

Introduction to Diatonic Chords

To understand the concept of *diatonic chords*, begin with a familiar major scale. We'll use G major, which is spelled out below. Notice that in the top row, each note has been assigned a scale degree.

Scale Degree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Note	G	A	B	C	D	E	F#

The question we will ask is this: if we were to build a chord (a simple 1-3-5 triad) on each of these notes *using only the notes from this scale*, what would the series of chords be? This would make a great exercise for you to do on your own, but if you prefer, the answer is provided in the table below. The major scale now appears in the row devoted to the “root” of each chord. Above the root you see the 3rd and 5th which have been added to create each triad. Remember, the rule we're following is that these notes must be drawn from the G major scale. This table is actually spelling out the *diatonic chords* of the key of G major, which you might think of as the “family” of chords that belong to the key.

Scale Degree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5th	D	E	F#	G	A	B	C
3rd	B	C	D	E	F#	G	A
Root	G	A	B	C	D	E	F#

The next question to ask is, what chord types have we arrived at in this little exercise? We see we have some sort of G chord, some sort of A chord, some sort of B chord, etc. But what sort? That's another good puzzle for you to solve, but again, the answer is provided below. The scale degrees still appear in the top row. Below that row, the original notes of the scale now appear as the root of a chord. (As always, if the note stands alone the chord is presumed to be major; other chord types are specified.) Below that, the roman numeral combines two pieces of information: the scale degree and the chord type (major chords appear in upper case, whereas minor and diminished chords are in lower case.) So, for example, the ii chord is the minor chord built on the second scale degree.

Scale Degree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Chord	G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#dim
Roman Numeral	I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii°

The middle row in the table above gives you the *diatonic chords* for the key of G major, but the sequence you see in the bottom row is where you want to focus your attention. This is the *diatonic sequence of chord types of any major key*: I, IV and V are major; ii, iii and vi are minor; the vii chord's triad is diminished. To test your understanding of this, ask yourself, what are the diatonic chords of the key of C major? (No sharps or flats.) The answer is provided at the bottom of this page.

Once you are familiar with the sequence of diatonic triads and you have worked them out for a number of common keys—for our purposes, C, G, D, A and E are the most useful—you might want to go back and work out the sequence again, this time adding a 4th note, the 7th, to each triad. When you do so remember that this additional note, too, must be drawn from the major scale that defines the key you've chosen to work within.

If you practice applying the concept of diatonic chords to the songs that you learn you will find that, eventually, you naturally see every song you play in those terms. This, in turn, has many benefits and applications. It makes songs easier to learn by ear, for example, because you know which chords tend to go together. The ability to distinguish diatonic from non-diatonic chord progressions is also extremely useful if you want to work up your own solos or improvise; by telling you whether any of the chords of the progression take you outside of the song's key, this insight will greatly inform your choice of scales to use for soloing.