

Naming a Chord

Once you know the common names of the intervals, the naming of chords is a little less daunting. Still, there are a few conventions and short-hand terms that many musicians use, that may be confusing at times. A few terms are used throughout the maze of chord names, and it is good to know what they refer to:

Major / Minor – a “minor” note is one half step below the “major.” When naming intervals, all but the “perfect” intervals (1,4, 5, 8) are either major or minor. Generally if neither word is used, major is assumed, unless the situation is obvious.

However, when used in naming extended *chords*, the word “**minor**” usually is reserved to indicate that the **third** of the triad is flatted.

The word “**major**” is reserved to designate the **major seventh** interval as opposed to the minor or dominant seventh. It is assumed that the third is major, unless the word “minor” is said, right after the letter name of the chord. Similarly, in a seventh chord, the seventh interval is assumed to be a minor seventh (aka “dominant seventh”), unless the word “major” comes right before the word “seventh.”

Thus a common “**C7**” would mean a C major triad with a dominant seventh (CEGBb) While a “**Cmaj7**” (or **CM7**) would mean a C major triad with the major seventh interval added (CEGB), And a “**Cmin7**” (or **Cm7**) would mean a C minor triad with a dominant seventh interval added (CEbGBb)

The dissonant “**Cm(M7)**” – “C minor major seventh” is fairly uncommon outside of modern jazz:
it would mean a C minor triad with the major seventh interval added (CEbGB)

Suspended – To suspend a note would mean to raise it up a half step. In chord naming, we usually reserve the term for the third interval in the triad. The third being suspended to the fourth interval, it is usually called a “suspended fourth” and written as “sus. 4” or often simply as “sus.” Therefore a “**C sus**” or “**C sus4**” would be played C-F-G

Augmented / Diminished – These terms are usually reserved for the fifth interval. Similar to major & minor, to augment a note would be to raise it up a half step, to diminish it would be to lower it a half step. . When a chord is called “augmented” it means the fifth interval is sharped. When the fifth – and only the fifth – is flatted, the chord might be called a “diminished fifth” (these days often “flat five” or “b5”).

However, without the word “fifth” after it, “diminished” would refer to the **entire chord**. *When any chord per se is “diminished” it means that every note is flatted **except the root**.*

(Note – the symbol (°) is often used to mean “diminished” as in “C°7” for “Cdim7” and the symbol (+) is often used to mean “augmented”)

Thus a “**Caug**” or “**C+**” would mean a C major triad with the fifth sharped (CEG#)
And a “**Caug 7**” or “**C+7**” or “**C7+5**” would mean a C7 with an augmented fifth (CEG#Bb)
And a “**Cdim5**” or “**C(b5)**” would mean a C major triad with the fifth flatted (CEGb)
A “**Cdim**” would mean both the third and fifth are flatted – a C minor triad with a flat fifth (CEbGb)
And a “**Cdim7**” (C diminished seventh) would be a C7 with all notes but the C flatted (CEbGbA)
While a “**Cm7b5**” (C minor seven flat five) would be a C7 with only the third and fifth flatted (CEbGbBb)

[another name for the “minor seven flat five” is “half diminished” and the little circle has a slash through it]

Ninth / Add Nine – It is common usage that a “ninth chord” is a seventh chord with the ninth interval added, thus a five note chord. A “major ninth” adds the ninth to a “major seventh” and a “minor ninth” adds the ninth to the “minor seventh.” When the ninth is added to a simple triad, with no seventh interval included, the chord is called an “add nine.”

Examples:

“**C9**” would be a C7 with a ninth added (CEGBbD)
“**Cadd9**” would be a C major triad with a ninth added (CEGD)
“**Cm9**” (C minor ninth) would be a Cm7 with a ninth added (CEbGBbD)
“**CM9**” (C major ninth) would be a CM7 with a ninth added (CEGBD)

11th and 13th—further extensions add more notes. An “eleventh chord” adds the 11th interval to the 9th chord. A “thirteenth chord” adds the 13th interval to the 11th. If a 13th interval is simply added to a triad it would be called an “add 13”—a popular guitar chord is a “9 add 13” which eliminates the suspended sound of the 11th interval.

Examples:

“**C11**” would be a C9 with an 11th added (CEGBbDF) (sounds like a “sus4” on top of the ninth)
“**C13**” would be a C11 with a 13th added (CEGBbDFA) (note that the 13th is a seven note chord, impossible on the guitar)
“**C9 add 13**” would be a C9 with an added 13th (CEGBbDA)