

# **DESCRIPTIVE HARMONY STYLE GUIDE**

**A personal approach to notating Western harmony  
consistently and accurately**

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## INTRODUCTION

Harmony has moved on: musicians do not necessarily write music that can be analysed functionally any more, but the descriptive language has not moved with the music.

The prevailing system of notating chords using letters and numbers has existed for approximately 200 years. There have been few changes to it in this time; what has proliferated more is the number of analyses and explanations as the language of Western modern music has become more complex and variegated. These explanations tend to bring in slivers of knowledge about mediaeval modes with synthetic scales and chords abstracted from early 20<sup>th</sup> Century music, classical functional harmony and a *de facto* convention in notation. But this is not a synthesis; but more a vague shifting of an orthodox position, which is tied closely to assigning transpositions of scales as "modes"; degree alterations of these "modes"; and triads built from these.

In music most closely related to jazz this has had consequences on **accuracy** (how correct something is) and **precision** (how reproducible or consistent something is).

1. **Chord symbols are now less descriptive and more functional** – if a chord is rigidly married with a scale then the flexibility of description is diminished; moreover, as the chord has an associated scale, melodic notes may be added to the chord that actually break down the intended harmony.
2. **The capacity to describe has diminished** – if a chord cannot be married rigidly to a scale or "mode" it is less likely to be described, or more likely to be described inaccurately.
3. **The symbolism is arbitrary and not truly representative** – take "alt chords" for instance. Visiting any music theory forum will present a question on this: and each thread will run as there really isn't a consensus on what an altered chord is, other than the fact that it has been altered in some way. Thus *the prevailing system is not precise, although it is intended to be*.

The tools to purely describe a chord, with no reference to scales (or at most, with reference only to the chromatic scale), do exist. But the robustness of current Western descriptive harmony notation should not be ignored or thrown away: perhaps some reassessment is in order though. This is an attempt to do so, looking at different and personal approaches to specific problems in popular/jazz notation. In each case I have to satisfy these questions:

1. does the symbol I have written describe what I want to hear?
2. Is this the most direct way of writing what I intend to be played and heard?
3. If I gave it to another group, would I get the desired affect again?

And in these questions it is worth exploring those terms **accuracy** and **precision**.

Accuracy in this case does not mean "the measure of detail", but "the measure of truth to the target". This means that if your artistic aim was to leave some openness about a harmony for a musician, allowing for various colourations, it may be better to write a more

basic symbol. If this gets you your desired effect (or close to it) the symbol is accurate. This hinges on knowing and understanding things that are less to do with mechanics (which, let's face it, is what we're dealing with here) and are more to do with people and the depth of your work.

If however you need a specific sonority and you are unable to describe it fluently then the symbol possibly needs work, unless it is really a very difficult thing to describe. **But if the notes are there, it can be described.**

How efficient you are at realising the harmonies as symbols for others to read has a direct effect on the accuracy. If the notes are coming in the right order but the sound isn't working the way it did before then **the precision** might need some work – sometimes it's a matter of dynamics, but it can be the voicing of the harmony; again something the composer can influence directly.

I feel the style guide I present here gives me the flexibility of accurate description with a precision in emotional feeling. Some of it will be familiar – but some may not be. It's all intended to be helpful but not prescriptive.

# RATIONALE

## 1 WHEN IS #11 THE SAME AS #4?

For my ears, **never**.

Go to a piano and play **c + e + f# + g** as a block chord. Now move the **f#** up an octave. Sonically, honestly, are they the same? I don't think they are.

Functionally, the **f#** is an augmented fourth from **c**. But  $C^{add\#4}$  has different harmonic implications to  $C^{(\#11)}$ ; the relation between the chromatic and diatonic notes is different. The language is descriptive, not functionally reductive, so if you want a certain sound, you owe it to yourself to describe it as accurately as you can. There will be those who will assume a minor seventh and a ninth in  $C^{(\#11)}$  but I feel that assumption is an over-complication, as I can happily describe  $C^{7(9,\#11)}$  and leave no doubt, consistently.

