

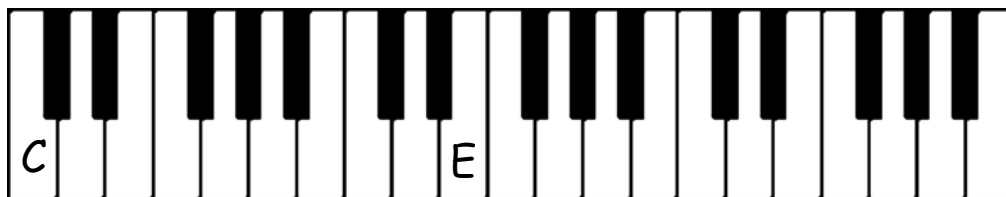
The Essentials of Piano Chords

All about Chords and Intervals

Before we get into the system, you'll need to know some basics of music theory. If you've already studied music, you can glance over this chapter and then move right on to chapter 2. If you've never studied music before, you might need to spend a little more time on this chapter.

Chords

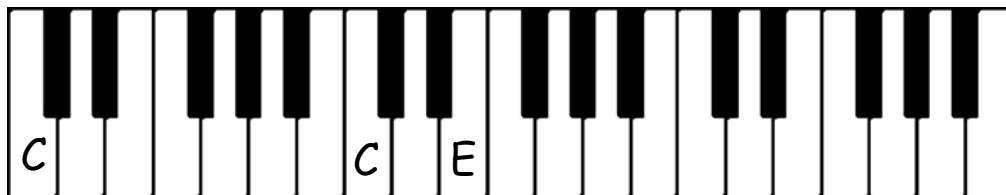
A chord is a group of notes played *at the same time* that sound good together. For example, go to your piano and play the note C in your left hand. (It's the note that's just to the left of the two black keys.)



Now in your right hand, play the note E. (It's the note just to the right of the two black keys).

These two notes played together make a chord! Chords can have lots of notes or just two notes.

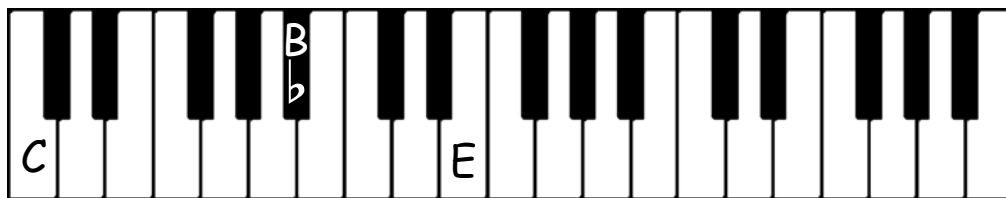
For example, we could add another C to the chord, just below the E, and the chord would still sound about the same.



Play the top two notes in the right hand for now. Fingering doesn't matter just yet.

Certain notes tend to change the flavor of a chord. For example, if we add the note B Flat to the notes C and E, we'll get a very different sort of sound.

B Flat is the right-most of the three black keys. It is written with the flat symbol, which looks like a cursive letter b.



So when you add the note B Flat to the notes C and E, you get what's called a C7 chord.

In sheet music, you might see it like this:

BACKGROUND INFO YOU'LL NEED TO KNOW

A musical staff in treble clef with a common time signature (C). Above the staff, the chord symbol 'C7' is positioned over the first four notes, and 'F' is positioned over the fifth note. Below the staff, five notes are written: E, D, C, E, and F. The notes E, D, and C are quarter notes, while the final E and F are half notes.

What you see here are two chord symbols, the symbol for the chord C7 (“pronounced C Seven”) and the symbol for the chord F. Underneath you see five notes. This is the melody.

So what we’ll want to do is play the chord along with the melody note written below it. Often, the melody note will be part of the chord – as we see here. The note E, which is the first note of the melody, is also the top note of the C7 chord you’ve learned.

So you would play those three notes, the C in the left hand, the Bb and E in the right.

Then you would play the three melody notes that follow, the D, C and E. You can either hold down the chord while you play those other notes, or let go of it, depending on the style and your skill at the keyboard.

You would then play the next chord along with its melody note. (We’ll learn the F chord in a minute.)

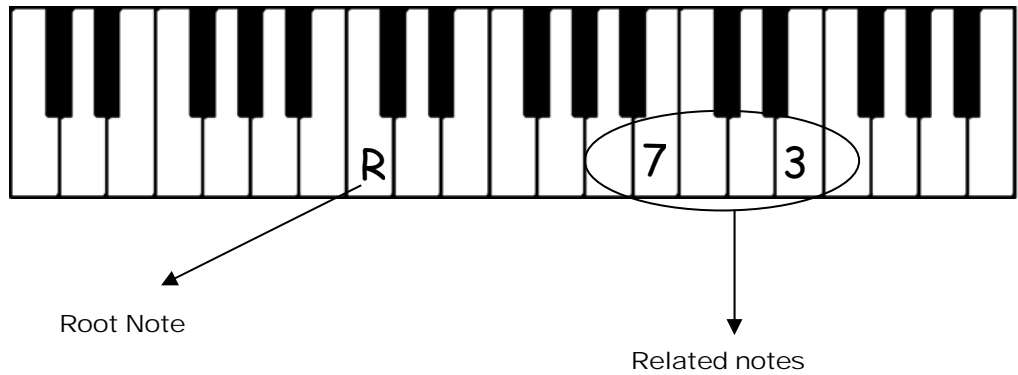
That’s the essence of how to use chords. Now let’s learn how Chord Symbols constructed.

HOW CHORDS SYMBOLS ARE BUILT:

A diagram illustrating the components of a chord symbol. The symbol 'F#m7b5' is shown in a large, bold font. Three arrows point to different parts of the symbol: 'ROOT' points to the 'F', 'QUALITY' points to the 'm', and 'EXTRA STUFF' points to the '7b5'. The 'm7b5' portion of the symbol is highlighted with a black background.

Root

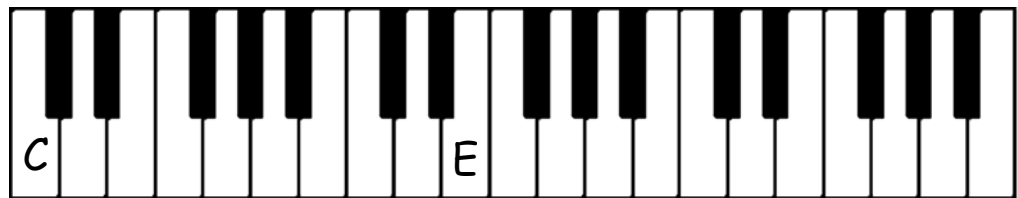
Usually the bottom note of a chord, the Root is the fundamental note of the chord to which the other notes relate.



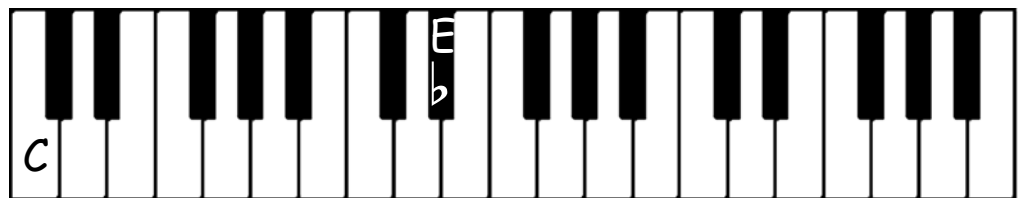
Quality

The next part any chord symbol is the Quality of the chord. This changes depending on the related notes. For example a C chord has the note E in it, while a Cm chord (pronounced “C minor”) has the note Eb in it.

