

50 Strumming Exercises Using the Circle (Cycle) of Fifths

Absolute Basics:

Roman Numerals – There are a variety of Roman numerals that are assigned to the Circle of Fifths wheel. These numbers represent the intervals of the key in which you are playing in. Let's take a look at each in their PUREST form.

Upper Case Roman Numerals = MAJOR

- I
- IV
- V

Lower Case Roman Numerals = MINOR

- ii
- iii
- vi

Lower Case Roman Numeral with a degree (°) sign = DIMINISHED

- vii°

Chords are basically built by superimposing thirds, or **EON** – every other note. For example, once we are certain about the tones in the key of **C Major**, we build chords. Chords are created by selecting a ROOT (a tone to build something from).

We can then select **Every Other Note (EON)**. There are 7 tones in a Major scale; therefore, there are 7 triads (each tone becomes a root).

Figure 1:

This figure represents the 7 tones in a given scale. In this case it is the C Major scale. Notice that it repeats once we've reached the B as the seventh tone.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	...
C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C	D	E	...

Figure 2:

	Root	3rd	5th	Result
I	C	E	G	= C
ii	D	F	A	= Dm
iii	E	G	B	= Em
IV	F	A	C	= F
V	G	B	D	= G
vi	A	C	E	= Am
vii ^o	B	D	F	= B ^o

As you'll see from Figure 1, C – E is a THIRD. (1 – 2 – 3 = C – D – E)

IMPORTANT: In EVERY key the letter names will still be the same, but instead sharps (#) or flats (b) will be added because of the 'tones' that are selected.

If that confused you, don't worry - we're not concerned with constructing or building chords.

We just want to play them. Let's tip toe out of music theory right now.

The standard in three chord progressions is I – IV – V.

- These three Roman numerals can be rearranged a variety of ways
- There doesn't have to be ONLY three of these numerals

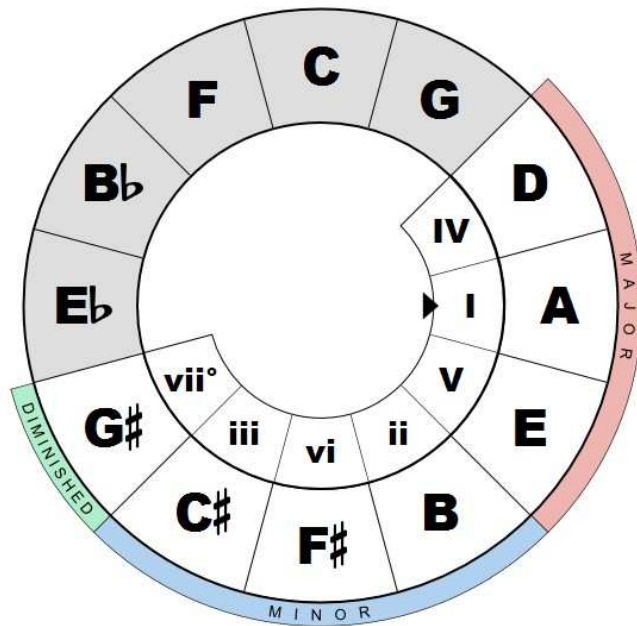
Let's start with our MAJOR chord progressions first. If you don't know how to use the Circle (Cycle) of Fifths diagram, I will include a reference for you. I am going to assume you understand the absolute basics of it for now and simply provide you with a series of progressions that work. As you watch, you'll see the diagram unfold before you. Sometimes it's easier to watch first - then go back and comprehend the concept.

VERY IMPORTANT!

I've explained how the Circle of Fifths works quite often, but a few things tend to trip up newcomers to this concept. I'd like to address these issues right now:

1. How do you know where the Roman Numerals appear? *The Roman Numerals begin to appear only based on the key in which you are searching. I provide the key to each exercise and example to keep the confusion to a bare minimum.*
2. Why are there so many variations of the same Circle of Fifths chart? This is based on how people 'think' of the diagram/chart and aren't always easy to understand. The two charts I provide for you are in my opinion the easiest ones to use. However, they need to be explained as both charts MUST be used hand-in-hand.

Diagram 1 - Quick Progression Circle of Fifths Generator:



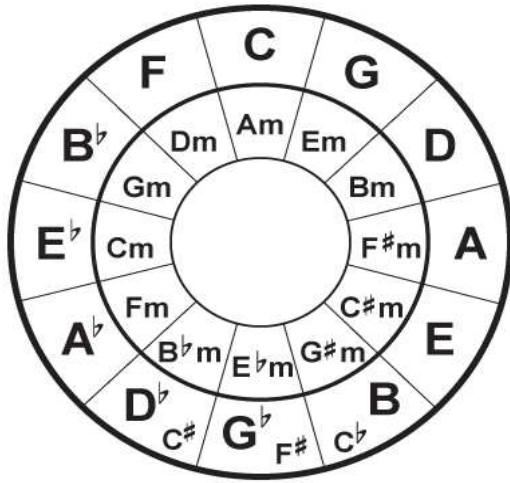
(above example is in the key of A Major)

At the reference area you'll find a link that will allow you to instantly create chord progressions based on the Circle of Fifths in every single key, but the generator focuses more on the actual Roman Numeral system, so the diagram isn't completely accurate. It works, but there are technical issues with it. However, it is an AMAZING tool that shows you the circle/cycle with their respective numerals.

When to use Diagram 1

If you are working in only Majors it works fine. For the first series of examples I am using that diagram. However, it starts getting a little confusing when you start combining the other values. It is possible to use, but the minors get a little troublesome. Ultimately, the 'interactive' generator doesn't provide enough levels of exploration without getting confusing. Instead I have an additional diagram that works wonders.

Diagram 2 – The Standard Circle of Fifths:



As you'll see in this example, the same concept still applies, but you see an additional 'depth' chart that automatically includes the minors. This one is much easier to understand, BUT the problem is you have no Roman Numeral system. You can easily plug the numerals in, but you must know how the order works to be able to do so. It's not that hard, but the Diagram 1 option automatically does it for you based on key.

Plugging In the Roman Numerals (Diagram 2)

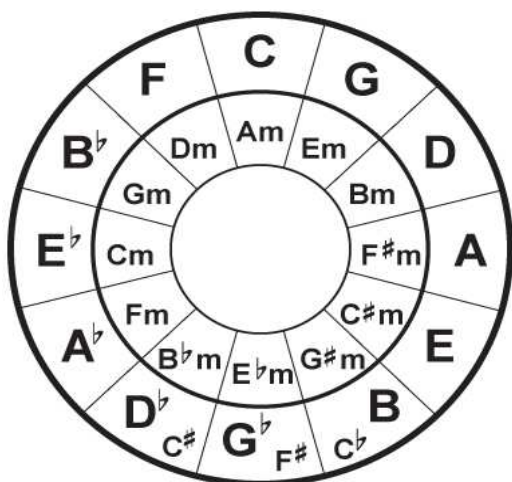
An easy way to remember the Circle of Fifths is:

Fat Cows Go Dancing At Every Bar (F-C-G-D-A-E-B)

Let's use the key of C Major:

This is a crucial piece of theory to get your head around, since the Guitar is tuned to Fourths (except the G-B strings). Don't expect this to make sense right away. Print out or draw the circle and put it where you can see it while you are practicing. If you convert the notes to numbers/Intervals, then you won't have to memorize every key, but you should start out looking at the key of C, as it has no sharps or flats.

First think of the Circle as a clock face with 12 points except that number 1 is at the top instead of 12. The Circle contains all 12 notes of the Chromatic scale. The main use for learning the patterns is for giving your progressions direction. It will allow you to control consonance and dissonance in your solos.



A “Fourth” is 4 steps up the Diatonic scale from the Root Note (or 5 frets). In C, we would go;

C (I-Root), D (II), E (III) and F (IV), F is the fourth interval.

One more step to G gives us our Fifth (V) in the key of C. If we played this on our A string, C would be the 3rd fret, F would be 5 frets up at the 8th fret and G would be 7 frets up from C, on the 10th fret. A “step” can be either a Whole tone (2 frets) or a Semi-tone (1 fret) because it follows the Major scale.

The Fourth and Fifth are considered “Perfect” Intervals. We’ll look at one string from open, to the 12th fret (1 Octave). Use the A string; A is the Root (I), D on the 5th fret is the IV and E on the 7th fret is the V. **They occupy the center of the octave. They are the 2 most consonant intervals.**

Let’s look at open strings. When we play an open A string, D is 1 string higher, E is 1 string lower. D is 5 frets UP from the Root note, E is 5 frets DOWN from the Root note (A). This works with all the strings except G-B.

So when we look at the Circle, the top position is our Root, I, clockwise to the right is the V, to the left is the IV. *The higher the position on the circle, the better the note will blend with the Root.* This means it is also a “Circle of Consonance and Dissonance.” **Notes that are across from each other are equally Consonant (eg. key of C; Bb to D or Eb to A). This is a very useful way to look at the notes in an octave.**

At the bottom of the circle, we find the 3 most dissonant notes; the Tri-tone is the note between the IV and V, often called the “Devil’s Interval.”

Tri-tone is the most dissonant interval. Second most dissonant are the minor ii (1 fret up from the Root), and the Major VII(1 fret down from the Root).

The Tri-tone is the only interval that does not have an equal. The Root has its octave, the IV is equal to the V, the II is equal to the vii and so on.

When we look at these “equal” notes on the Guitar, they are the same distance from the Root note, in different directions.

Look at an A note on the 5th fret of the “E” string. 5 frets up is the IV (D), 5 frets down is the V (E).

Being able to always find your Root, and V (and IV) in whatever key you are playing in, will help you map out Scales/Chords.