The knock-on of this is that this allows the composer to accurately and consistently describe more exotic chords. Let's look at **c + d + e**:



Should the musician add a **g** and call the chord  $C^{add2}$  or  $C^{(9)}$  the intention of the sonority might be lost; perhaps the composer wanted that specific harmony without the perfect fifth. So now, after writing the chord, the composer has to think: **how do I represent this harmony accurately, simply and consistently?**

If you didn't want to stray too far away from what people know you could use "omit 5" or "no 5":

$C^{add2(no\ 5)}$

But this symbol still states the chord as a major chord, which may not be desirable. It's also possible to describe the intervals from the tonic – a form of figured notation, really. You could stay within the tonal system:

$C^{[2,3]}$

Or use a bastardised form of pitch set theory :

$\{c,2,4\}$

But the idea here is that you are now not confined by a tonal system that may have nothing to do with the harmonies in your work. You can thus write things like

4/4  $d^{[4,b5]}$   $F\sharp^{maj7(b5)}$  |  $C\sharp^{maj7(b5)}$   $C^{7(b9)}$  |  $Fm$   $c^{[b2,b9]}$  |  $c^{[b2,b9]}$  ||

which might look like this in a score:



All the harmonic information is preserved in the chord symbols.

## 2 WHY USE A CHORD WHEN YOU ACTUALLY WANT A SCALE?

The purpose of a chord symbol is to show the harmony. In chord-scale theory, a musician will use a chord as a function of a scale, to represent the scale. So you hear things like this:

"The score has a  $D^{7(b9,b11)}$  ... so I'm on the D reversed octotonic scale!"

Did the composer intend to hear that for the melody? Or in fact, was this meant purely for the harmony?

Simply put, there is no reason to play a diminished scale on that chord if you do not say that's what you want. If you're just describing the harmony then a soloist could play any scale they wanted as long as it sounded right to him/her. So **if you really want that scale, just write it.**

$d^{dim.(s)}$

[I am using a lower case letter to denote the tonic, and have superscripted the type of scale (diminished, semitone interval first)]

How it's done *doesn't matter*, but in this case, there is no real need for a chord as a scale is intended. This has the consequence of allowing you to write a different chord – potentially, the chord you actually want.

$d^{dim.(s)}/E^7$

If in fact you intended a tritone mix then a polychord might do it:

$A\flat/D$

[the upper-case D is a chord, not a bass note: that would be  $A\flat/d$ ]

As harmonic symbols these choices are distinct, and give the tonally-based soloist different choices –  $d^{dim.(s)}$  precludes  $c\sharp$  and  $g$  which are present in both  $d^{maj.}$  and  $a\flat^{maj.}$

All that remains is for the writer to be consistent with the abbreviations of scales (my personal list is at the end). It's easy enough to write a piece with absolutely no references to

chords at all, just indicating the scale desired. For a soloist of any capability the intention of the composer is clearer.

# THE GUIDE

Harmony is two sounds or more produced simultaneously, or played in such a way as to give the impression of a unified sound.

In contemporary Western music, harmony is normally described based on musical notes or pitches and the relative spacing between the notes heard.

Specifically, two notes sounded together is called a harmonic interval or dyad and three or more notes is called a chord or triad.

Any chord or harmonic interval can be represented by letters. Below follows my method of describing musical harmonies. They are meant to be easily read by most musicians with a reasonable level of music theory.

## 1 *monads and dyads*

One note (termed a monad) is represented by its pitch letter, in lower case.

$d\flat$

Here a random note is specified by  $r$  (although of course you could use any other letter that isn't a note name).

Harmonic intervals/dyads are represented as note 1 + note 2, with both note letter names in lower case:

$g\sharp+f$  = "g-sharp and f"

Nothing is said about the spacing between the notes: so the two notes could be played in any octave or register.

To specify that one note is to be played lower than the other, the forward slash is used and the dyad is written **higher note/lower note**:

$g\sharp/f$  = "g-sharp over f"

Alternatively, the interval can be written in **superscripted brackets** after the lower note. The type of brackets used is up to you.

$f^{[\sharp 2]}$  or  $f^{[\sharp 9]}$

these two examples **do not** describe the same harmony though. See *rationale 1*.

## 2 triads

Three-note chords (or triads) are based primarily on the semi-descriptive method currently used by many musicians.