Here’s a C chord.

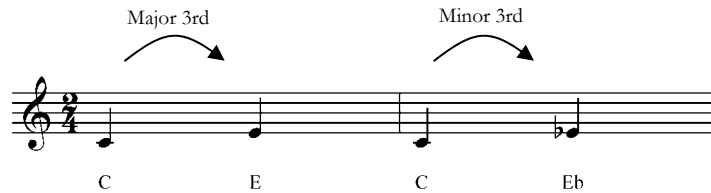


Here’s a Cm chord.

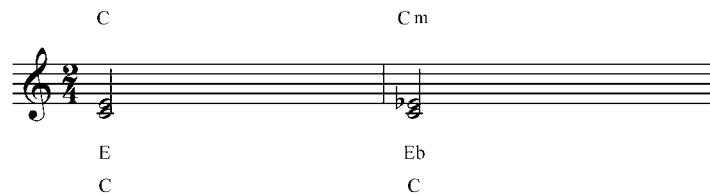


The quality usually depends on two related notes: the **third** and the **seventh**.

For example the note E is the third of the note C. The note Eb is the minor third of the note C.



When you play the Root and the third together, you get a chord. If you play C and E together you get a C Major chord (Often just called a C chord – the Major quality is assumed). If you play C and Eb together you get a C Minor chord.



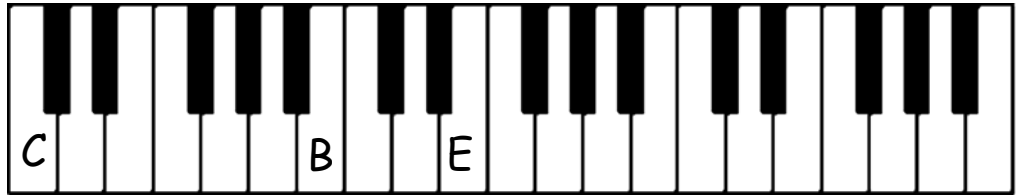
The other most important note for determining the quality of a chord is the seventh. The seventh of the note C is the note B. The minor seventh of the note C is the note Bb.



(The note B is just to the right of the three black keys.)



When you play the Root, the 3rd and the 7th, you get what's called a **seventh chord**.



This is a blanket term for all the different types of seventh chords.

There are four qualities of seventh chords you will see:

- the Major 7th chord
- the Minor 7th chord
- the Dominant 7th chord
- The Diminished 7th chord

Confusingly the Dominant 7th chord is often the “default” seventh chord, so if someone said to you, “play a C Seven chord,” they would actually mean a dominant chord. Most people don’t use the proper term, dominant, because it’s a long word. To distinguish the dominant from the other chords, these improper folks will describe the other seventh chords by their whole name. “Play C seven, and then play C minor seven”. You would understand this to mean “Play C dominant, and then play C minor seventh”.

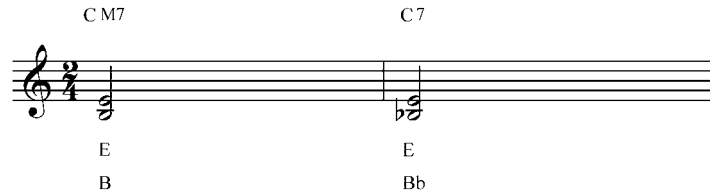
To save yourself from confusion, remember that All “seven” chords are “seventh” chords, but not all “seventh” chords are seven chords.

In other words, the dominant chord (which is often called “seven”) is a type of seventh chord, but not all seventh chords are dominant.

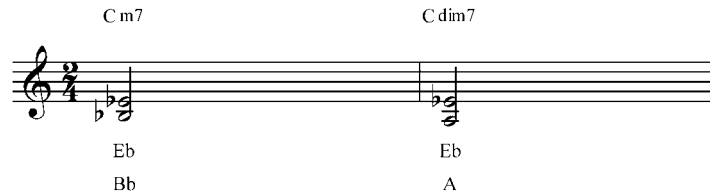
The chord above using C, B and E, is a Major 7th Chord. The chord on page two using C, Bb and E is a Dominant 7th Chord.

BACKGROUND INFO YOU'LL NEED TO KNOW

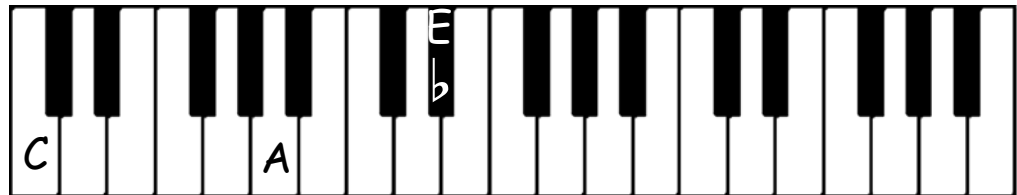
C Major 7th uses the notes B and E in the right hand. C Dominant 7th uses the notes Bb and E in the right hand.



C Minor 7th uses the notes Bb and Eb in the right hand. C Diminished 7th uses the notes A and Eb in the right hand.



(The note A is the right-most of the two white keys *between* the three black keys.)

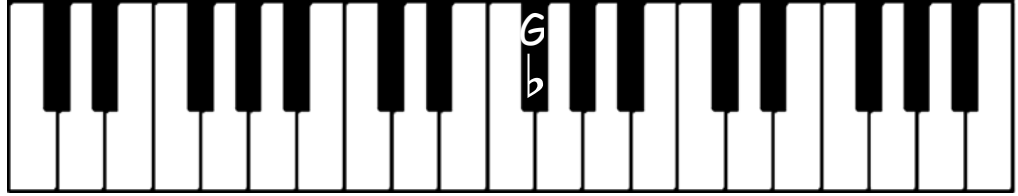


Extra Stuff

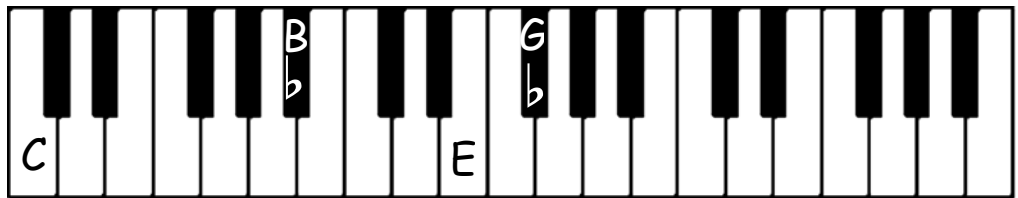
The “extra stuff” is the third thing you’ll see tacked on after the quality. This is for alterations to the chord or for added-on notes. For example, the symbol C7b5 (pronounced “C Seven, flat five”) is just a C Dominant chord with the flat fifth added on.

