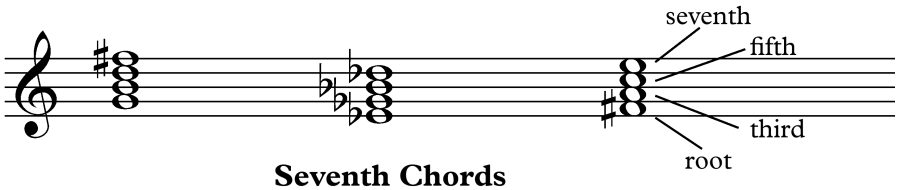
MU 1310 (Feurzeig): The Dominant Seventh Chord

Seventh Chords

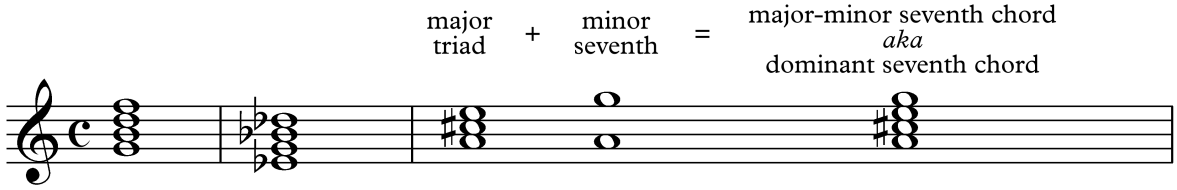
A **seventh chord** is a 4-note sonority formed by a stack of three thirds (like a 4-ball snowman). In other words, it is a triad plus an additional note that lies a third above the triad fifth. The top note is a seventh above the root, hence the term *seventh chord*. The members of the chord are called the root, third, fifth, and seventh.



Seventh Chords

Dominant Seventh Chords

Like triads, seventh chords come in various **chord qualities**. If the triad is major and the seventh is minor, the quality is **dominant** and the chord is called a **dominant seventh chord**. If you're thinking in terms of the thirds stack, it is a major triad topped by a minor third, that is, the note a minor third above the chord fifth.



Dominant Seventh Chords

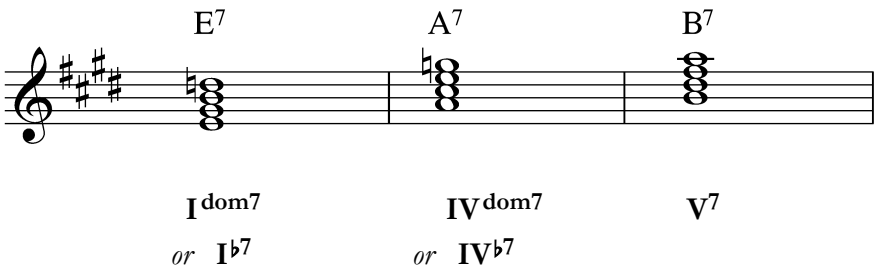
For this reason it is sometimes called a **major-minor seventh chord**. "Major" here refers to the triad quality, "minor" to the quality of the seventh from the root to top note. (Think of a pause after "major": it's a major triad … with a minor seventh.)

In a major scale, the only place this quality of seventh chord occurs is with scale degree $\hat{5}$ as root. Hence the term **dominant seventh chord**, or simply **dominant seventh** for short. The complete chord is **sol-ti-re-fa, or $\hat{5}$-$\hat{7}$-$\hat{2}$-$\hat{4}$**.

Although the chord occurs **naturally** in major keys only on the dominant, which is what gives the chord its name, chords of dominant quality can be formed on any note of the scale via the use of chromatically altered notes (accidentals). A chord of this quality is called a **dominant seventh** no matter what scale degree is the root.

For example, in the standard 12-bar blues progressions, the three main chords (tonic, subdominant, and dominant, or I, IV, and V) are usually all of dominant seventh quality. The I and the IV chords require a chromatic alteration—a lowered chord seventh—to attain this quality. The following example shows the common blues chords in the key of E. The three chords would be called "E dominant seven", "A dominant seven", and "B dominant seven", even though E is the tonic and A is the subdominant of the key. The term "dominant seventh" has its origin in the location of this chord in the major scale, but it has become the generic name for a chord of this quality, no matter what scale degree is the root.

MU 1310 (Feurzeig): The Dominant Seventh Chord



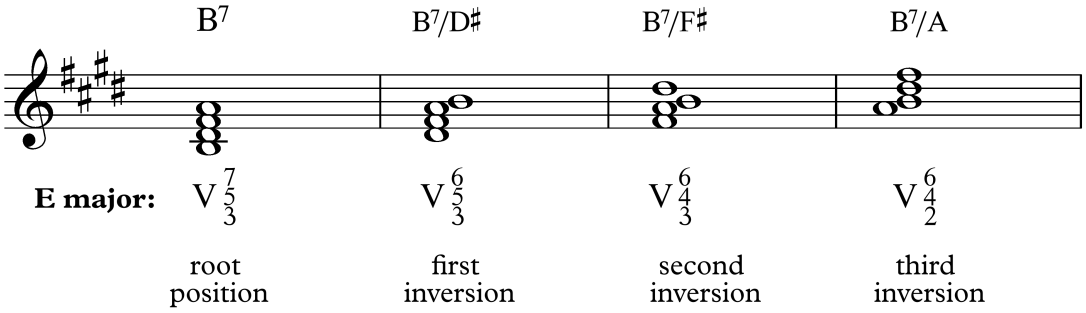
Because the dominant seventh is the most commonly encountered seventh chord quality, its lead-sheet chord symbol is simply the root letter with superscript 7. However in roman numeral analysis, the modifier "dom7" or "♭7" is necessary to indicate the deviation from the usual scale tones. This is not necessary for the V^7 chord, because it has no altered notes.

Inversion

Because seventh chords have four notes, there are **four** positions possible: root position (root in the bass), first inversion (third in the bass), second inversion (fifth in the bass) and **third inversion** (**seventh** in the bass).

In lead-sheet symbols, inversion is handled by slash notation, exactly as with triads.

In analytic notation, inversion is indicated with figured-bass numbers. Just as with triads, these numbers indicate the intervals over the **bass** (not the **root**) if the inversion in question is written compactly (within an octave).



In practice, the figured-bass inversion indications are usually **abbreviated** as follows:

