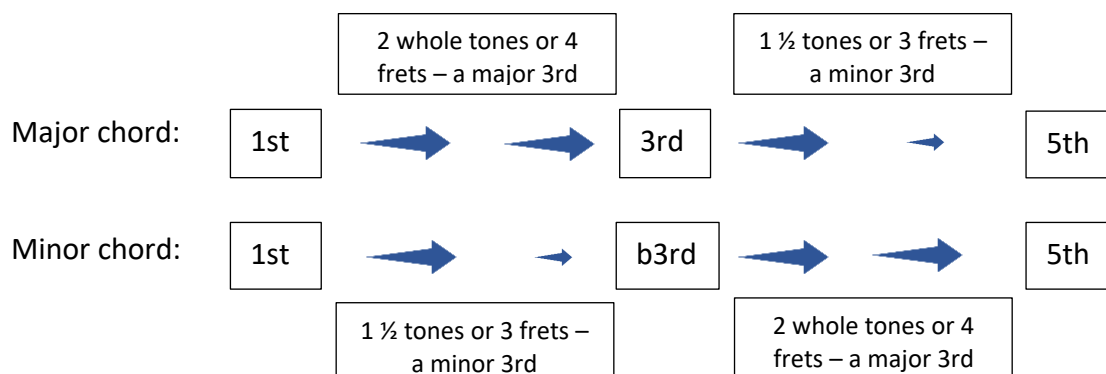
Check it out here:



In the exercise above you worked out the notes of the D major scale and chord:

- Scale: D E F# G A B C# D
- Chord: 1<sup>st</sup> = D  
3<sup>rd</sup> = F#  
5<sup>th</sup> = A
- Move the 3<sup>rd</sup>, the F#, back one fret to the F
- Congratulations – You’ve made the D minor chord!

## Summary:



## Chords in a Key

Ever asked yourself: Why some chords sound right with others and some don't?

Or

What chords can I play with other chords?

Or

What chords can be made from a scale?

Or

What scale can I play with certain chords?

These are all really asking the **same** question. And they can all be answered if we understand how to make chords from a scale. So let's crack on!

- Let's take our C major scale again. Remember it looks like this?

C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
1st		3rd		5th			

- We made the C major chord by taking the **1<sup>st</sup>**, **3<sup>rd</sup>** and **5<sup>th</sup>** notes, which gave us C, E, and G.
- All we now have to do is the same thing and find the **1<sup>st</sup>**, **3<sup>rd</sup>** and **5<sup>th</sup>** starting from **every other note** in the scale. Here we've done that for **D**:

C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
	1st		3rd		5th		

And here for the **E**:

C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
		1st		3rd		5th	

- Note both the D and E are **minor chords** here - the jump from the **1<sup>st</sup>** to the **3rd** is  $1\frac{1}{2}$  tones making it a **minor 3rd** (flat 3<sup>rd</sup>). Remember there is no sharp or flat between the E and F or the B and C

We can keep doing this for every note in the scale, making a chord for each one. And we know they're going to sound good with each other as every note is from the same scale.

This gives us 'harmonised' chords as they are all build from the same scale. Pay close attention to the **3<sup>rd</sup> degree** (3<sup>rd</sup> note in the scale) as this decides if it's a major or minor chord.

### Exercises:

- Work out the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> from every note in the scale – careful not to count the C twice if moving past it.
- Decide if the chord is **major** or **minor**

Fill in the following:

C chord is major	D chord is minor	E chord is minor	F chord is _____	G chord is _____	A chord is _____	B chord is _____
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Answers on next page.

Answer:

C chord is Major	D chord is Minor	E chord is Minor	F chord is Major	G chord is Major	A chord is Minor	B chord is Minor?
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- Notice the B chord doesn't really fit with the major / minor idea as it has steps of  $1\frac{1}{2}$  tones between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> (B and D) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> (D and F). This gives it a flat 3 like a minor chord, but also a flat 5. This makes it a **diminished chord**, which you can think of as a minor flat 5 chord. More focus on diminished and augmented chords in later courses.
- As these chords all only use 3 notes, they are **Triads** – more on these in the Triad lesson

## Chord Progressions

When we talk about chords, we often use Roman numerals. Capitals refer to major chords, and lower case refers to minor.

So, the harmonised chords of the C major scale we've just worked out look like this:

I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii
C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	B dim

When looking at chord progressions, which just means a collection of chords we play in sequence, you might have heard of things like a 1, 4, 5 in blues or a 2, 5, 1 in jazz. These numbers just refer to chords built from those notes in the scale.

So a 1, 4, 5 in C would mean playing the C (I), the F (IV) and the G (V) chords.