BACKGROUND INFO YOU'LL NEED TO KNOW

The flat fifth of any C chord is the note G Flat. It's the left most of the three black keys.



Here's a C7b5 chord. Compare it to the C7 chord we talked about earlier. Do you see how it's the same chord, just with one added note? That's the essence of the "extra-stuff" part of chord symbols.



Try playing these two notes in the right hand, while the C and Bb are played in the left

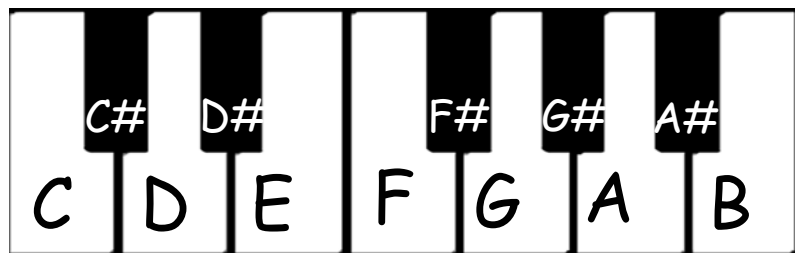
Now the extra stuff adds some complexity to what we're doing, so we'll leave off the extra stuff for now. If you see C7b5, just play C7. OK? This will make things easier at first, and then, whenever you're ready, you can it back in.

Learning the Sharp and Flat Note Names

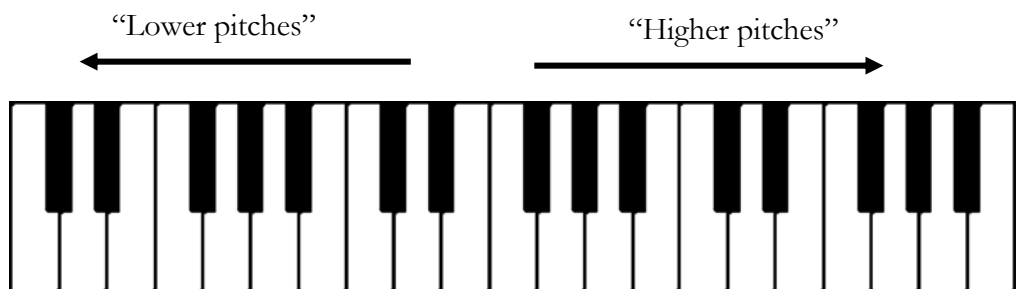
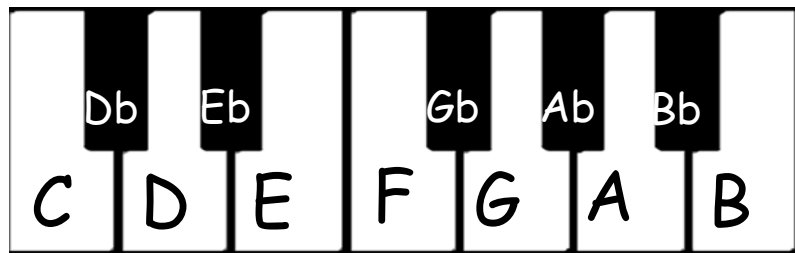
The black keys on the keyboard don't have their own names. They borrow their names from the keys to the left and right.

For example, look below at the notes A and B. B is the note just to the right of the three black keys. A is the right-most of the two white keys *between* the three black keys. They have one note in between them, which can be named either B flat or A sharp.

In this first diagram you see the sharp names for the black keys. These names come from the note just to the left. So C sharp is one key "higher" than C. "Higher" on the key board means to the right on the keyboard.

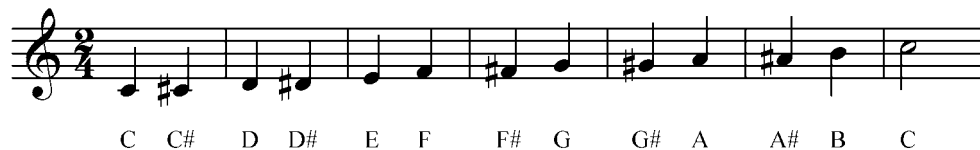


In this second diagram you see the flat names for the black keys. These names come from the note just to the right. So D Flat is one key "lower" than the note D. "Lower" on the keyboard means to the left.

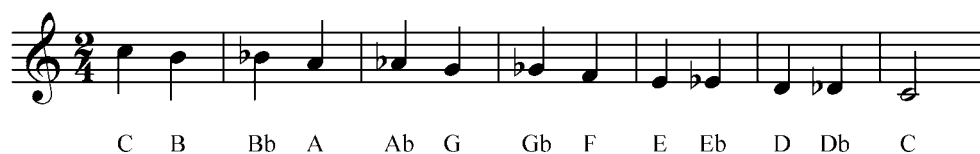


BACKGROUND INFO YOU'LL NEED TO KNOW

Often, you'll see sharps as the music goes up in pitch (as you move from left to right on the keyboard).

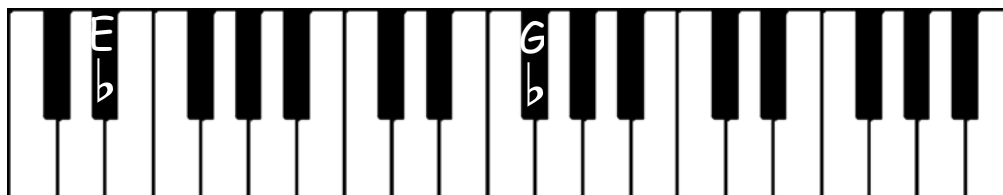


Often, you'll see flats as the music goes down in pitch (as you move from right to left on the keyboard).



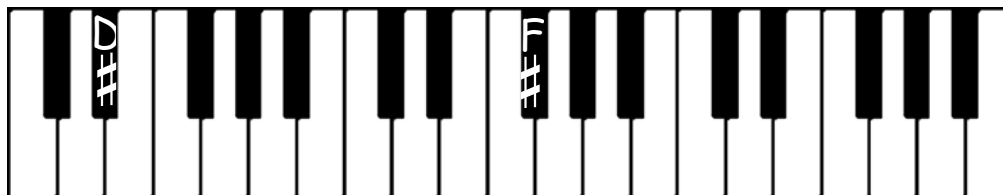
Usually a chord is spelled with either all sharps or all flats, not both. So an Eb minor chord would only use flats. You would spell it Eb and Gb, *not* Eb and F#. Even if F# is much more common way to spell that piano key.

An E **flat** minor chord is spelled with all flats.



You could also call this a D sharp minor chord. But then you need to spell all of the notes with sharps.

A D **sharp** minor chord is spelled with all sharps.



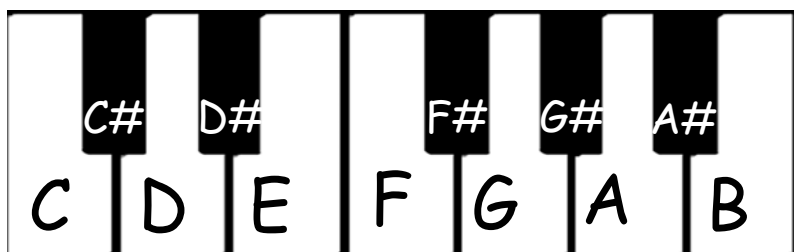
The Intervals You'll Need to Know

The method this book will teach you requires you to know a few intervals. **Intervals** are the distances between notes.

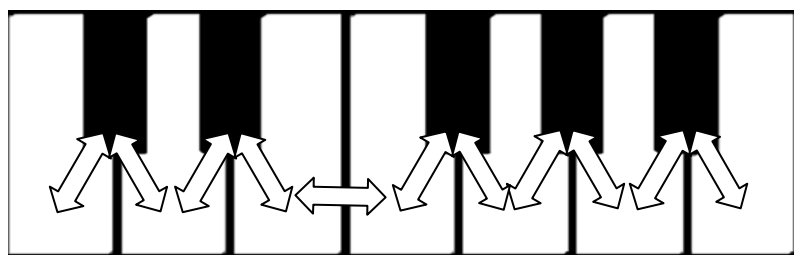
First of all, you'll need to know half-steps. **Half-steps** are the smallest interval. Basically from any one key to the next key is a half-step – regardless of whether that key is a white or black key.

Here are some examples of half-steps.

- C to C# is half-step.
- D to D# is a half-step.
- E to F is a half-step.
- D# to E is a half-step.



This is what half-steps look like.

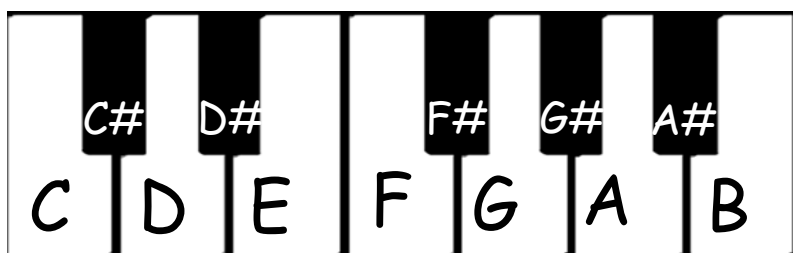


So it doesn't matter whether the key is white or black, as long as it's adjacent, the distance is a half-step.

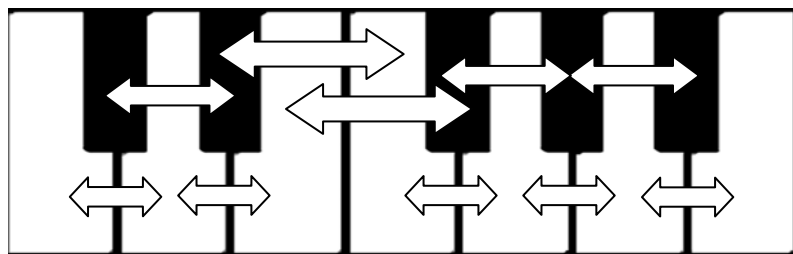
The next interval you'll need to know is a **whole-step**. A whole-step is basically two half-steps. Whole-steps have one key in between them.

For example

- C to D is a whole-step (C# is in between)
- D to E is a whole-step (D# is in between)
- E to F# is a whole-step (F is in between)
- F# to G# is a whole-step (G is in between)



Examples of whole-steps. Notice most whole steps either go from a white key to a white key, or a black key to a black key. They're a little tricky around the notes E and F because there is no black key in between. So, these ones use both white and black keys. The same is true between B and C, although you can't see it on this diagram.

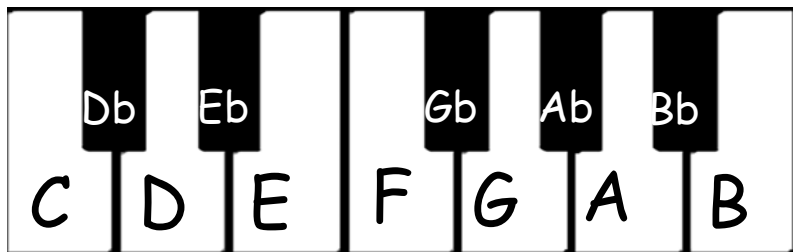


Here are some of the trickier whole-steps that use both white and black keys.

- Eb to F
- E to F#
- Bb to C
- B to C#

The last interval you'll need to know for the system, and the most important one, is the **fourth**.

Fourths have four keys in between.



So for example,

- C to F is a fourth (Db, D, Eb and E are in between)
- D to G is a fourth (Eb, E, F and Gb are in between)
- F to Bb is a fourth (Gb, G, Ab, and A are in between)

Two Easy Tricks for Finding Fourths

Between White Keys

To find a fourth between white keys, just **skip two white keys**. So for example:

- To find a fourth above C, skip two white keys (D and E) and you'll find the fourth, F.
- To find a fourth above D, skip two white keys (E and F) and you'll find the fourth, G.

Just watch out for the one exception! F to B is not a fourth. See below under Exceptions.

Between Black Keys

To find a fourth between black keys, just **skip one black key**. So for example:

- To find a fourth above Db, skip one black key (Eb) and you'll find the fourth, Gb.
- To find a fourth above Eb, skip one black key (Gb) and you'll find the fourth, Ab.

Just watch out for the one exception! Gb to Bb is not a fourth. See below under Exceptions.

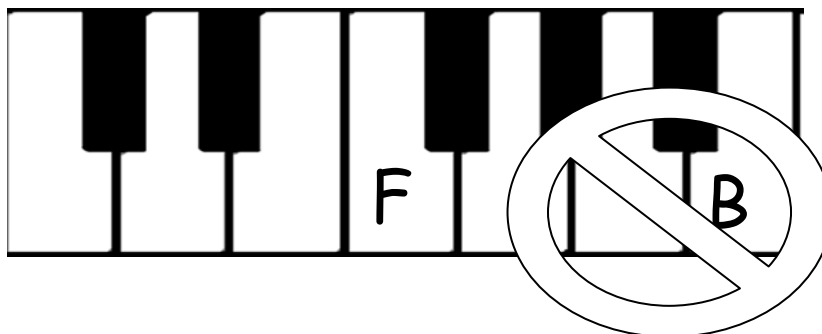
Exceptions

There are two exceptions to our trick for finding fourths. Here they are.

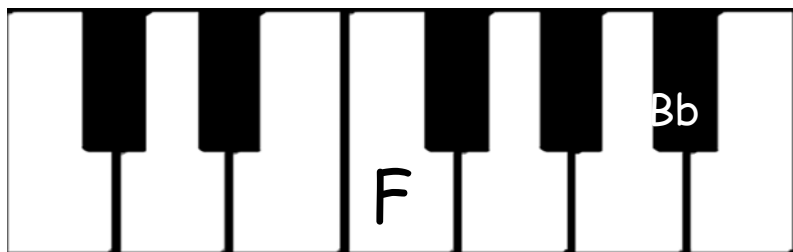
Exception 1

If you use the trick for white keys starting on F, it doesn't work. This is the one exception to the white key rule.

F to B is not a fourth! The "skip two white keys" rule will mislead you here. You just have to memorize this exception.



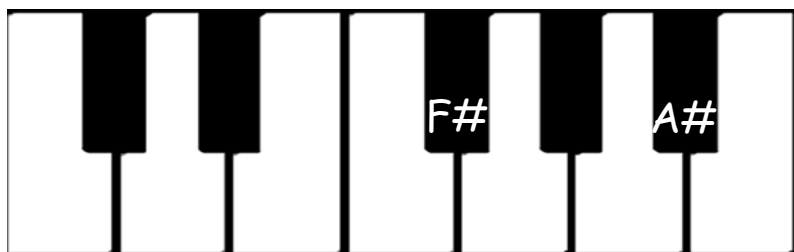
The fourth above F is Bb.



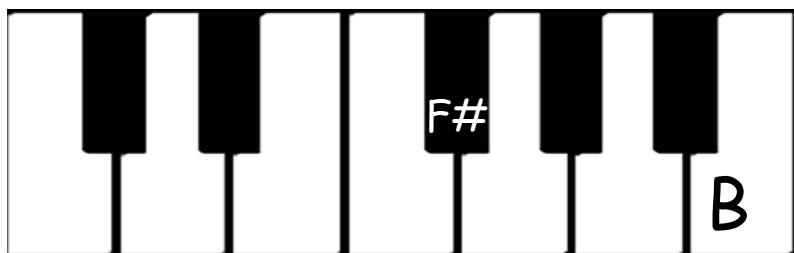
Exception 2

If you use the trick for black keys starting on F# (or Gb – same note just spelled differently) it doesn't work. This is the one exception to the black key rule.

F# to A# (or Gb to Bb) is not a fourth! The "skip one black key" rule will mislead you here. You just have to memorize this one exception.



The fourth is F# to B!



Here's a list of fourths. For homework, see if you can find them all on the piano:

- C to F
- C# to F#
- D to G
- Eb to Ab
- E to A
- F to Bb – (exception to the white key rule)
- F# to Bb – (exception to the black key rule)
- G to C
- G# to C#

- Ab to Db
- A to D
- Bb to Eb
- B to E

The Essential Elements of a Chord

So far we've talked about the Root, the 3rd and the 7th. The Root is the foundation of the chord around which the other notes relate. The 3rd and 7th are the notes that determine the quality of the chord.

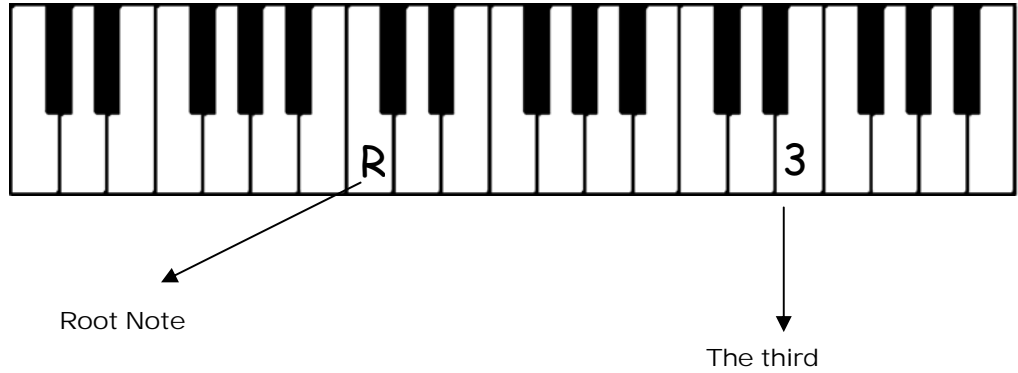
There is one more element of the chord that you will see much more in other chord books, but I try to minimize, and that's the **fifth**. The fifth is not an essential element of the chord. You will often see it in other chord books because they teach you the chords in terms of **triads**. Triads are chords that use the Root, 3rd and 5th (all three notes are third away from one another, hence the name triad).

The fifth helps strengthen a chord and make it more powerful, but it can also cause problems as far as voice leading, and until you are more advanced, I would recommend leaving it out. Eventually, when your ear is stronger, you'll sense when you should add a little fifth, or when you should leave it out.

On the following pages, we'll review the essential elements of a chord and how to find them.

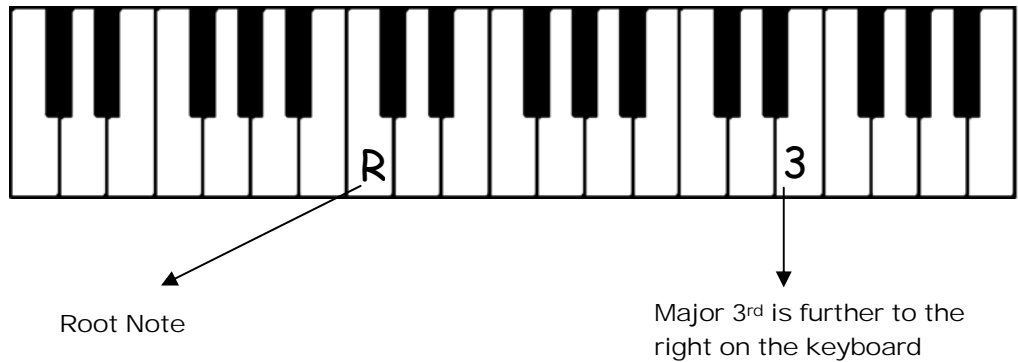
The Third

The third is the next most essential note in a chord after the root. In fact, you can make a chord with simply the root and 3rd. Remember the 3rd for C Major? Thanks right, E.

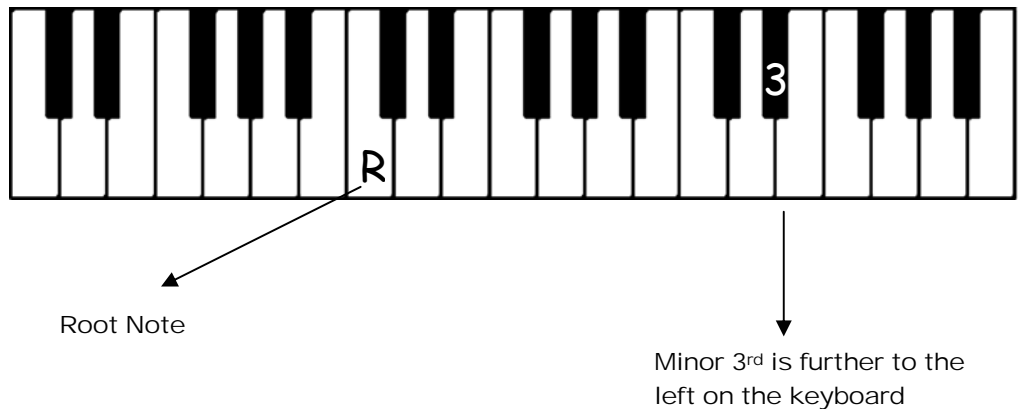


Major Thirds and Minor Thirds

Thirds can either be higher or lower in pitch. If they are higher in pitch, they will be more to the right on the keyboard.



And if they're lower in pitch, they'll be more to the left on the keyboard.

