

How to Transpose a Song

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First, a few definitions:

KEY - the group of notes/chords used in a song. For example, in the key of "C," the melody and chords are made from the seven notes of the C scale. Chords built on these notes are: C, Dm, Em, F, G, Am, Bdim, and C (to top it off). You can also think of these as chord numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. The next C above is considered the 1 chord again, and the sequence repeats. (See the "Transposing Chart" on the next page for a complete list of chords in every key.)

MAJOR CHORDS are those built on note numbers 1, 4 and 5 of a scale. In the key of C, these would be C, F and G. These are the bones of a song -- strong and happy sounding. In major keys, the 1 chord functions as the "home" chord of the song; the 4 chord functions to "move the song forward" (away from home); and the 5 chord is the "farthest from home, wanna return there" chord. These functions are the same in EVERY KEY.

MINOR CHORDS are built on the 2, 3 and 6 notes of a scale. These are soft, darker chords that flesh out a song. No matter what key your song is in, chords 1, 4, and 5 will be major, and 2, 3, and 6 will be minor. With a song in a MINOR KEY, chord 6 is used as the home chord (the 1 chord -- even though it is minor; chord 2 is now the 4 chord, and chord 3 becomes major and functions as the 5 chord. See the "Transposing Chords & Keys - Minor Chords" handout to compare how chords built on the same scale compare when in a major key vs. a minor one.

* **Secret Song Playing Tip #1** -- PLAY THE BONES: If your song is in a major key (using a lot of 1, 4 and 5 chords), you can often ignore/cross out/not play the minor chords and still have the gist of a song. For example, let's look at all the chords in "Over the Rainbow," in the key of C:

Somewhere Over the Rainbow - with all the chords:

CHORD NAMES -->	C	Am	Em	C	F	C
CHORD No. ----->	1	6	3	1	4	1
	Some	where	over the	rainbow,	way up	high.
	F	C	Am	Dm	G	C
	4	1	6	2	5	1
	There's a land that I heard of once in a lull-a-by.					

Somewhere Over the Rainbow - Playing the Bones (only the 1, 4 and 5 chords):

CHORD NAMES -->	C	F	C			
CHORD No. ----->	1	4	1			
	Some	where	over the	rainbow,	way up	high.
	F	C	G	C		
	4	1	5	1		
	There's a land that I heard of once in a lull-a-by.					

This is a quick and easy way to simplify a song - especially helpful in challenging keys!

SO WHAT ABOUT TRANSPOSING?

Transposing means to replace chords from one key with those in another. It's easiest to do so by thinking in chord numbers. In the transposing charts on the following pages, each line is a family of chords built on a particular scale. To transpose from the key of C, for example, replace chords 1, 4 and 5 in that key with those same chord numbers from a different key (G, for example). Just remember to transpose ALL the chords from one key (one line in the chart) to another.