Here are some common chord progressions:

- I IV V I
- I ii V I
- I vi IV V

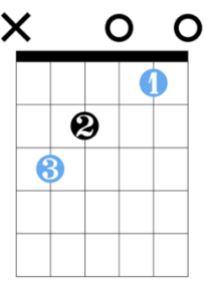
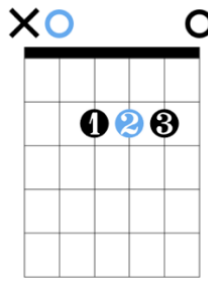
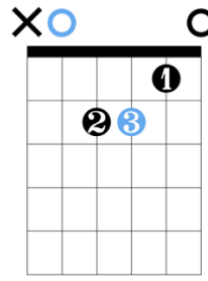
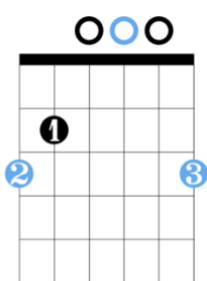
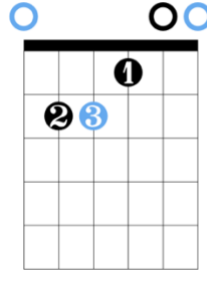
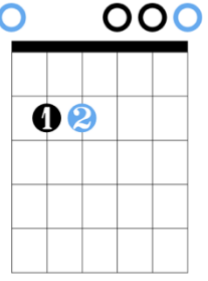
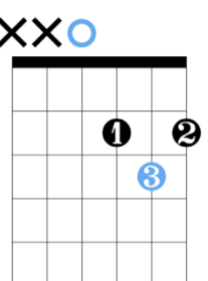
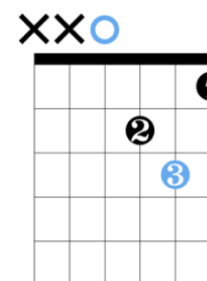
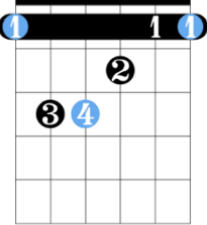
## **Exercises:**

- Work out what these chords would be in the key of C – you've already worked out all the chords in an earlier exercise
- Try playing the progressions
- Make up your own – some ideas will sound better than others, but that's okay! Keep a record of the ones you like.
- If unsure of the chords, look at the chord reference sheet below.



## Open Chord Reference Sheet:

Here are some of the most useful first chords you need to know if you don't already. You might notice there are no 7 chords here e.g. G7, A minor 7 etc. That's because we haven't touched on this aspect of chord harmony in this fundamental course. Please look at the other available short courses if you want to know more about these types of chords.

<p><b>C</b></p>  <p>C E G C E</p>	<p><b>A</b></p>  <p>A E A C# E</p>	<p><b>Am</b></p>  <p>A E A C E</p>	<p><b>G</b></p>  <p>G B D G B G</p>
<p><b>E</b></p>  <p>E B E G# B E</p>	<p><b>Em</b></p>  <p>E B E G B E</p>	<p><b>D</b></p>  <p>D A D F#</p>	<p><b>Dm</b></p>  <p>D A D F</p>
<p><b>F</b></p>  <p>F C F A C F</p>			

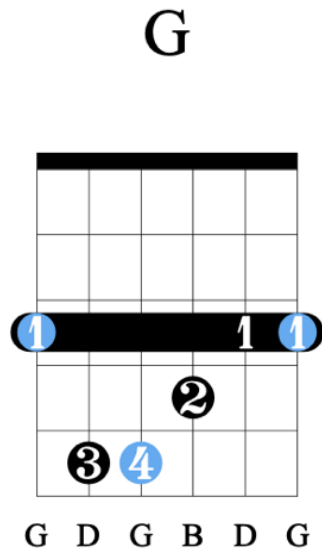
These are all **open chords** as we play them with open strings – which is the odd one out? The **F**! This is a Barre Chord, more on these below.

You might notice that I've given you the chords in the key of C major, but also some in both major and minor form. This is because although we may not need them for C major, they are still very important fundamental chords.

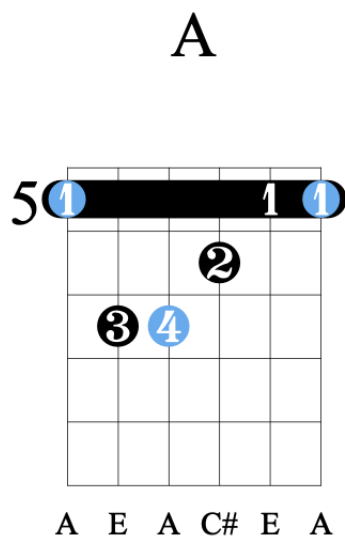
## Moveable Barre Chords

A barre chord is the name given to a chord when we usually have the first finger placed across a number of strings using it as a capo and making the chord a **moveable** shape. The **F chord** above is an example.