The I-IV-I-V is one of the most popular chord changes in Western music. When you learn to listen for it you will hear it and variations everywhere.

Playing a Root (I) and a V together is called a “**Dominant**” Chord (often called a power chord), the V is called the Dominant Interval. The IV is called “**Sub-dominant**”.

You don’t need to try and memorize the Circle. *You should be able to start at any note and count in Fourths or Fifths.*

If we start at A, moving by V we go E, B, F#, C#, G#, D#.

Moving counter-clockwise in IV would be A, D, G, C, F, Bb, Eb.

If you figure out the 3 or 4 keys you use the most, they will all make sense. These patterns also work as numbers. Moving in V would be; I, V, II, VI, III, VII, IV (back to I). Moving by Fourths would be; I, IV, VII, III, VI, II, V (back to I).

The easiest way to think of IV’s and V’s is that they are the changes in a 12-bar blues pattern (for the most part). No matter which key they are in, they will use the I-IV-I-V-I progression. Let’s look at the best open keys as examples.

In E we use E, A and B.

In A we use A, D and E.

In D we use D, G and A.

In G we use G, C and D.

Once you can see the pattern in the keys we use frequently, all the keys will make sense.

We just substitute a new note for number I(Root).

In a Major key, the Root (I), Fourth (IV) and Fifth (V) stay Major.

In a minor key, the Root (i), Fourth (iv) and Fifth (v) stay minor.

Root and **Tonic** can be used interchangeably, but technically “root” applies to chords and tonic applies to scales.

Also the Circle of Fifths is somewhat more useful to guitarists when you flip it over so that Fifths (V) are counter clockwise, Fourths (IV) are clockwise.

When we Play a “C” on the 5th string, 3rd fret and move 1 string higher (to the F on 4th string 3rd fret), when we move down a string, in the same fret we arrive at the G on 6th string 3rd fret.

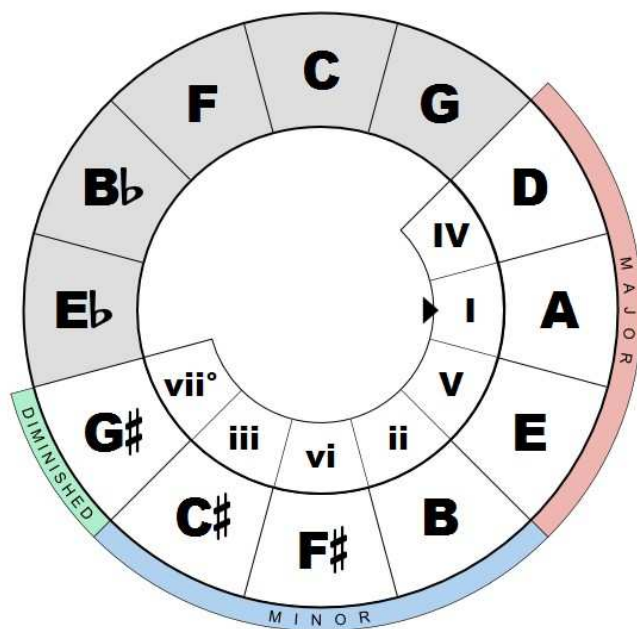
So looking at the circle as going UP to the Fourth (IV) and DOWN to the Fifth (V) makes a bit more sense.

The important thing is that the pattern is the same. Either way you look at it, Fifths and Fourths, run in opposite directions, following the SAME Pattern.

Major Chord Progressions:

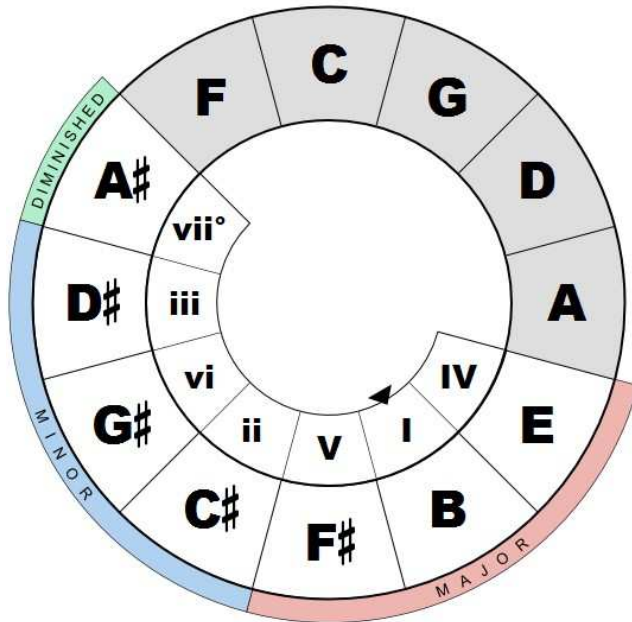
For now we’ll focus on the standard A, B, C, D, E, F, G progressions. We’ll begin with the absolute standard of I-IV-V using the seven Primary notes. As you will see, I’ve provided two of the elements you need in order to construct a progression. You have the key. You also know the formula, which is I-IV-V. All that is left is plugging the right notes/chords in. Each example below will show you the result.