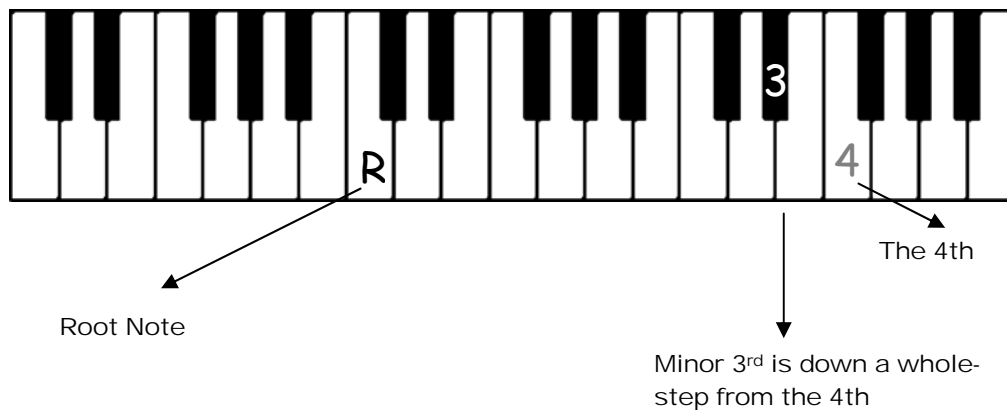


Finding the Minor or Major 3rd of a chord

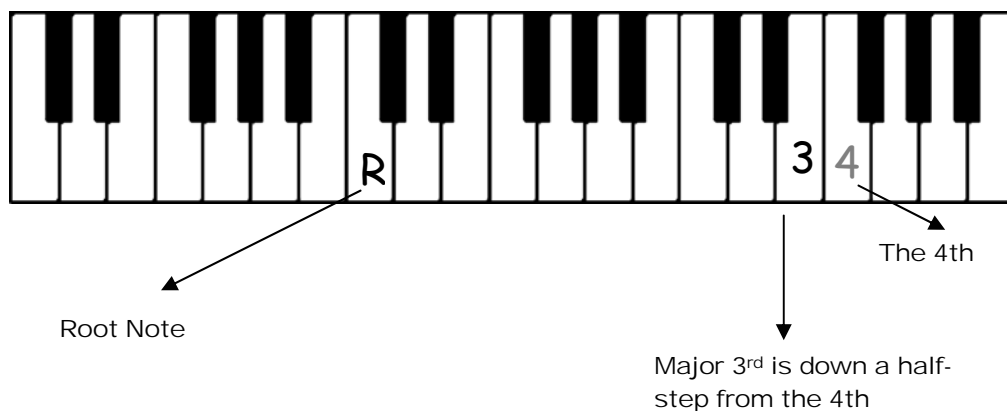
In this book we'll be learning to find the 3rds of your chord by first finding the 4th and then counting down either a half-step or whole-step.

This is why we needed to learn how to find fourths!

The **minor 3rd** will be down a **whole-step** from the 4th



The **major 3rd** will be down a **half-step** from the 4th



Practice finding the Major 3rd

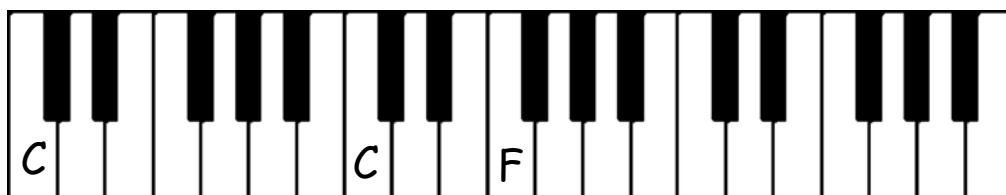
First, find C on the key keyboard with your left hand.



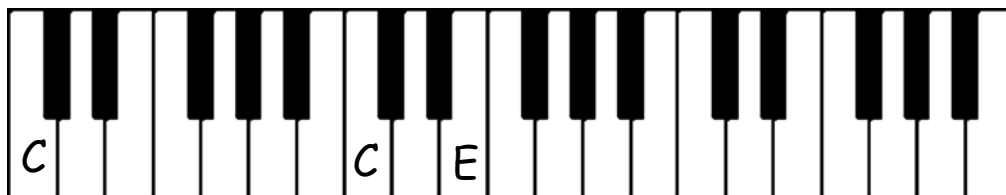
Then pair it with another C higher on the keyboard (further to the right).



Now find the note up a fourth from the higher C. Remember the rule for white notes? Just skip two white notes to find it. (So skip D and E, and you'll land on F). To test to make sure it's a fourth, you can count the number of keys in between, and it should be four. (So, Db, D, Eb and E – that's four!)



Now to find the major 3rd, just take the top note down a half-step. And there we have the Major 3rd, the note E. If you play all three notes, you'll get a C Major chord.



Practice finding the Minor 3rd

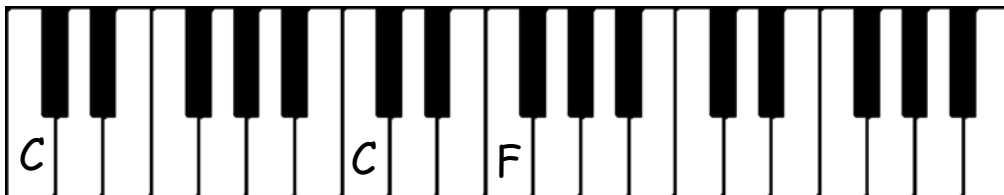
First, find C on the key keyboard with your left hand.



Then pair it with another C higher on the keyboard (further to the right).

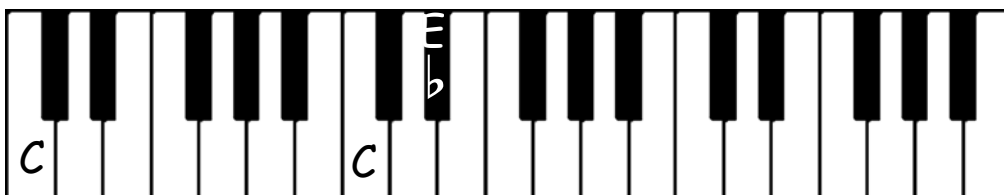


Now find the note up a fourth from the higher C, which is F.



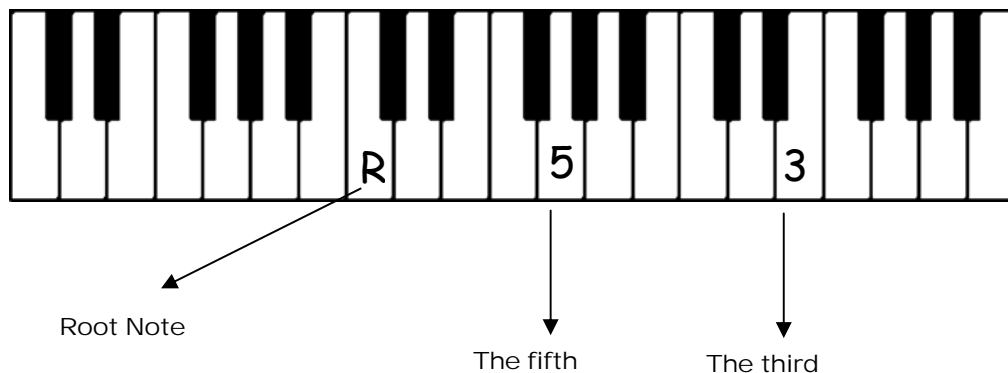
Now to find the minor 3rd, just take the top note down a whole-step. Remember, with a whole step we skip one note (in this case the note E), so the minor 3rd is the note E_b.

