

Overview of Guitar Chord Theory

The table below lists what notes of the scale are needed to build different chords. All the chord spellings are given in relation to the notes of the **major scale**, i.e a chord described as 1, 3, 5, b7 means you need the 1st, 3rd, 5th and flat 7th of the major scale to build the chord.

I have included the most common chord types in the table. Many more chord types exist (particularly chromatic/jazz chords), but there is not room to list the spellings of all of them.

Note that the symbol for flat "b" can also be written as a minus sign "-". Similarly, the symbol for sharp "#" is interchangeable with "+".

Notes that are **essential** in the chord are highlighted in bold. Other notes listed in the chord spelling can be considered as optional notes. For example, the 5th is an optional note in many chords (although it is nearly always present in simple major and minor chords). When it comes to 9th, 11th and 13th chords, there are sometimes differences of opinion as to what are considered the "essential" notes. For example, with a 13th chord, some people include the 9th and 11th as essential notes - I prefer to list these as optional, with the essential notes being 1, 3, b7 and 13. For the guitar, I think this is the most commonly used definition of a "bare minimum" 13th chord.

Quick Reference Table for Guitar Chord Spellings

Chord type	Also written as	Chord spelling (notes needed)
Major		1, 3, 5
Minor	m	1, b3, 5
Diminished	dim, °, mb5	1, b3, b5
Diminished 7th	dim7, °7, dim <small>* see footnote 1</small>	1, b3, b5, bb7 <small>* see footnote 2</small>
Half diminished	m7b5, ø	1, b3, b5, b7
Augmented	aug	1, 3, #5
5th	5	1, 5
7th	7	1, 3, 5, b7
Minor 7th	m7	1, b3, 5, b7
Major 7th	maj7	1, 3, 5, 7
Minor/major 7th	m/maj7	1, b3, 5, 7
Suspended 4th	sus4	1, 4, 5
Suspended 2nd	sus2	1, 2, 5
7th suspended 4th	7sus4	1, 4, 5, b7
7th suspended 2nd	7sus2	1, 2, 5, b7

Added 2nd * see footnote 3	add2	1, 2, 3, 5
Added 9th * see footnote 3	add9	1, 3, 5, 9
Added 4th	add4	1, 3, 4, 5
6th	6	1, 3, 5, 6
Minor 6th	m6	1, b3, 5, 6
6/9	6/9	1, 3, 5, 6, 9
9th	9	1, 3, 5, b7, 9
Minor 9th	m9	1, b3, 5, b7, 9
Major 9th	maj9	1, 3, 5, 7, 9
11th	11	1, 3, 5, b7, 9, 11
Minor 11th	m11	1, b3, 5, b7, 9, 11
Major 11th	maj11	1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11
13th	13	1, 3, 5, b7, 9, 11, 13
Minor 13th	m13	1, b3, 5, b7, 9, 11, 13
Major 13th	maj13	1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13
7th sharp 9th	7#9, 7+9	1, 3, 5, b7, #9
7th flat 9th	7b9, 7-9	1, 3, 5, b7, b9
7th sharp 5th	7#5, 7+5	1, 3, #5, b7
7th flat 5th	7b5, 7-5	1, 3, b5, b7

1. Diminished chords: the chord symbols used for diminished 7th chords should always include the 7, i.e either dim7 or °7 should be used. This allows the diminished 7th to be clearly distinguished from the diminished chord (dim or °). In practice, since the diminished 7th chord is much more common than the diminished chord, you may find that dim or ° is sometimes used as a "convenient shorthand" for the diminished 7th chord. This can lead to confusion about which chord was actually wanted, so to make things clear always write diminished 7th chords as dim7 or °7.

2. Diminished chords: the double flat 7th (bb7) is the note two semitones (half-steps) below the natural 7th of the scale. In other words, it is equivalent to the 6th. In C major, the bb7 would be written as Bbb although you may want to think of it as being "the same" as A.

3. Add2 and add9 chords: the add9 and add2 chords are *usually* considered to be alternative names for the same chord. After all, they are made up of exactly the same notes. However, some people argue that add2 implies a different *voicing* than add9. For example, it can be argued that the added note in an add2 chord should appear within the first octave above the root (i.e a true 2nd above the root), whereas the added note in an add9 chord should be more than an octave above the root. Others argue that add2 implies a chord voicing in which the 2nd and 3rd are next to each other, whereas add9 implies the added note is not adjacent to the 3rd. These are fairly subtle distinctions though - the important thing is that both chords are made up of the same notes.