



Chords by Ear

4-Chord Starter Kit

Play songs you love with

C

G

Am

F

A free beginner's guide · hundreds of songs · 4 chords



C · G · Am · F — the four chords that unlock hundreds of songs

Welcome

Hi, I'm Housseem, and I'm glad you're here.

This little kit is built on one simple idea: you don't need to read sheet music to start making real music on the piano. Most pop songs are built on chords, and a surprising number of them share the same four chords in the same order.

In these pages you'll learn:

- Where your fingers go on the keyboard
- Four chords: C, G, A minor (Am) and F
- The famous I-V-vi-IV progression, and why it's everywhere
- Four rhythm patterns that turn those chords into music
- A list of 10 well-known songs that use this progression
- A public-domain melody to play along with
- A relaxed practice plan

Go at your own pace. There's no deadline and no test. If a page takes you a week, that's a perfectly good week.

Getting your bearings

Finding C: Look at the black keys. They come in groups of two and three. The white key just to the left of any group of two black keys is a C. The C closest to the middle of your keyboard is middle C.

The white keys from C upward: C – D – E – F – G – A – B – (then C again)

Finger numbers (same for both hands)

Finger	Number
Thumb	1
Index	2
Middle	3
Ring	4
Little finger	5

Hand position tips

- Sit so your elbows are roughly level with the keys, with your forearms relaxed.
- Curve your fingers slightly, as if you're holding a small ball.
- Play with the fleshy tips of your fingers, not flat fingers.
- If anything feels tense, stop, shake your hands out and start again more slowly.

What is a chord?

A chord is three or more notes played together. The chords in this kit are triads (three notes) built by "skipping" white keys:

Play a note, skip one, play one, skip one, play one.

Starting on C: C (skip D) E (skip F) G gives you a C major chord.

- Major chords tend to sound bright and settled.
- Minor chords (written with a small "m", like Am) tend to sound softer or more emotional.

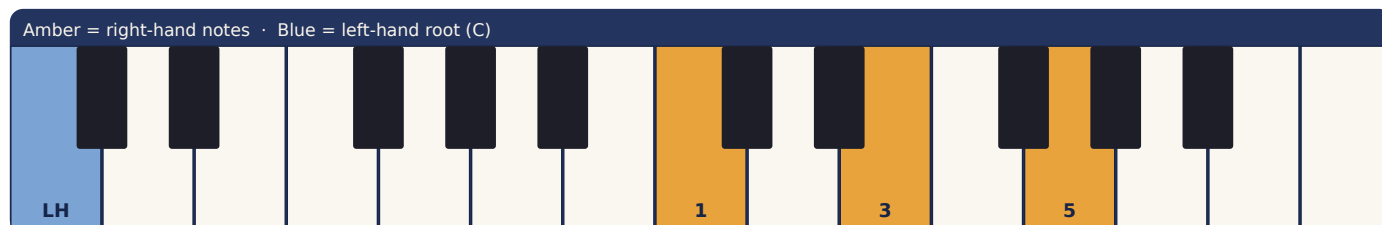
Your right hand plays the three-note chord. Your left hand plays one low note: the chord's name note, called the root (C for a C chord, G for a G chord, and so on).

Chord 1: C major (C)

Notes: C - E - G

Right hand (around middle C): C = finger 1, E = finger 3, G = finger 5

Left hand: a single low C.



Sound check: Press all three right-hand notes at the same moment. You should hear one clean, bright sound with no buzzing between notes. If one note is quiet, press that finger a little more firmly.

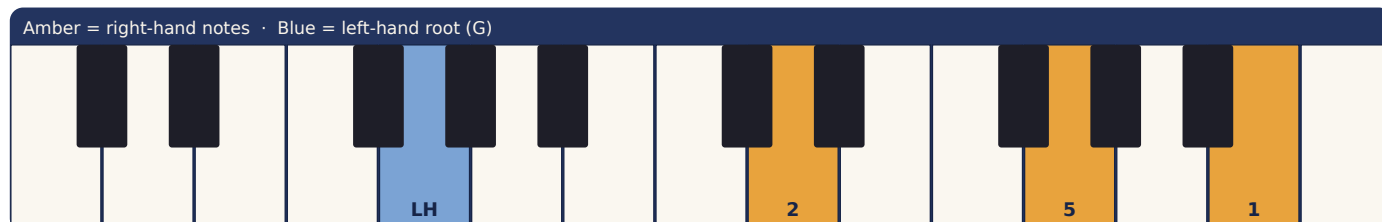
Chord 2: G major (G)

Notes: G – B – D

Option A, root position: G (1) – B (3) – D (5), moving your hand up to start on G.

Option B, the "lazy" shape (recommended): B – D – G — B = finger 1, D = finger 2, G = finger 5. Same three notes, rearranged (an inversion). Your thumb slides from C to B, middle finger from E to D, little finger stays on G.

Left hand: a single low G.



From C to this lazy G, only two fingers move — that's the whole point.

Chord 3: A minor (Am)

Notes: A – C – E

Option A, root position: A (1) – C (3) – E (5)

Option B, the "lazy" shape (recommended): C – E – A — C = finger 1, E = finger 2, A = finger 5.
From the C chord, only your little finger moves, from G up to A.

Left hand: a single low A.



Am is your first minor chord — same shape idea, softer colour.