If you play all three notes, you'll have a C minor chord.



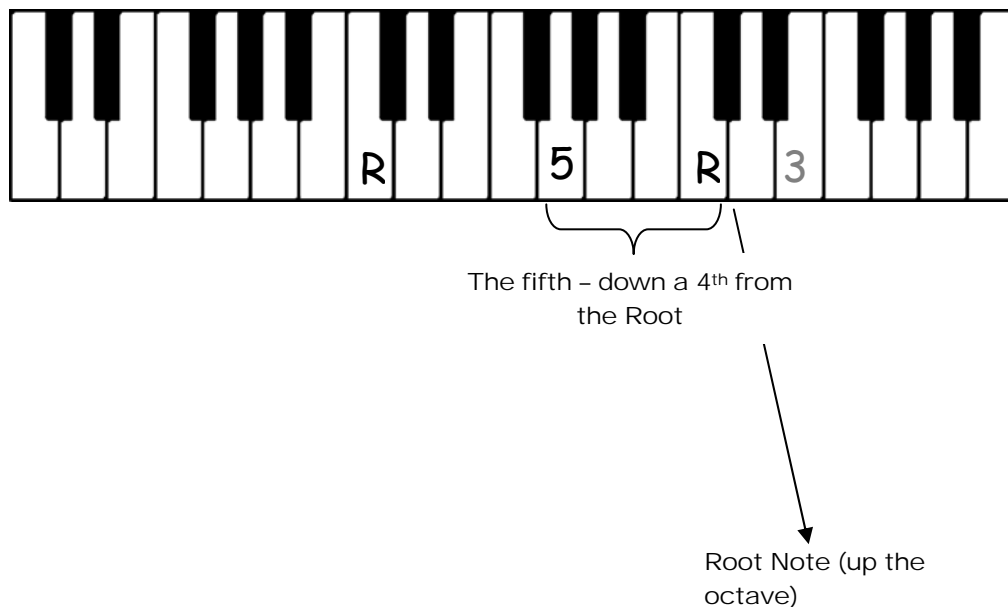
The Fifth

The fifth is an extra note that is added for flavor. Unlike the 3rd, it's not necessary to make most chords.



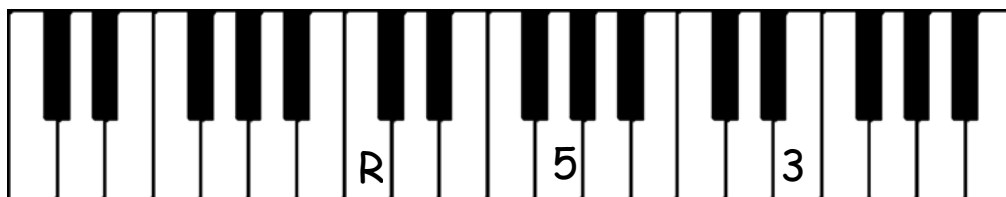
Finding the fifth

The fifth can be found down a 4th from the Root. *Another good reason to know how to find fourths!*



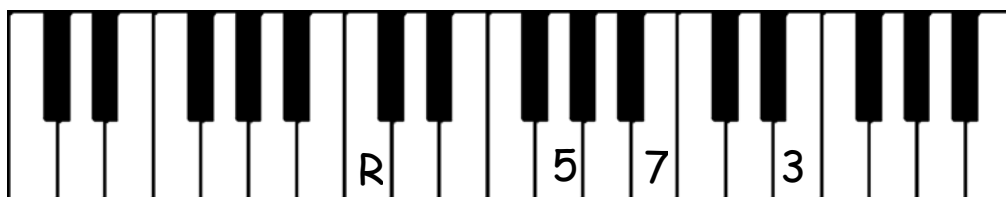
Triads

Triads are chords that use only the Root, 3rd and 5th.



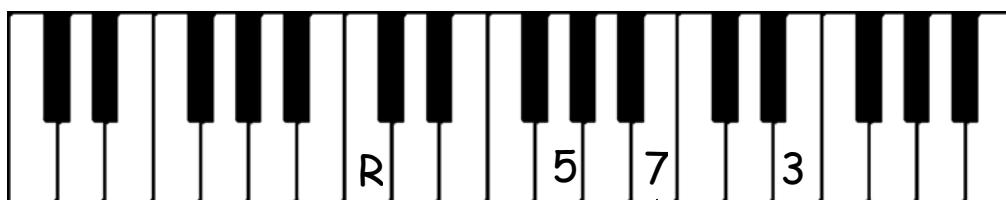
7th Chords

7th chords use the Root, 3rd and 5th, and add one additional note, the 7th.



Finding the 7th

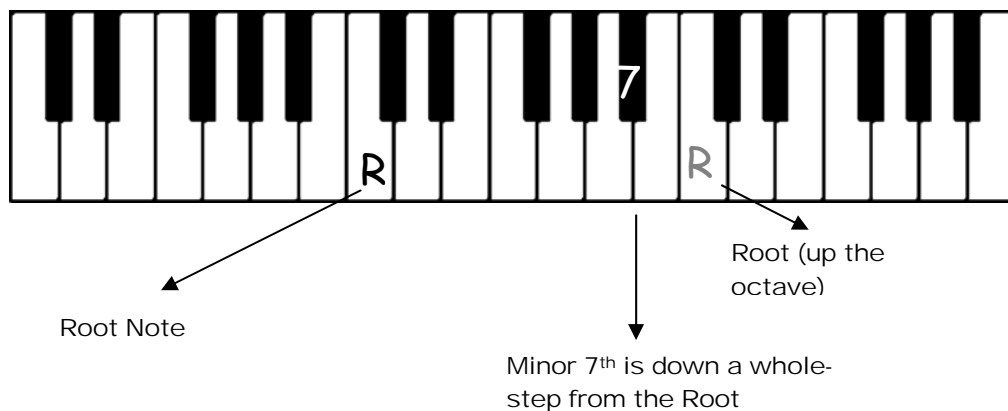
The 7th of a chord is a lot like the 3rd of a chord, except, instead of finding it from the 4th, you'll find it from the Root.



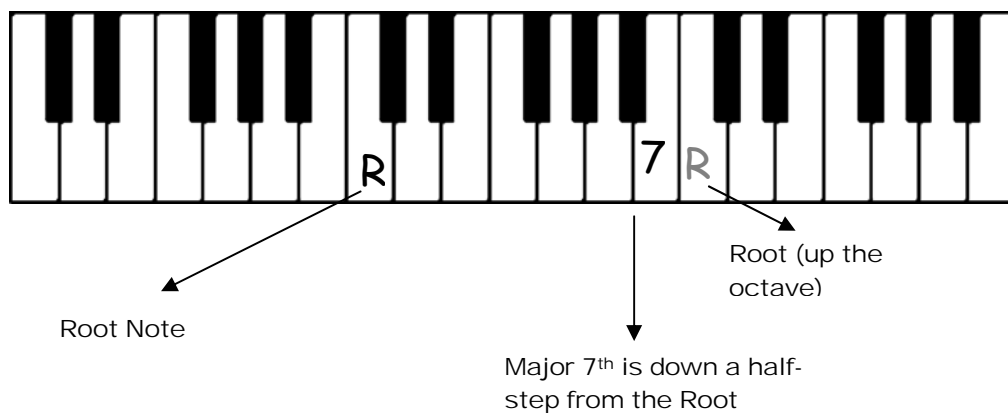
Down ½ step from Root

Down ½ step from 4th

The **minor 7th** will be down a **whole-step** from the Root



The **major 7th** will be down a **half-step** from the Root



Practice finding the Major 7th

First, find C on the key keyboard with your left hand.



