

The Five Chord Families

by Dennis Winge

Schools of thought will vary on this in the music theory world, but I was taught that there are 5 main types of chords:

Major

Dominant

Minor

Half-Diminished

Diminished

With these 5 chords you can play any song from any fake book, especially if you 'boil down' the chords to one of their respective families. This means you would ignore extraneous information like 9ths, 13ths, sus chords, slash chords, etc. If use this 'boil down' technique and you memorize only 10 chords, i.e. each of the 5 chord-types with roots off of 6th string and another 5 on the 5th string, you can open up a jazz real book, for example, and play every single song with no problem!

Your voicings in this scenario may not be perfect, but if we're talking about sitting in with a band or on a jam session where you're expected to read a chart with these chords is in it on the fly, then using this method is better than not playing at all. Most of the time, when these 5 families are not understood, two things happen with students:

1. The 'extraneous' chord information bogs them down to the point that they cannot enjoy playing the song in real-time at all.
2. They have no idea that they can substitute much easier voicings to make good music quickly.

So it's not that I'm trying to encourage a cavalier attitude or foster imprecision among guitarists. It's just that very frequently, chord extensions and the like are not essential to the character of the song, so knowing the chord families allows you play much more complicated music much faster.

Here are some common chord types and which families they belong to.

Family	Chord examples in key of C
Major	C, C6, C ^{aug} , C ^{add9} , C ⁶⁹ , C ^{sus2} , C ^{sus4} , C ^{maj7} , C ^{maj9} , C ^{maj7#5} ,
Dominant	C7, C7 ^{aug} , C7 ^{sus4} , C7 ^{sus2} , C13, C11
Minor	Cm, Cm7, Cm6, Dm(maj7), Cm11, Cm13
Half-Diminished	Cm7b5, Cm9b5
Diminished	Cdim, Cdim7

To give you some examples, I am going to open up a rock fake book to a random page and look for examples of how boiling down can immediately help. (By the way, a "fake book" is just

the basic melody, lyrics and chords for a song. It's not an arrangement with full intros, outros, solo sections, etc. It's just the bare bones of the song, and by using the book, a musician can make up his or her own arrangement and 'fake' it as if he/ she really knows the tune (as in when he or she is on a solo gig and gets a request, for example).

The first page I opened to was "Hold Me Now" by the Thompson Twins, which was a hit in the 80s. It's in the key of D and there are chords such as Cadd9 and A7sus. If you played this song with a C and an A7, respectively, you could get by.

Other examples I see in the fake book are slash chords. These are somewhat different and will require another article, but for now if you just play the first part of the chord and leave out the 2nd part, which would be played by the bass player if you're playing the song in a band, you'll be okay. So for example for the chord Bb/Ab, just play a Bb chord.

Here more examples from random tunes:

Chord	Family	Substitution
D7sus	Dominant	D7
Fmaj7	Major	F
Dm(maj7)	Minor	Dm
Bm7/E	Minor*	Bm
Gadd9	Major	G
D11	Dominant	D7
C7#9	Dominant	C7
G(add2)	Major	G
A(add4)	Major	A
Em6	Minor	Em

* One could more accurately say that the Bm7/E chord belongs in the dominant family of the key of E as in E9sus, but this is a subject for another day.

Generally, your decisions on what chord to substitute can be made easier if you understand that:

1. For the most part, you will be substituting chords for the first 3 categories: major, dominant, and minor. This is because when you see half-diminished or diminished, you will generally have to play them as is (how to voice them is also a subject for another day), and there isn't much to figure out because there isn't much substitution that can be done there.
2. When you see a number directly after a letter (as in G11, B7aug) these are generally in the dominant family (so you would play G7 or B7).
3. When you see 'maj' or the number is followed by a word such as 'sus' or 'add,' the category is major (as in Bbmaj13, Cadd9, Dsus2 where you would play Bb, C or D respectively.)
4. When there is a small 'm' after a letter or 'min' (as in Amin, Bm7, Em6) the family is minor (and you would play Am, Bm, or Em accordingly.)

So, memorize the 5 families and you can feel confident to substitute much simpler voicings. It takes a long time to grasp all the nuances of every chord extension, much less learn several voicings for each one. Use your ear and if a particular chord substitution doesn't sound right, consult your teacher, and you may have to learn a new voicing for that specific place in the music. Learning new voicings and continuing to study chord theory should be an ongoing part of your growing musicianship, but in the meantime, use the above information to help you make music now and have fun while learning.