Progression of I-IV-V in the key of A Major:



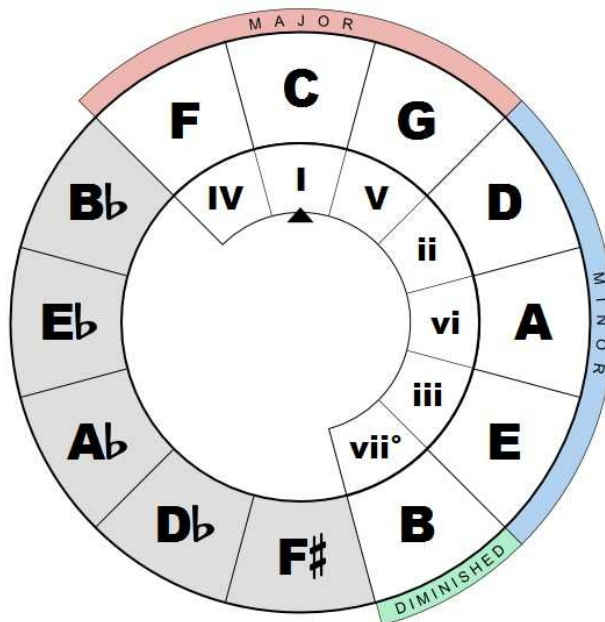
- A – D – E

Progression of I-IV-V in the key of B Major:



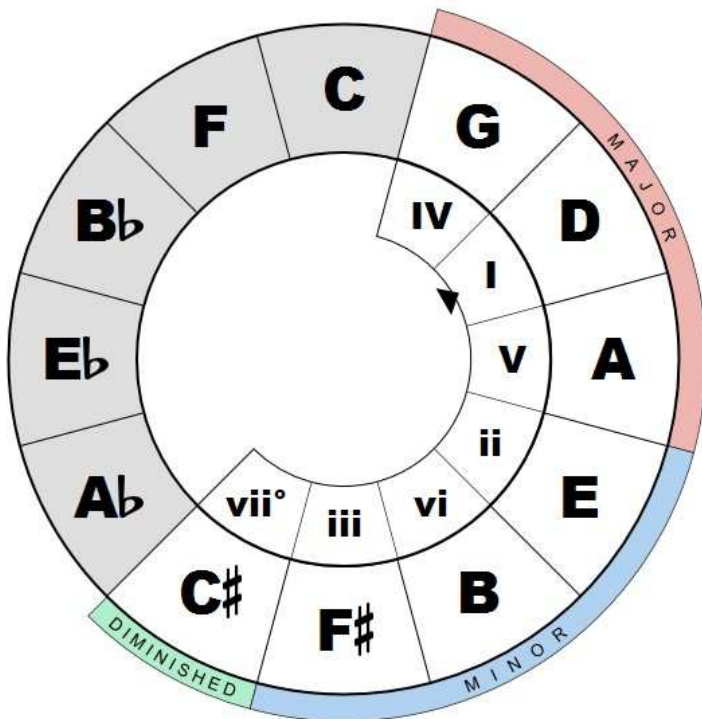
- B – E – F#(Gb)

Progression of I-IV-V in the key of C Major:



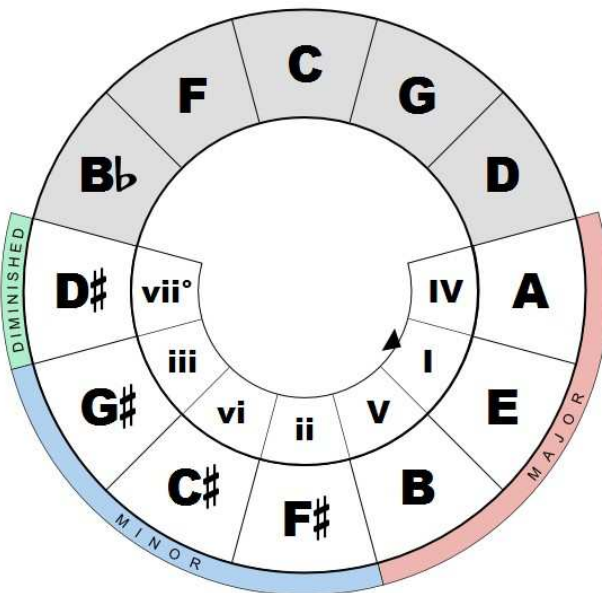
- C – F – G

Progression of I-IV-V in the key of D Major:



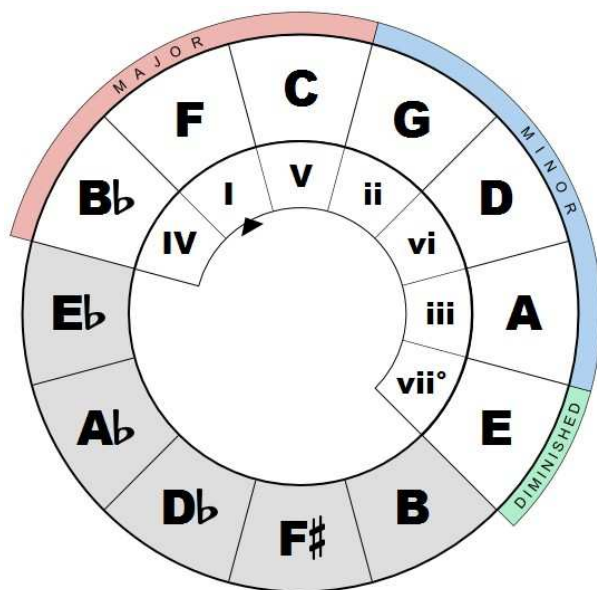
- D – G – A

Progression of I-IV-V in the key of E Major:



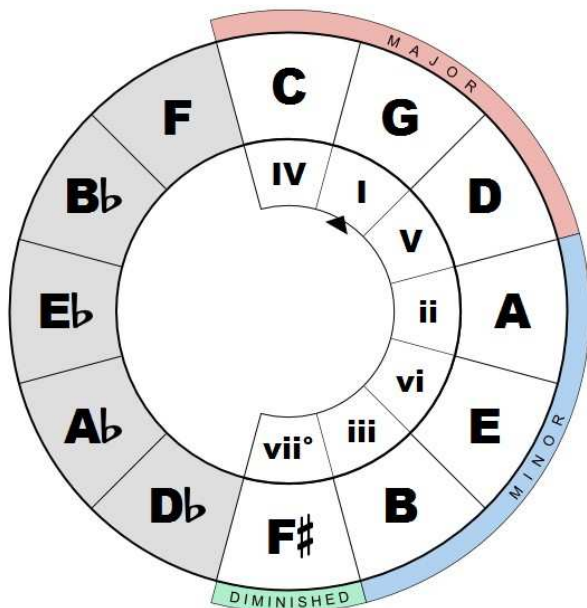
- E – A – B

Progression of I-IV-V in the key of F Major:



- F – Bb – C

Progression of I-IV-V in the key of G Major:

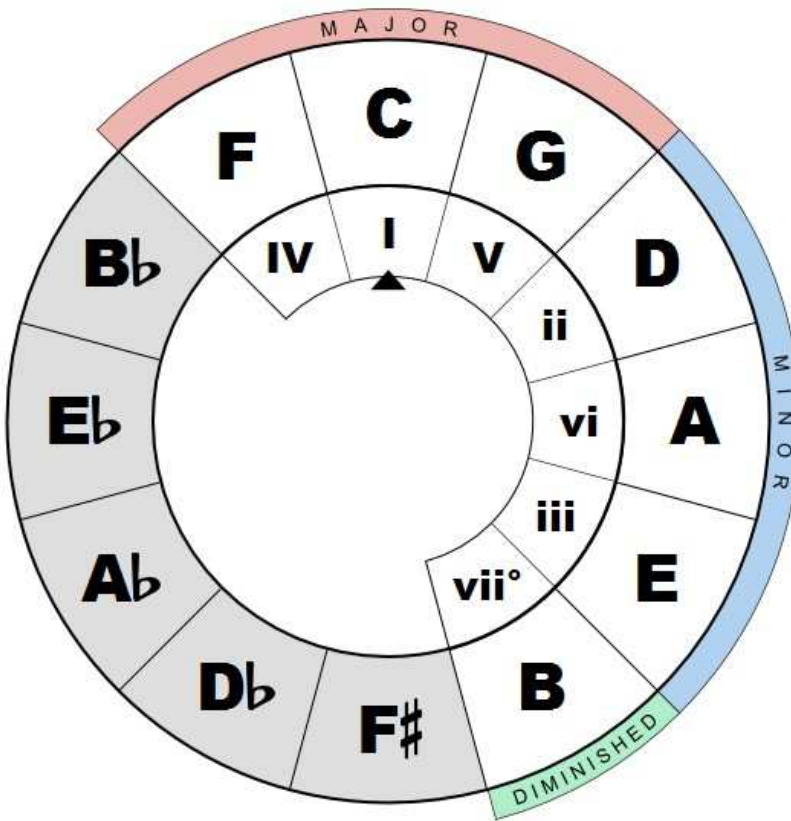


- G – C – D

Now, that should have been pretty easy to understand. Next we need to rearrange some of the I-IV-V's to create different progressions. Remember, they DO NOT necessarily need to be in any order, and DO NOT necessarily only have to work in groups of three.

