

# How to Identify Chords

In an actual arrangement, chords are not usually “stacked” in order starting with the root on the bottom and going up from there. How can you figure out what chord it is? The key is finding the root—IF there is one!

1. First, put all four tones on the treble clef within an octave (or bass clef, if you read that one more easily). See if you can put all four notes on spaces, or all four notes on lines.
2. The bottom note of your new stack is most likely the root of the chord. Check to see if the next tone is a major or minor 3<sup>rd</sup> above that root; if so, the next note up will probably be a 5<sup>th</sup> above the root to complete the major or minor triad. The final note (if it's a 4-tone chord) will tell you the name of the chord.
3. Is there a doubled tone? In most cases, that will be the root of the chord, and it is often a major triad. Other possibilities are a minor triad with either the root, fifth, or third doubled, or an augmented chord. These are the only chords that should have a tone doubled—major triad, minor triad, or augmented. In very rare cases, a major triad might have a 5<sup>th</sup> doubled.
4. If you can't find a triad, look for a symmetrical chord:
  - If all the tones are a minor third apart, it's a diminished 7<sup>th</sup> and any tone can serve as the root.
  - If all the tones are a major third apart, it's an augmented chord, and the doubled tone will usually be the root.
5. If you're still stumped, it's probably a dominant 9<sup>th</sup> with the root omitted. Look for two tones one step apart. Lower the bottom note by a whole step and see if that creates a dominant 7<sup>th</sup>—if so, that note is the omitted root of the dominant 9<sup>th</sup>. For example—the notes in the chord are Bb-F-G-Db. F and G are one step apart; lower the F by a whole step to Eb. Now you have Bb-Eb-G-Db, for an Eb7 chord. The Bb-F-G-Db is an Eb dominant 9<sup>th</sup>.

## SOME TRICKY CONSIDERATIONS---

The tones of a minor 6<sup>th</sup> and a dominant 9<sup>th</sup> are the same. For example, C-Eb-G-A could be identified as a minor 6<sup>th</sup> with C as the root (C-Eb-G-A), or an F dominant 9<sup>th</sup> with F as the omitted root (F-A-C-Eb-G).

The tones of a major 6<sup>th</sup> and a minor 7<sup>th</sup> are the same. For example, C-E-G-A could be identified as a major 6<sup>th</sup> with C as the root (C-E-G-A), or a minor 7<sup>th</sup> with A as the root (A-C-E-G).

SO HOW DO YOU KNOW WHICH IT IS?!?!? Look at the context of the song and the chord progressions surrounding the chord in question. The strength of the voicing in the bass note is also a good clue. Sometimes it's still hard to determine!