MusicReason RESOURCE

Chord Function, Cadence, and Substitution

https://musicreason.com/resources/chord-function-cadence-and-substitution/ · Last updated 2026-09-06

A chord symbol names notes. A Roman numeral names a function: the role that chord plays in relation to a tonal center at a specific moment. The same G major chord is a I chord in G major and a dominant V chord in C major; nothing about the notes changes, only the context around them does.

Three functional families, one worked example

A ii-V-I in C major, function by function

Chord	Roman numeral	Function
D minor	ii	Predominant, leans toward the dominant
G major	V	Dominant, creates tension that pulls toward the tonic
C major	I	Tonic, the point of harmonic rest

Roman Numeral Analyzer and Chord Function Analyzer both assign this kind of label relative to a stated (or inferred) tonal center, never from a chord symbol read in isolation.

An applied dominant borrows tension, briefly

A chord like D7 resolving to G within a passage in C major is acting as V/V, "the dominant of the dominant": it temporarily borrows the pull a dominant has, aimed at a scale degree other than the main tonic, without actually changing key. Secondary Dominant Finder identifies exactly this kind of brief tonicization and distinguishes it from an actual modulation.

A cadence is a functional pattern, not a chord pair

"Authentic," "half," "plagal," and "deceptive" name specific functional resolutions (or deliberate non-resolutions), not just any two chords in a row. Cadence Finder looks at the functional relationship between consecutive chords to classify which cadence family, if any, is present.

A substitution has to earn its place, not just sound close

Chord Substitution Finder proposes a replacement chord only when it can state the specific rationale: shared function, shared voice-leading tones, or a tritone relationship, for example, rather than an

unexplained "chords that sound similar" list. Modal Interchange Explorer and Reharmonization Explorer extend this into borrowing chords from a parallel mode and building fuller alternate harmonizations.

Frequently asked questions

Can the same chord have two different functions in two different songs?

Yes. Function comes from a chord's relationship to the tonal center and how it resolves in that specific passage, not from the chord symbol alone. A G major chord is dominant in C major and subdominant-adjacent (bVII-style) borrowed color in G minor.

What makes a substitution valid rather than just "a different chord"?

Chord Substitution Finder only proposes a replacement that preserves the original chord's functional role or shares enough voice-leading and tone content to serve the same resolution, stated with its specific rationale, not a generic "chords that sound similar" list.

Is a secondary dominant a modulation?

Not by itself. A secondary dominant briefly tonicizes another scale degree without abandoning the original key; Modulation Planner and Secondary Dominant Finder handle these as distinct, related questions rather than treating one as a synonym for the other.

Where this shows up

CHORDS AND HARMONY
Chord Function Analyzer

PROGRESSION AND ARRANGING
Roman Numeral Analyzer

CHORDS AND HARMONY
Cadence Finder

CHORDS AND HARMONY
Secondary Dominant Finder

CHORDS AND HARMONY
Chord Substitution Finder

CHORDS AND HARMONY
Modal Interchange Explorer

CHORDS AND HARMONY
Reharmonization Explorer