Creating Modal Chord Progressions
by Dennis Winge

When you're studying the modes, you can always go to YouTube and search for things like "A Phrygian backing track" or "E Lydian jam track." There is a wealth of free videos like that to jam with. However, if you really want to solidify your understanding of the modes, it is best to create your own chord progressions.

In order to get at this, we will first assume that you first understand the theory behind what a harmonized scale is. Second, you know how to make up chord progressions based on those scales. Perhaps you might even know how to make progressions that utilize chords both a major key and its parallel minor.

You also, in order to understand this article fully, must understand at a minimum what modes are, and, even better, memorized them. Here is an excerpt from the last-cited link, which represents a simplification of what makes each mode unique.

The Modes, Simplified

Ionian = mode I = pure major	Aeolian = mode VI = pure minor (b3, b6, b7)
Lydian = mode IV = major with a #4	Dorian = mode II = minor with ♮6
Mixolydian = mode V = major with a b7	Phrygian = mode III = minor with b2
	Locrian = mode VII = minor with b2 and b5

When you make a progression in Ionian, make sure the home chord is a major chord. In preparation for writing modal progressions, let's define what we mean by the tonic chord, the chord of resolution, the I chord (that's first roman numeral, not a word referring to oneself), or the "home chord." These all mean the same thing: the chord that best gives you the sense of finality, i.e. that no more chords are required to make you feel that the progression is brought to a conclusion.

The tonic chord does not have to be the first chord. It might be the last chord, or it could even be a chord in the middle. Even students with minimal amounts of ear training can tell which chord feels like "home" if they take the time to play the entire progression, then play the chord they think is the tonic (the I chord or "home" chord) afterwards, as if they were saying "thank you, good night!" to the audience that has amassed for them.

In modal writing, 7 different modes share the same 7 chords. In other words, the chords of E mixolydian are the same as those from A Ionian. Just as the "E mixolydian" shares the same notes as A Ionian, so it shares the same chords, although the harmonic analysis for it will look different from that of its "parent scale" (which is the name I give for any mode's associated Ionian key.)

A Ionian

I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
A	Bm	C#m	D	E	F#m	G#m7b5

E Mixolydian

I	II	IIIm7b5	IV	Vm	VI	bVIImaj
E	F#m	G#m7b5	A	Bm	C#m	D

The above analysis for E mixolydian shows that the III chord, the V chord and the VII chord are different from what they would be in the key of E Ionian. We are comparing to E Ionian because we want to analyze the mode from the point of view of *e,* not *a.* Otherwise we'd be back in A Ionian.

In any case the trick when it comes to **writing modal progressions** is to:

a) **Use the chords that contain the defining interval of that mode**. The defining characteristic of mixolydian, for example, is a major scale with a b7. The chords that have the b7 are the III, V, and bVII chords listed above. So use at least one of those, as in:

||: E | D | C#m Bm | E :||

b) **Make sure that I chord is where you want it to be**. The tonic chord should be major or maj7 if Ionian or Lydian or Mixolodian; major or dominant 7th if Mixolydian; minor or min7 if Aeolian, Dorian, or Phrygian; and diminished triad or m7b5 if Locrian.

It also means to make sure you haven't "flipped the mode." Flipping the mode is when you unintentionally make the progression sound like one of the other modes in the series.

For example, notice that I put E as both the first and the last chord. It's not always necessary to do this, but it reinforces that E is the tonic, and the progression's analysis would look like: || I | bVIImaj | VI Vm | I ||

