

Diatonic Triads and Roman Numerals

“Diatonic” chords are those that fit in the key you are in. Imagine that you want to list off all the chords in C major. You can start with the C major scale and start picking out notes to make triads, like so:

The diagram illustrates the construction of diatonic triads from the C major scale. It features a central staff with the C major scale notes: C, D, E, F, G, A, B. Above the staff, a bracket groups the first three notes (C, D, E), with an arrow pointing to a chord diagram for C major, labeled "C major (= 'I')". Below the staff, another bracket groups the second, third, and fourth notes (D, E, F), with an arrow pointing to a chord diagram for D minor, labeled "D minor (= 'ii')".

So far we’ve created “the I chord” and “the ii chord” in C major, or the triads that are built on the first and second scale degrees. We use roman numerals to refer to them, and it is important to learn which of the triads are major, minor, or diminished. Here, the I chord is major (a C major triad), and the ii chord is minor (d minor.)

Here is a list of all seven triads that you can derive from C major. In the blanks below the staff, indicate the quality of the chord (whether it is major, minor, or diminished.)

A musical staff in treble clef showing seven diatonic triads from C major. From left to right, the triads are: C major (C-E-G), D minor (D-F-A), E minor (E-G-B), F major (F-A-C), G major (G-B-D), A minor (A-C-E), and B diminished (B-D-F).

Now, let’s convert them all to roman numerals. Use capital letters for major triads (like I), lowercase letters for minor triads (like ii), and lowercase with a little circle for diminished triads (like vii°).

All major keys follow this pattern, so you’ve got to memorize it!

Diatonic Chords in Minor Keys

The three minor scales vs. minor keys

Most theory courses teach you that there are three minor scales, the natural, the harmonic, and the melodic. It's important to realize that these are not the same as keys - nobody would say that a piece is "in A harmonic minor."

The best way to understand the way minor keys work is to realize that the sixth and seventh scale-degrees aren't always the same, but rather they've got two "positions," a higher one and a lower one. Sometimes, as in the "natural" minor scale, they are in the lower position, but sometimes (as in the ascending melodic minor scale) they are raised.

(movable degrees)

1̂	2̂	3̂	4̂	5̂	↓6̂	↓7̂	1̂	= natural minor
					}	↘		
1̂	2̂	3̂	4̂	5̂	↓6̂	↑7̂	1̂	= harmonic minor
					}	}		
1̂	2̂	3̂	4̂	5̂	↑6̂	↑7̂	1̂	= melodic minor (ascending)

When it comes time to learn diatonic triads, most textbooks teach you to pull triads from the different forms of the scale. Frankly, that's pretty pointless - it's not how real music works. In reality, pieces in minor keys mostly use one group of chords that samples several of the different minor scales. Memorize these diatonic chords:

uses ↓7̂ uses ↑7̂ uses ↑7̂

c minor: i ii° III iv V VI vii°

Important: make sure you build vii° on the raised leading tone, ↑7̂

Raising the leading-tone for V and vii°

Minor key signatures, of course, provide the accidentals for the natural minor scale. Therefore, when you create a V or a vii° on a staff with a key signature, you've got to provide the extra accidental for the raised leading-tone.

c: V

e: vii°