Check this out:

These progressions are ALL in C Major for now:

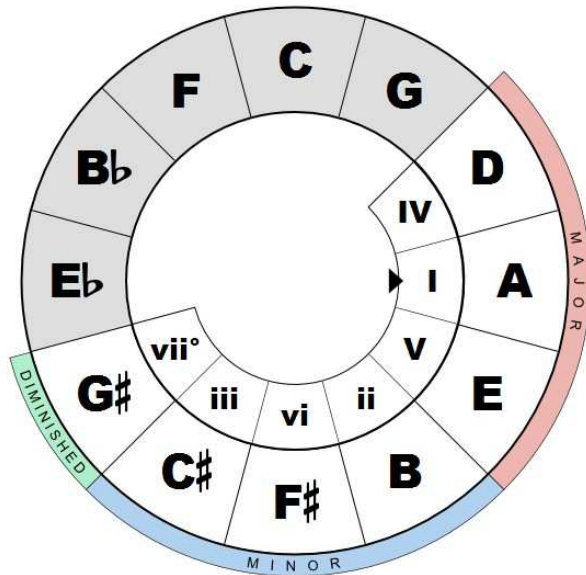


- I – IV – V – V = C – F – G – G
- I – IV – V – IV = C – F – G – F
- I – I – IV – V = C – C – F – G
- I – IV – I – V = C – F – C – G

Often I get asked, “Well what’s the point of using Roman Numerals instead of notes?”

The answer is actually quite easy: *If we use Roman numerals INSTEAD, we can apply these Roman numerals as a template.* In other words, we can use the spectrum of virtually any note or chord name and just plug it in to the name of the Roman numeral.

What about using A Major?



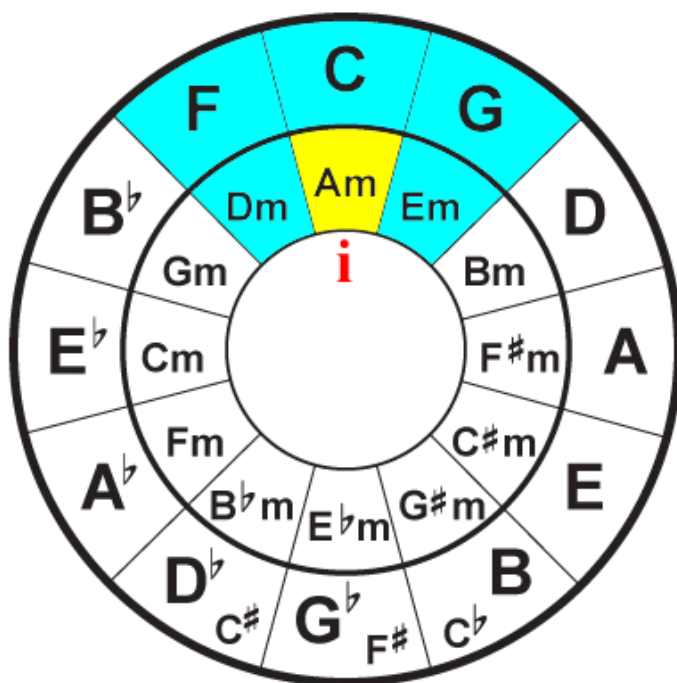
- I – IV – V – V = A – D – E – E
- I – IV – V – IV = A – D – E – D
- I – I – IV – V = A – A – D – E
- I – IV – I – V = A – D – A – E

The list can go on from there using G, E, D and so on....

What about the MINOR Chord Progressions?

As an example we'll use the key of A minor (or Am) as well as Diagram 2 to discover the minors.

The 5 chords touching Am on the Circle of Fifths diagram can be used with Am to form a guitar chord progression.



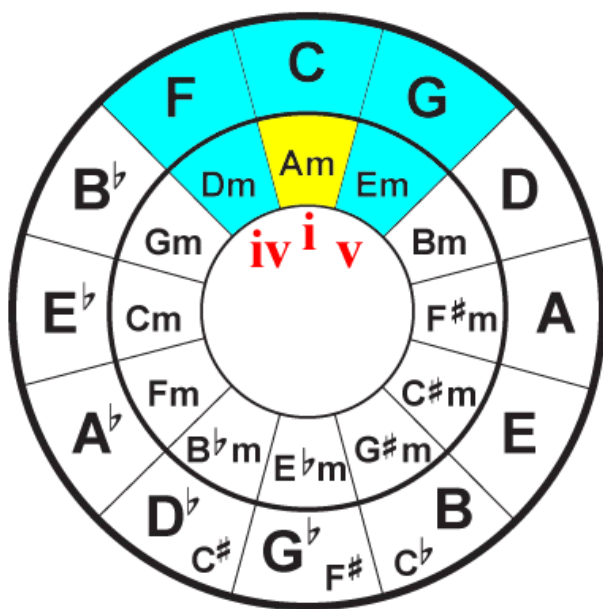
For Am these chords are: Dm, Em, C, F and G.

We know that the “i” is the Am, or the key. But, the question is, what is the Dm or Em for that matter? Remember that the circle always stays the same, so the IV (or iv) will always move counter-clockwise and the V (or v) will always move clockwise. That would mean the Dm is the iv and the Em is the v.