Then pair it with another C higher on the keyboard (further to the right).



Now to find the major 7th, all you need to do is go down a half-step from the higher C. Remember, a half-step is the next (adjacent) note.



If you play these two notes, by the way, it's not a chord, because a chord needs a third.

Practice finding the Minor 7th

First, find C on the key keyboard with your left hand.



Then pair it with another C higher on the keyboard (further to the right).

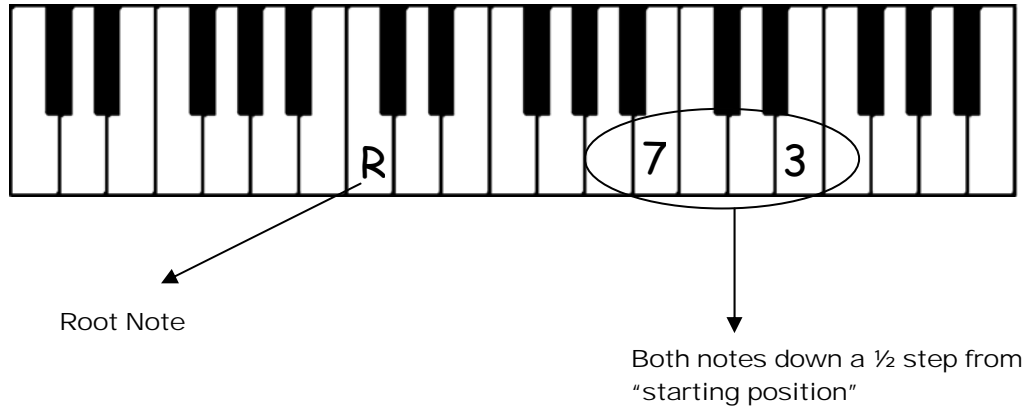


Now to find the major 7th, all you need to do is go down a whole-step from the higher C. Remember, with a whole step you skip one note (in this case the note B). B flat is the minor 7th of C.



Finding the 7th and 3rd in pairs

One of the best tricks you'll learn in this book is to think of the 7th and 3rd in pairs when finding them. This will eliminate many steps and allow you to visualize them more easily on the keyboard.



The Starting Position

The starting position is a visual guide to help you find any chord; it is a valuable learning tool while learning to read chords. A fancy way to describe would be that it's a *metachord* – a reference point to the other chords you'll learn.

Since the 3rd is found from the fourth, and the 5th and seventh are found from the Root, you will want to start with The Root and the 4th.



So our starting position will look like this. It's going to be the Root note, twice (in octaves) and then the note a fourth above the higher root.

The Starting Position



How we'll use the Starting Position.

Once you have found the starting position for a chord, you'll move down to find the major or minor 7ths depending on the quality of the chord. This will be discussed in great length in later chapters.

But let's look at an example quickly.

If you take the top two notes down a half-step each you'll get a Major 7th chord. For C Major 7th, the top two notes would be B and E.

Major 7th chord



Maj 7th and the Maj 3rd

If you take the top two notes down a whole-step each you'll get a Minor 7th chord. For C minor 7th, the top two notes would be B \flat and E \flat .

Minor 7th chord

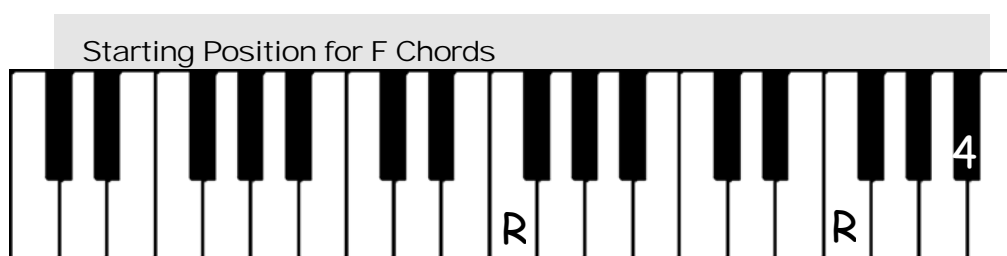


Min 7th and the Min 3rd

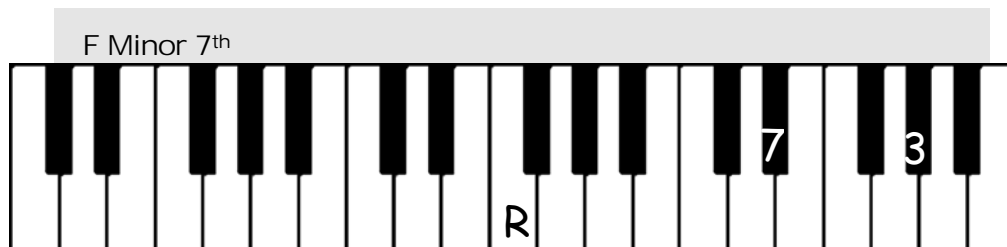
From the starting position you'll find different qualities of chords

As you can see, once you have found the starting position for a chord, it's simply a matter of knowing the right moves to find the quality of chord you want.

If you are looking for an F minor 7th chord, you would first, find the starting position for F:



You would then take the top two notes down a whole-step each. (Remember, down means to the left on the keyboard). This would give you an F minor 7th chord.



So you can see the system breaks down into two major parts:

- First, learning to find the starting position for the all 12 keys.
- Then, learning the moves from the starting position (in terms of half-steps and whole-steps) to finding the final chord

While learning the system takes some thought, it will save you from having to think in the long run, because you'll know the theory in a visual way, rather than having memorized the chords by rote, therefore you'll be much more flexible to improvise around a melody with accompaniment you come up with.

An Overview of Nate's Three Finger Piano Method

Steps 1-2: Finding the Starting Position

At first, you will want to find the Root of the chord in octaves, then the fourth above the higher root. This will be the **starting position**.

For example, for all C chords, you will find C, C and F. Then depending on whether it's Major 7th, Minor 7th or many other qualities of chords, we'll move the top two notes to find the chord.

The Starting Position for All C Chords



Step 3: Finding the Quality from the Starting Position

Depending on the quality of the chord (M, m, 7, M7, m7, dim7), you will move the top two notes to the left in certain patterns.

The 7 Common Qualities of Chords

*(You don't need to know all of this right now,
just take a quick look at it for now)*

- M – Major Chord {R, Major 3rd}
- m – Minor Chord {R, Minor 3rd}
- dim – Diminished Chord {R, Minor 3rd, Flat 5th}
- M7 – Major 7th Chord {R, Major 7th and Major 3rd}
- m7 – Minor 7th Chord {R, Minor 7th and Minor 3rd}
- 7 – Dominant 7th Chord {R, Minor 7th and Major 3rd}
- dim7 – Diminished 7th Chord {R, Diminished 7th and Minor 3rd}