

Chord Substitution Cheat Sheet

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1 Overview

Playing complex “jazz-y” arrangements can be challenging without an in-depth knowledge of music theory followed by song analysis. Many players learn by trial and error that some chords can be simplified without losing the basic tonality of a phrase. These rules are actually based in chord theory, and can be summarized in a table.

2 Illegal Substitutions

Some substitutions are simply wrong. Here are a few hard-and-fast rules.

2.1 Major vs. Minor

The single most important value of a chord is whether it is minor or major. **This can never be ignored or substituted.** In the substitutions that follow, there are exactly zero instances where a minor is replaced by a major, or vice-versa. The few occasions when this may be allowed are beyond the scope of this document.

2.2 6th Vs. 7th

In the following table, you should note that there are no instances when a 6th chord (major or minor) can be replaced by a 7th chord of any kind. These voices are very different, since the 6th is a harmonic tone in an octave but the (flatted) 7th has strong dissonance.

2.3 Major 7th versus 7th

This issue is similar to the issue of 6th chords. The major 7th tone is much more harmonious than the (flatted) 7th, so a 7th should never be substituted for a major 7th.

3 Substitution Table

In the table that follows, I use a root chord of C major as a demonstration. However, the same substitutions are available in all twelve keys, since they are structurally the same.

Desired Chord	Primary Substitution(s)	Secondary Substitution(s) and Notes
C7	C	
C6	C	Am, Am7 (The relative minor. Never use C7!)
C9	C7	
C11	C9	Bb (Drop down one whole step or 2 frets.) Avoid the bass note.
C13	C6	The '6' note is the same as the '13' note.
CMaj7	C	Em (The IIIIm chord. Never use C7!).
CMaj9	CMaj7	
CMaj13	C6	Never use C7!
Csus, Csus4	C	C, but add an F (the 4 th tone in C major) if you can.
Cm7	Cm	
Cm9	Cm7, Cm	
Cm6	Cm	
Cm11	Cm7	
Cm13	Cm6	
C7b9	C7	C#dim (Use the 'dim' chord one half-step higher.)
Cm7b5	Cm7	Cdim (Use the 'dim' chord of the root note.)
Cm6b5	Cdim	These are exactly the same.
Caug (C+)	C	
Caug7 (C+7)	C+, C7	
Caug9 (C+9)	C+, C7	