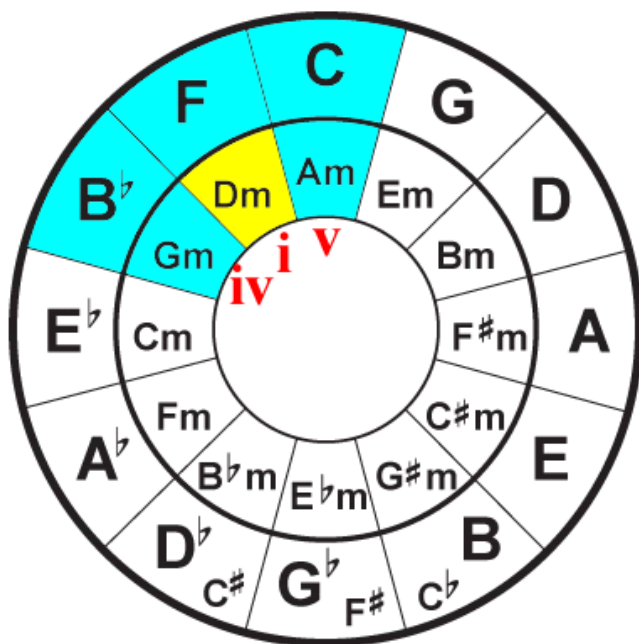
NOTICE: C, F, and G are not minor chords as you know, but since they are touching the Am itself, they CAN be used. For now let’s just stick to minor-only progressions. We’ll combine them in a moment.

Examples of an Am Chord progression:

- i – iv – v (or Am – Dm – Em)
- i – v – vi (or Am – Em – Dm)



Of course, if you chose to use Dm as your key, this change takes place in the same way. Just find the chords touching the Dm instead. (It really is THAT easy!)



The Circle of Fifths chord positioning is relative throughout the circle.

For example: C is related to F the same way that D is related to G or E is related to A.

This is especially useful when you have problems playing certain chords (e.g. The F Chord) and you want to transpose between keys.

If you have a song with the chords C, F and G but you can't play F yet you can transpose between keys using the Circle of Fifths.

The C can be played as A, the F can be played as D and the G can be played as E.

What We Have Covered:

1. Basic Major Chord Progressions
2. Basic Minor Chord Progressions

Now we want to combine Major and minor.

Here we have a series of both Major and minor progressions:

- i – iv – VII – III
- i – III – iv – VI
- i – VII – VI – V

In the examples above, we **MUST** start on a minor, as indicated in the progression of “i.”

Let's use the first one: **i – iv – VII – III** for now:

Key of A(m): Am – Dm – G – C

Key of B(m): Bm – Em – A – D

Key of C(m): Cm – Fm – Bb – Eb

Key of D(m): Dm – Gm – C – F

Key of E(m): Em – Am – D – G

Key of F(m): Fm – Bb – Eb – Ab

Now we'll use the **i – III – iv – VI**:

Key of A(m): Am – C – Dm – F

Key of B(m): Bm – D – Em – G

Key of C(m): Cm – Eb – Fm – Ab

Key of D(m): Dm – F – Gm – Bb

Key of E(m): Em – G – Am – C

Key of F(m): Fm – Ab – Bb – Db

Finally let's use the **i- VII - VI - v**

Key of A(m): Am – G – F - Em

Key of B(m): Bm – A – G – F#m

Key of C(m): Cm – Bb – Ab - Gm

Key of D(m): Dm – C – Bb - Am

Key of E(m): Em – D – C - Bm

Key of F(m): Fm – Eb – Db - Cm

You'll notice here that the “v” is in LOWER case. Interesting huh? You CAN create lower case numerals and apply the “v” instead here to create the minor.

Experimental Options:

- (1) v – VII – i – VI
- (2) IV – vi – iii – ii
- (3) I – ii – IV – vii^o
- (4) i – v – VI – v

Ex. 1: Key of Bm: Bm – D – Em – C

Ex. 2: Key of Bb: Bb – Dm – Am – Gm

Ex. 3: Key of F: F – Gm – Bb - E^o

Ex. 4: Key of Fm: Fm – Cm – Db – Cm

One thing you'll always want to consider is how the progressions ‘sound’ as a whole. Sometimes plugging and playing any values of numbers (as long as they are available on the wheel) creates highly unusual, sometimes rare, and sometimes awful combinations. However, there is literally NO END to the style of music you can create by simply using the progression wheel.

There is no reason to get into the Dominant 7ths (because all you do is literally add a ‘7th’ to any chord of your choice) so now we'll look at common cycles.

Descending Fifths:

B-E-A-D-G-C (using the key of C)

This cycle travels counter-clockwise from “B” to “C.” The “B7-E7-A7-D7-G7-C” and “Bm-E7-Am-Dm-G7-C” progressions are two common types of this cycle. The first type is called a cycle of dominant seventh chords.

