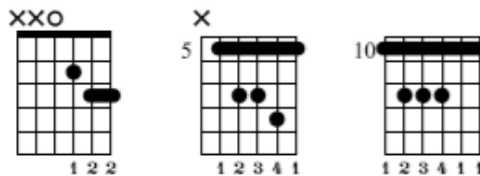


Suspended Chords

by Dennis Winge

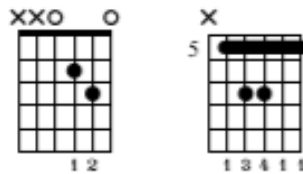
Suspended chords are created when you take a basic triad (first, 3rd and 5th notes of a given key) and move the 3rd up a half-step, which creates a sus4, or you take the 3rd down a whole step, which creates a sus2. A sus4 chord, then, consists of the intervals 1, 4, 5. A sus2 chord is 1, 2, 5. When you hear a musician say “sus” without a number after it, it is safe to assume he or she means “sus4” because this is the most common type of sus chords.

I. Common Voicings

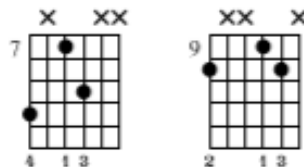


The 3 most common voicings on guitar for a Dsus4 chord are above. Notice that the *f#* note, the 3rd note in the key of D, has been moved to *g*. Notice also that there is one chord in open position and two barre chords, one whose root is on the 5th string and one whose root is on the 6th string. In general, if you have 3 places to play any particular chord, you are covered for most playing situations.

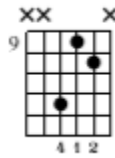
For a Dsus2, the *f#* note moves to *e*, the 2nd note of the key of D, as in these voicings:



Unfortunately, the options for sus2 voicings whose root is on the 6th string are not very straightforward in terms of fingering. There are lots of variations, but I prefer the ones with fewer notes:



If muting two strings in a row is difficult for you in the voicing on the right, you could add another root at the 12th fret to that voicing, or even leave out the lowest root on the 6th string, like this:



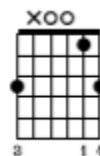
Some sus chords are not very practical in the open position. Take a standard G chord like this:



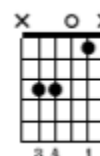
The notes of a G major triad are *g*, *b*, and *d*. To make a sus4 chord we must make the *b* into a *c*. However, in the above voicing there are two *b* notes: one on the 5th string and one on the 2nd string. If you hiked up both of them by a half-step it would look like this:



I personally find this voicing to be a little muddy, so I'll mute the 5th string altogether as in:

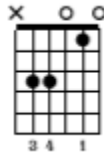


Similarly in an open C chord, there are two thirds (i.e. two places where an e note, the 3rd note in the key of C, is found), so you must be careful to eliminate the 1st string in order for the high e not to sound, as in:



However, the problem with a voicing like the above is that it sounds also like a Fsus2 with the 5th in the bass. Sometimes it can simply be better to use the barre chord versions of sus chords that were presented earlier.

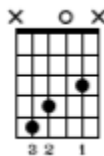
To further complicate the matter, in jazz, the 3rd of a sus4 chord may be present, and is usually voiced an octave above the 4th, as in the previous voicing where we do deliberately include the top string:



Notice that the intervals for the above voicing are 1, 3, 4, 5. In most rock and pop circles, however, adding a 4th to a triad of 1, 3, 5 would be considered an “extension” and would be called “add 11.” To try and keep it simple, note that there is a factor of 7 between a root and an octave (which is the 8th note of a scale). In other words, $1 + 7 = 8$. In other words, add the number 7 to a root and you get its octave. In the same way, when you add 7 to 2 you get 9, so an “add 9” chord means 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). Likewise, the 4th is the 11th and the 6th is a 13th.

The music theory says that the 9th is an extension and would appear in the octave above the triad because chords are built in 3rds, so you typically skip every other note as in 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13. But in practice, especially on guitar where we often rearrange notes just for convenience of fingering, the intervals can be in any octave. So, to keep it simple, just memorize that $8 = 1$, $9 = 2$, $11 = 4$, and $13 = 6$. How’s that for some advanced math? :)

Consider the following voicing of a Dadd11:



The chord adds a 4th or the note *g* to a basic D major triad (*d*, *f#* and *a*), and the 3rd and 4th are in the same octave. In fact, the half-step tension between those two notes is what adds to the beauty of the voicing. This is a long way from the very first Dsus4 example in the article.

II. Uses of sus chords

Sus chords give a feel of “suspension” to a song, and are commonly, but not always, resolved to a triad as in | Asus4 | A |. A good example of this is in the song “Pinball Wizard.” Another common use for guitar is to add motion to an otherwise stagnant chord, like James Taylor does on D chords, as in | D | Dsus4 Dsus2 D / | or Tom Petty does on an F chord in “Free Fallin’” | F Fsus4 | F – Fsus2 |. Sometimes, suspended chords are used in succession but are not ‘resolved’ to triads, which gives a floaty feeling as in Herbie Hancock’s “Maiden Voyage.”

III. Rock/ Pop Songs That Use Suspended Chords

“The Long and Winding Road” by the Beatles

“The Look of Love” by Burt Bacharach, in the intro of the version by Dusty Springfield

"I Feel the Earth Move" by Carole King

"Don't Dream It's Over" by Crowded House

"Natural Science" by Rush

"Venus" by Shocking Blue

"Make Me Smile" by Chicago

"Black or White" by Michael Jackson

"Automatic" by The Pointer Sisters