

Lesson 9 – Chord Progressions and The Standard Harmony Rule (DVD 2)

In This Lesson: In this lesson you'll learn the standard harmony rule and how to put chord progressions together in minutes.

A *Chord Progression* is simply a group of chords that are played together in a song.

We use chord progressions a lot. When you are improvising over a song, you aren't really playing over the whole song... just one section. That section is called a chord progression.

Blues music has a standard chord progression called the 12 bar blues. In jazz we also have the 12 bar blues (though it's a bit different in a jazz context.) There are other standard forms like Rhythm Changes, the 8 bar blues, the 16 bar blues, and what I call Ice Cream changes (or vanilla changes.)

There are probably many other standard forms in many other styles of music. There are certainly many common chord progressions that are found in dozens of songs and are not named.

We are going to describe chord progressions in terms of ... you guessed it... the major scale.

We always use Roman numerals to show chord progressions. The upper case numbers are for major chords, the lower case for minor. You'll see how I know which is which in a few minutes.

So let's say I have a I, vi, ii, V (vanilla changes) in the key of A. What chords am I talking about?

The first thing I need are the 1st, 6th, 2nd, and 5th tones of the A major scale. I can quickly build one and see that I have A, F#, B, and E.

Now I need to use what's called The Standard Harmony Rule to determine which of those chords should be major and which ones should be minor.

The rule is simple: ***In any major key, the I, IV, and V chords are major. The ii, iii, and vi chords are minor, and the vii is diminished.***

Notice this doesn't take into account anything but triads. We'll learn how to extend this rule later to cover 7th and tall chords.

One more little thing... if you think about it, when was the last time you played a diminished chord? Not a diminished 7th chord, but a straight diminished chord. It's probably been a really long time or maybe even never.

It's important to note that vii chords just don't come up much. So in general you have 6 chords to work with in any key... not 7.

If you stop and think about that for a moment, the implications are pretty cool.

How much easier it is to figure out the chords in a song by ear if you only have 6 to choose from? Imagine how much easier it will be to figure out what scale to use and what key a song is in when you've removed so many of the possible outcomes!

Now of course, I'd be lying through my teeth if I said all songs work this way. They most certainly do not. Many songs break rules and change keys and use other compositional devices to use additional interesting chords. We're going to get to all that, but for now stay in the box with me.

How to find the chords given the progression

The steps are simple.

1. Find the root notes given the numbers. If it's I, iii, IV, V then you need the 1st, 3rd, 4th, and 5th notes of the key you're in (remember a major scale and a major key are the same thing!)
2. Apply the standard harmony rule.

Let's say you have the progression above (I, iii, IV, V) what would those chords be in the key of...

- A – The I is A, the iii is C#, the IV is D, and the V is E. I know that by grabbing the 1, 3, 4, and 5 from the A major scale. From there, the A, D, and E are all major and the C# is minor from the standard harmony rule.
- D – The 1, 3, 4, and 5 in D are D, F#, G, and A. So we have D major, F# minor, G major and A major.
- B – The 1, 3, 4, and 5 in B are B, D#, E, and F#. So we have B major, D# minor, E major, and F# major.