An example of this type of cycle that uses secondary dominant sevenths is the verse progression to the Chordettes' 1954 hit *Mister Sandman* shown below. A secondary dominant is a chord that serves as the "V" of another.

For example, in the "B7-E7-A7-D7-G7-C" progression the "B7" is the "V" of the "E7" chord and the "E7" is the "V" of the "A7" chord.

Similarly, the "A7" is the "V" of the "D7" chord and the "D7" is the "V" of the "G7" chord.

Again, these are ALL in descending fifths, but also realize that it starts on the "I" which is C (in this example.)

Examples:

- C – B7 – E7 – A9 – Dm7 – G7
- C – Bm – E7 – Am (to) Am/G – F – G7 – C

E-A-D-G-C Cycle

This cycle travels counter-clockwise from "E" to "C." The "E7-A7-D7-G7-C" and "Em-Am-Dm-G7-C" progressions are two common types of this cycle. Again, the first type is called a cycle of dominant seventh chords. We're still working in the key of C.

Examples:

- C – E7 – A7 – Dm – G7 – C (You're Nobody Til' Somebody Loves You)
- C – Em – Am – Dm7 – G7

DESCENDING FOURTHS

Bb-F-C-G Cycle

This cycle travels clockwise from "Bb" to "G."

An example of this type of progression is the "C-Bb-F-C-G" chorus progression to the Beatles' 1967 *Lovely Rita*

What About 12 Bar Blues?

I don't want to confuse you here, so I am just providing you with an absolute basic series of 12 bar blues. Here's the 'standard' which, as you probably have guessed, involves 12 Roman numerals.

Standard:

I - I - I - I - IV - IV - I - I - V - V - I - I

Let's say we wanted to play a 12 bar blues shuffle using only the standard. If we pick the key of C (it's so much easier to stick with a key when explaining this topic) then we can establish that the "I" is the C. Remember that we can add a 7th at ANY time, so instead of making it this: C - C - C (all indicating "I", or the tonic) we could do this: C - C7 - C - C7 (or any combination - plus more, but let's not worry about that for now)

Next we just need to find the IV. Looking at the Circle of Fifths, based on the key of C, we know that the IV is the F chord. Simply plug that F chord into ANY "IV" and keep in mind that you can add the 7th to change it up a little.

Last is the V, which would be the G chord, again with dominants at any time.

Here are some possible combinations

(I - I - I - I - IV - IV - I - I - V - V - I - I)

- C - C7 - C - C7 - F - F7 - C - C7 - G - G7 - C - C7
- C7 - C - C7 - C - F7 - F - C7 - C - G7 - G - C7 - C

W.C. Handy liked this (sticking with C Major still):

I - I - I - I - IV - IV - I - I - V - IV - I - I

- C - C7 - C - C7 - F - F7 - C - C7 - G7 - F - C - C7
- C7 - C - C7 - C - F7 - F - C7 - C - G - F7 - C7 - C

You can also incorporate quick changes:

I - IV - I - I - IV - IV - I - I - V - IV - I - I

- C - F - C7 - C - F7 - F - C - C7 - G - F7 - C - C7
- C7 - F7 - C - C7 - F - F7 - C7 - C - G7 - F - C7 - C

The technicalities: when constructing a 7th pattern, which is VERY common in jazz and blues, it should be written as such:

I - IV - I7 - IV - IV7 - I - I7 - V - IV - I - V7

This progression, if starting in the key of A MAJOR instead, would be as such:

A - D - A7 - D - D7 - A - A7 - E - D - A - E7

This would only matter if you were playing with another guitarist or accompanying a piece. I just wanted to make sure you knew that if you added a 7th to the progression it should technically be noted as to not confuse others.

Applying a Turnaround

What blues or jazz song would be complete without a turnaround? Well, some actually don't have them, but we'll address a few examples of ones that do for safety purposes. The turnaround is indicated in bold.

I - IV - vii^o - iii - vi - **ii - V - I**

- C Major: C - F - B - E - A - D - G - C
- Variation: C7 - F - B7 - E - A7 - D7 - G - C
(I7 - IV - vii^o7 - iii - vi7 - **ii7 - V - I**)

I - V - I

- C Major: C - G - C
- Variation: C7 - G7 - C
(I7 - V7 - I)

I - IV - V - I

- C Major: C - F - G - C
- Variation: C7 - F7 - G7 - C
(I7 - IV7 - V7 - I)

Realize that all of these are basically ADDED turnarounds, so the progression you see can be added into any basic 12 bar (or variation of) pattern. Just add it where you want it to turn around and stay consistent with the idea of the progression.

Final Thoughts

I know this is a great amount of information to retain, but realize that 90% of this is really just optional information. You don't actually NEED any of this to follow along with the actual strumming. It's just a guide that will allow you to create multiple progressions.

If you have any questions you can always contact me at: nathan@ezstrummer.com and I'll be glad to help.

Sincerely,
Nathan Wilson
ezstrummer.com