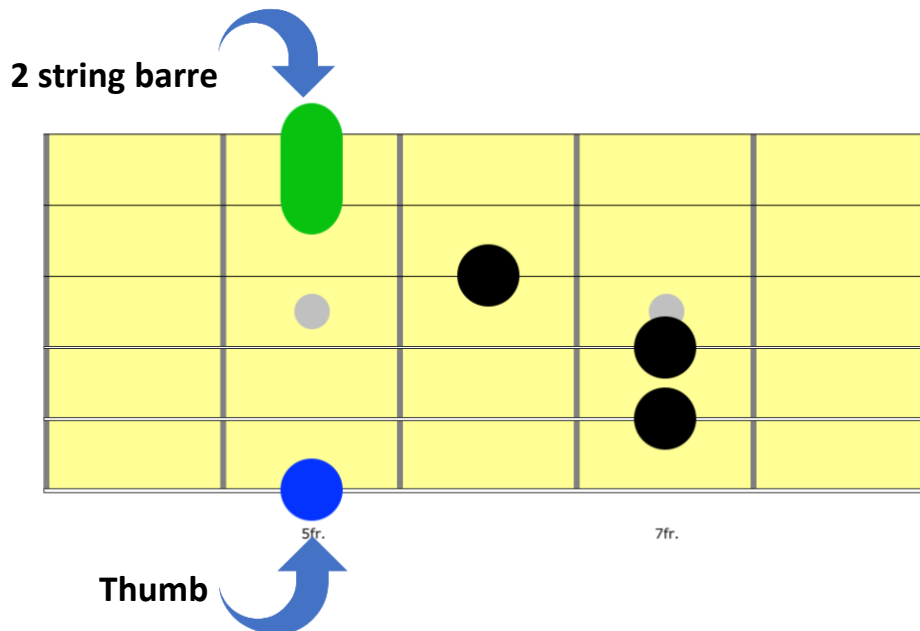
Here's one that you're probably familiar with based on the **E chord** shape, just like that F chord. This one is a G chord:



This can be moved all over the neck, with the root note on the low E string giving the chord its name. Here it is as an **A chord** with the root note on the 5<sup>th</sup> fret:



You'll often see these barre chords played with the **thumb** on the root note on the low E string, with the first finger as a partial barre on the B and high E string like this:



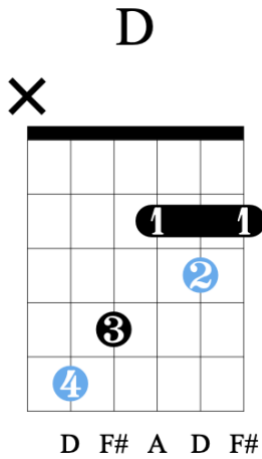
## Exercises:

Using the E shape barre chord:

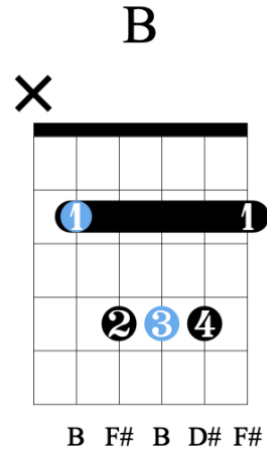
- first try using the traditional barre across all the strings and then the thumb and partial barre, which do you find easier?
- Play an A barre chord
- Play a G barre chord
- Play a I IV V I progression in C, like we did in the **Chord Progressions Section**, just using this barre chord shape. If unsure where the root notes are on the low E string, check out the **Navigating the Guitar** section.

Here are the **five moveable barre chord** shapes you need to know:

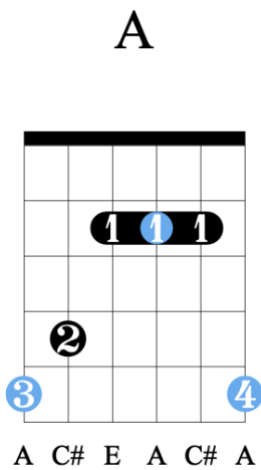
The **C shape** as a D chord:



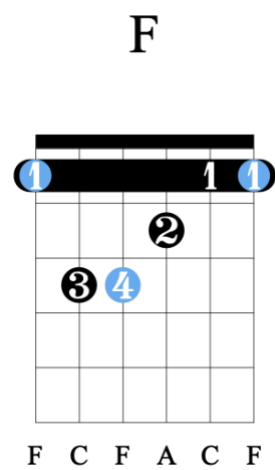
The **A shape** as a B chord:



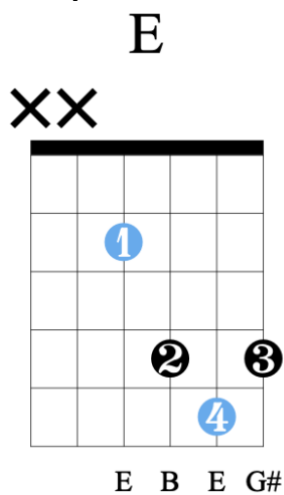
The **G shape** as an A chord:



The **E shape** as an F chord:



The **D shape** as an E chord:



You may notice that if we take the moveable shapes in this order - the C, A, G, E and D – it spells the word **CAGED**, which is what's meant if you've heard people refer to the **CAGED System**.

The CAGED system is a way of tying together chords, scales and arpeggios in a logical way and is a great way to approach learning as it helps connect all these concepts. However, it's a huge topic so keep an eye out for further materials on this.

### Exercises:

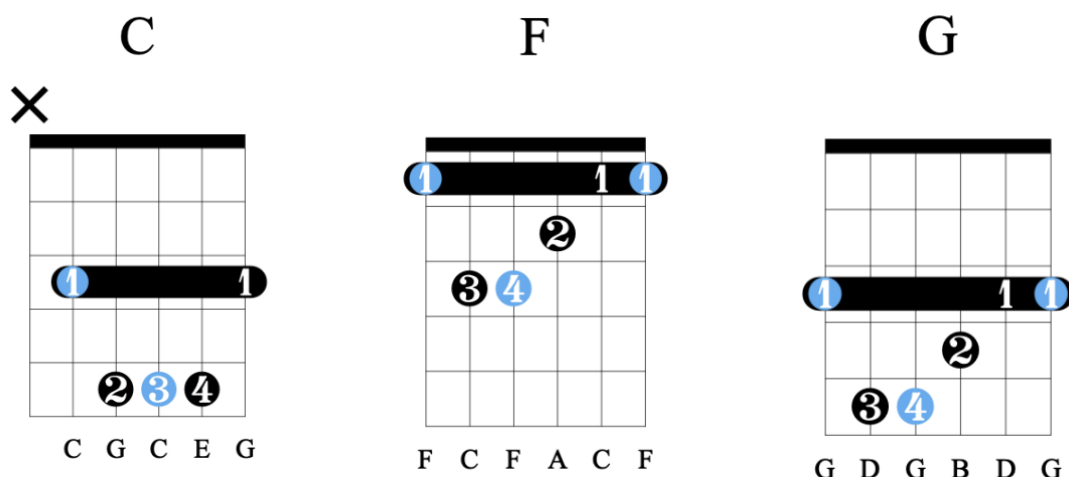
Now we have our CAGED moveable chord shapes:

- Play through each one focussing on correct fingering
- Holding the chord, play each string separately so you can check for any dead notes, buzzing etc
- Once happy, work out where a I IV V progression in the key of C (chords C, F, G) would be just using the same shape for each chord and play through this e.g. the C shape for the C chord, F chord and G chord

You should notice that when just using one shape at a time for each chord, we have quite a jump up the neck between a couple of them. For example, if only using the E shape our C is at the 8<sup>th</sup> fret with the F at the 1<sup>st</sup> and the G at the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Now we're going to look at how to use these CAGED chords shapes so we don't have to jump all over the fretboard.

Here's the I IV V in the key of C starting with the C as an **A shape** moveable barre chord:



You can see this allows us to stay between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> frets for our root notes, and we've used both **A** and **E** barre chord shapes.

## Major to Minor

As we talked about above in the **What About Minor Chords?** section, to make these chords minor, just move the 3<sup>rd</sup> back one step i.e. one fret. You can also use the **Open Chord Reference Sheet** above to help you with this.

### Exercises:

- Play through the I IV V using the shapes above
- Now work out the shapes and positions for all the chords in the **I IV V** starting with C in the **C barre chord shape**, remember the aim is to keep all the chords near each other – within a couple of frets
- The A shape we've done above. Now start with the C as a **G shape**, then an **E shape**, then **D**. So you'll have worked through the entire **CAGED** shapes for the I (one) in the I IV V in the key of C

### Extension –

Repeat this process with the other common chord progressions of:

- I IV ii V
- I ii V I
- I V vi IV

And that's it! If you've worked through all the exercises above, you should feel pretty confident with chords!

Remember to check out the other Courses and there is even more at [www.patreon.com/samgoffen](http://www.patreon.com/samgoffen)