If, however, I tried to get fancy and keep the listener in suspense with an A chord at the end, like below, the intended harmonic analysis would be || I | bVIImaj | VI Vm | IV ||

||: E | D | C#m Bm | A :||

However, you will see if you play this a few times, that the home chord in this new version sounds like A, not E. I have 'flipped the mode' and the analysis is now more accurately represented as | V | IV | III II | I |.
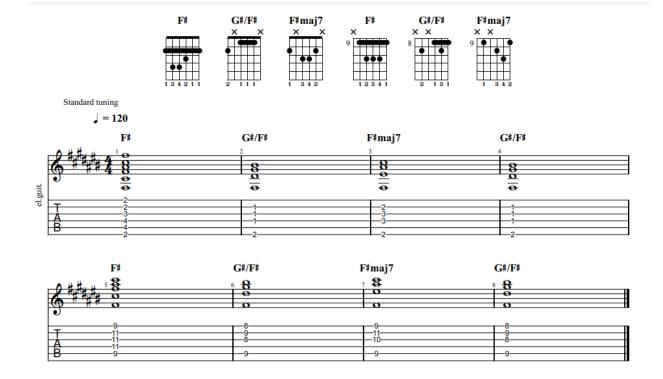
Before we go, let's see another example briefly. I choose F# lydian. Lydian is a very unstable progression, meaning that if I'm not careful, I'll end up sounding like I'm in the "parent key" of C#, *even* if I put the F# chord in twice. Consider this:

||: F# | G# | C# | F# :||

Because C# Ionian is so much more stable than F# lydian, we hear C# as the tonic, and the progression as | IV | V | I | IV | even though my original intention was for it to be | I | IImaj | V | I ||. The II major was a good choice because it gives me the #11 that we need for Lydian, but since the mode got flipped, the experiment failed. What to do?

Let's make the F# note a pedal tone underneath all the chords, then it can't slip away from us: ||: F# | G#/F# | C#/F# | G#/F# :|| I changed the last chord from what it was above to give the progression more forward motion, and because I knew I didn't have to reinforce the presence of F# because it's now a permanent bass note. In the end, we have set up a successful modal progression because a) we used at least one chord that had the #4 that defines Lydian, and b) we made sure our root felt like home base, not some other note.

By the way, to play the above Lydian progression, use either of the following positions.

c) **Understand that only a few choice chords can outline a mode**. Sometimes less is more, especially if you're only creating a 'vamp' (a short repeating progression) that you will solo over to practice the mode you're in. Keep in mind that since any mode's tonic chord has the intervals 1, 3, & 5, then the next chord, the II chord, will have 4, 6, and 2, so with just a progression of | I | II | you can get 6 out of 7 notes of the mode. If you use 7th chords for each rather than just triads, you will get all 7.

For example, suppose you're in Gm Aeolian. The Gm chord gives *g, bb, d* and the next chord in the series, Am7b5, gives you *a, c, eb, g.* This is the first 6 notes out of Aeolian; the only one missing is the 7th. If we used Gm7 as my I chord, then that would add the *f* note to give us all 7, but even if we didn't, there is no other mode than Aeolian that would fit the resulting 1, 2, b3, 4, 5, b6 that Gm and Am7b5 gives us, so it's enough to set up an Aeolian vamp.

If we used a | I | VII | progression in Gm instead, the Gm gives us g, bb, d and the F chord gives us f, a, c which results in the 1, 2, b3, 4, 5, b7. Notice that the 6 is not present. Because the only thing that distinguishes Aeolian from Dorian is whether the 6th is flatted or not, an improviser could choose either one on the | Gm | F | vamp. However, if we put in 1 more chord that has the b6 in it, then the progression would be undeniably Aeolian. Examples of this could be:

||: Gm | F | Eb | Gm F :||

||: Gm | Cm | F | Gm F :||

||: Gm | Am7b5 | Gm | F :||

As you work with these concepts you will be able to recognize which parts of real-life progressions are modal and which aren't.   You will be able to write modal vamps, sections, or even whole compositions that are modal.   You will become a master of major scale harmony and apply it to your own music in many creative ways.

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About the author: Dennis Winge is a pro guitarist, composer and teacher who has released 6 instrumental albums to date. His guitar school serves [Guitar Instruction Ithaca](#) and the surrounding areas.