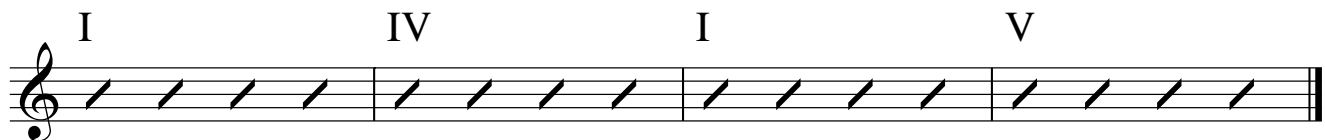
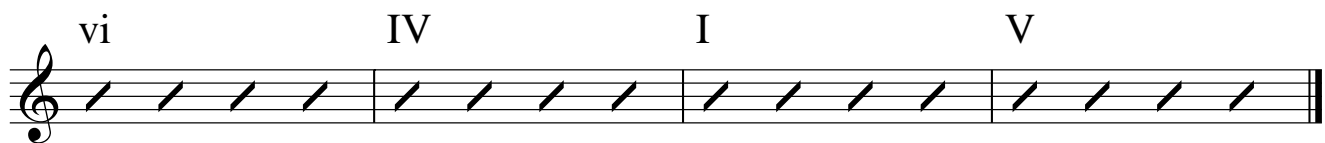
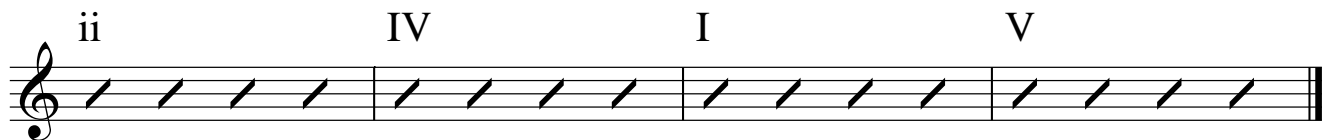
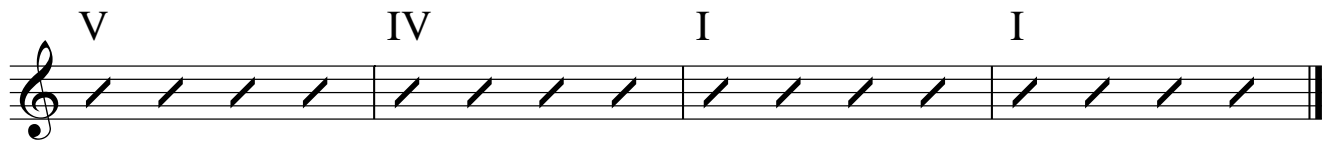
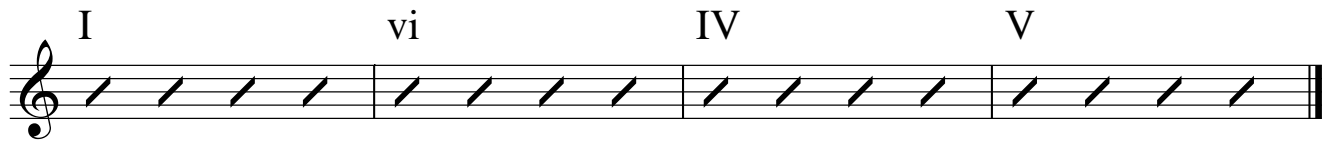
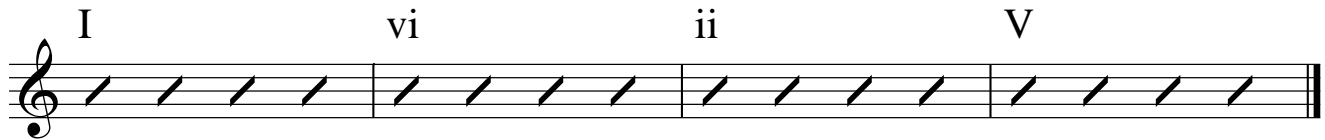
Pretty cool stuff. Now you can *transpose (change the key of)* any song easily. Let's say you have a song in the key of C. The chords are I, IV, ii, V.

But you have a gig this weekend with a new singer, and she sings the song in D, not in C. What do you do?

No sweat! The progression doesn't change... it's still I, IV, ii, and V. The only thing that changed is the key.

In D, the 1, 4, 2, and 5 are D, G, E, and A. And with the standard harmony rule we know to make the D, G, and A chords major, and the E chord minor.

If you want to have some fun with this, here are a few common chord progressions. Try strumming them and see if you can recognize a song that they are from. In the Lesson 9 "Answers" Play Along video I'll run through a few examples for you.



Lesson 9 Exercise

Exercise 9-1 – Here is a chord progression very similar to a classic pop song. I use this particular progression because it uses all 6 chords in the key in a “real” song.

I've written the progression with numbers instead of chords. Your job is to write the chords out in the keys of E, A, G, C, and D. Also, try playing it once you've written the chords out. Just use any generic eighth note strum pattern and play at about 110 beats per minute on a metronome... or just a nice easy pace.

In the “answers” video for this lesson, I'll walk you through what chords you should have come up with. I purposely did not include the chords here written out. If you get stuck and have to watch the video for the answers, you can make notes here. But I would rather you didn't write it down.

The image shows six blank music staves, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). Each staff is divided into four measures. Above each measure, a Roman numeral indicates the chord to be played. The progressions are as follows:

- Staff 1: iii, vi, V
- Staff 2: IV, I
- Staff 3: iii, IV, I
- Staff 4: iii, IV, ii
- Staff 5: vi, V, IV, ii
- Staff 6: V, I

Exercise 9-2 – Here you see 6 blank music lines, each with 4 measures. On each of the 4 measure choose a chord (1 through 6) and create 6 chord progressions. When you've finished, play what you've written so you can start to get used to what the various chords sound like.