Any triad can be represented by writing the tonic in lower-case and then writing the stacked intervals in superscripted brackets.

$$c^{[\sharp 2,6]} = a/d\sharp/c$$

Major triads are shown by the **root pitch letter in UPPER-CASE**. It says nothing about what order the notes should be played.

$$F = f^{[3,5]} \text{ OR } f+a+c$$

Minor triads have a **lower-case m** (*in the United States, a minus sign (-)*) written after the root.

$$Dm = D^- = d^{[b3,5]} \text{ OR } d+f+a$$

To state an inversion, put a **superscripted number before the chord symbol**:

$${}^2D^b = ab^{[4,6]}$$

$${}^1D = f\sharp^{[b3,b6]}$$

Roman numerals could be used here if you like: so  ${}^bD$ ,  ${}^1D$

Augmented triads use an addition sign (+) after the root, or "aug"

$$C+ = C_{aug} = c^{\{3,\sharp 5\}}$$

Diminished triads have a superscripted circle ( $^\circ$ ) after the root, or "dim"

$$B^\circ = B_{dim} = b^{[b3,b5]}$$

"Suspended" triads use "sus", and then the number of the suspended interval:

$$Asus2 = a^{[2,5]}$$

$$Asus^b2 = a^{[b2,5]}$$

$$Asus9 = a^{[5,9]}$$

$$Asus4 = a^{[4,5]}$$

A random chord is shown by R.



### 3 *larger chords: adding extensions*

A major seventh chord is represented by writing **maj7** superscripted after the root name.

$$E_{\text{sus}\sharp 4}^{\text{maj7}} = e^{[\sharp 4, 5, 7]}$$

$$F^{\text{maj7}} = f + a + c + e$$

The dominant seventh chord is shown by simply writing “7” superscripted after the root name.

$$G^{+7} = g^{[3, \sharp 5, b7]}$$

Added or altered intervals within an octave are written as numbers, superscripted after the root name and triad alteration; and are written in parentheses and after a seventh when a seventh is present.

$$G^6 = g + b + d + e$$
$$G^{7(4)} = g + b + c + d + f$$

Intervals greater than the octave are always written in parentheses.

$$B^{\text{maj7}(13)} = b + d\sharp + f\sharp + a\sharp + g\sharp$$

More intervals can be added by using commas after each number:

$$B^{\text{maj7}(b9, 13)} = b + d\sharp + f\sharp + a\sharp + c + g\sharp$$

The diminished symbol for the triad is also used as the full diminished chord. But the half-diminished chord (“minor-seven, flat-five”) is denoted by a  $\circ$  after the root name:

$$F^\circ = f + a\flat + b + d$$

$$D^\circ = Dm^{7(b5)} = d + f + a\flat + c$$

Chords with an specified bass note: CHORD/bass note

$${}^3G^{\text{maj7}(b5)}/c$$

Non-specific polychords: CHORD1 + CHORD2 + ...

$$E^\circ + C^{\text{maj7}} + B$$

Specific stacking of chords: HIGHER CHORD/LOWER CHORD/...

$$B/F/A$$

## 4 scales

Sometimes it is necessary to state an implied scale (*see rationale 2*). This is achieved by writing the tonic of the scale in lower case and then an abbreviation of the scale quality:

$$d^{\text{dim.(s)}}$$

A scale can be altered by adding the affected intervals after the scale type in brackets:

$$r^{\text{mix.(\#4)}} = r^{\text{lyd.dom.}} = r^{\text{maj.(\#4,b7)}}$$

## 5 General abbreviations

Of course, this list is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. As long as you are clear and consistent, you can create your own.

chr.	chromatic	dor.	Dorian
dia.	diatonic	phr.	Phrygian
M. or maj.	major	lyd.	Lydian
m. or min.	minor	mix.	Mixolydian
har.	harmonic	aeo.	Aeolian
mel.	melodic	loc.	Locrian
dom.	dominant	tri.	trichord
hy.	<i>hypo</i> - prefix (for Western modes)	tet.	tetratonic
aug. or wt.	augmented/whole tone	pen.	pentatonic
dim.(s)	diminished, semitone first	hex.	hexatonic
dim.(t)	diminished, tone first	oct.	octotonic
ion.	Ionian modal structure	any	any scale the player wishes

## TIPS

1. If the scale is massive or obscure, just write it out as notes, possibly as a footnote. Or even better, **think of a better way to describe it**. There are quite a few "jazz scales" that can be broken down to altered major or minor scales – very often there is little point in using the more exotic names at all.
2. Don't use a scale symbol when you actually want a chord. Because, y'know, that'd be as weird as using a chord symbol when you actually want a scale.
3. A "do unto others..." rule: if you're reading someone's work, don't *assume* a scale when you see a chord or *vice versa*. **If the composer is alive and standing in front of you, it might – might – just be easier to ask.**
4. **Keep it balanced.** Sometimes you don't have to be exactly descriptive and F+ will do over F+<sup>7</sup>(insert mad extensions here). The idea is to write symbols that tell the musicians what's going on – but if you're writing for someone to solo, can also give impetus to some creativity. The harmonic descriptions are just another source, along with the melody and the rhythm.