Chord 4: F major (F)

Notes: F – A – C

Option A, root position: F (1) – A (3) – C (5)

Option B, the "lazy" shape (recommended): C – F – A — C = finger 1, F = finger 3, A = finger 5.
From Am, thumb and little finger stay put. Only one finger moves, from E up to F.

Left hand: a single low F.



F is a white key — remember that when you find it on the keyboard.

Summary chart (the "lazy" shapes)

Chord	Right hand notes	Fingers	Left hand
C	C - E - G	1 - 3 - 5	C
G	B - D - G	1 - 2 - 5	G
Am	C - E - A	1 - 2 - 5	A
F	C - F - A	1 - 3 - 5	F

Notice how little your right hand moves. That's the whole trick: change as few fingers as possible, and let your left hand show which chord it is.

The I-V-vi-IV progression

Every key has seven basic chords, numbered with Roman numerals. In the key of C:

#	I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii°
Chord	C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	B°

(Capital numerals = major, small = minor.)

I-V-vi-IV means chord 1, then 5, then 6, then 4. In C, that's:

C → G → Am → F (and repeat)

Why it works: the I chord feels like "home". The V leans away, the vi adds emotion, and the IV leads naturally back home. Round and round — a satisfying loop.

Same loop, different start: many songs begin on the minor chord:

Am → F → C → G (vi-IV-I-V)

It's the same four chords, so you already know it.

Moving to other keys (for later)

Key	I	V	vi	IV
C	C	G	Am	F
G	G	D	Em	C
D	D	A	Bm	G
A	A	E	F#m	D
E	E	B	C#m	A
F	F	C	Dm	Bb

Songs are often recorded in keys other than C. You can still play them in C — they'll just sound a little higher or lower. That's completely normal. (Many digital keyboards have a "transpose" button.)

Four rhythm patterns

Count a steady 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 for each chord, then move to the next. Start slowly. A metronome app at 60–70 BPM is a good friend here.

How to read them: each number is one beat. Count out loud and play on the beats shown. A dot (.) means "keep holding, don't play". Your own count becomes the backing track.

Pattern 1: Whole notes (the warm-up)

Play each chord once on beat 1 (both hands) and hold for 4 counts.

C . . . | G . . . | Am . . . | F . . .

Pattern 2: Steady pulse (pop/ballad)

Left hand: root on beat 1, held. Right hand: chord on every beat.

LH: C . . . | RH: C C C C

Pattern 3: Bass and chord

Left hand on beats 1 and 3, right hand on beats 2 and 4.

1: LH root · 2: RH chord · 3: LH root · 4: RH chord

Pattern 4: Broken chord (gentle and flowing)

Left hand holds the root. Right hand plays bottom–middle–top–middle, one note per beat.

C chord: C – E – G – E

Tip: if a chord change feels rushed, play the last beat of each bar quieter and use it to get your fingers ready.

10 songs that use I-V-vi-IV

These well-known songs use the I-V-vi-IV loop (or its vi-IV-I-V rotation) for their main sections. Once your four chords feel comfortable, try playing the loop while you listen to the original recording.

#	Song	Artist	Loop
1	Let It Be	The Beatles	I-V-vi-IV
2	No Woman, No Cry	Bob Marley & The Wailers	I-V-vi-IV
3	With or Without You	U2	I-V-vi-IV
4	Someone Like You	Adele	I-V-vi-IV
5	I'm Yours	Jason Mraz	I-V-vi-IV
6	Don't Stop Believin'	Journey	I-V-vi-IV
7	Hey, Soul Sister	Train	I-V-vi-IV
8	Torn	Natalie Imbruglia	I-V-vi-IV
9	Save Tonight	Eagle-Eye Cherry	vi-IV-I-V
10	Zombie	The Cranberries	vi-IV-I-V

Good to know

- The recordings are in various keys. With this kit you're playing them in C — higher or lower than the original is fine for practice.
- Some songs add extra chords in a bridge or pre-chorus. The four-chord loop covers the main parts, not every bar.
- This kit doesn't include lyrics, melodies or sheet music for these songs (they're copyrighted). Use a licensed source for lyrics.
- Titles and artists are listed for educational reference only. No affiliation or endorsement is implied.

Public-domain play-along: "Ode to Joy"

This melody from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (1824) is in the public domain. You only need C and G here — a nice warm-up before the full four-chord loop.

Right hand: melody (one note per beat, start with thumb on C)

Left hand: the single root note for each bar, held for the whole bar

Bar	LH	Right hand melody
1	C	E E F G
2	G	G F E D
3	C	C C D E
4	G	E (1-2-and) · D (and) · D (3-4)
5	C	E E F G
6	G	G F E D
7	C	C C D E
8	G → C	D (1-2-and) · C (and) · C (3-4)

Counting: bars 1–3 and 5–7 are one note per count. In bars 4 and 8, count "1-and-2-and-3-4": hold the first note through "1-and-2", play the second on the "and", hold the last for "3-4".

Fingers: right thumb on C, one finger per white key up to G (C=1 ... G=5). The whole melody fits without moving.

Next step: play only left-hand notes and hum the tune. Then try full right-hand chords (C in bars 1, 3, 5, 7; G in bars 2, 4, 6, 8).

Your own 4-chord jam: play C–G–Am–F with Pattern 2, then improvise using only C, D, E, G and A. It's very hard to play a "wrong" note with these five.

A relaxed practice plan

There's no timetable here. Treat these as stages, and stay on each one as long as you like.

Stage	Focus	Done when...
1	Find middle C; play the C chord cleanly	All three notes sound together
2	Learn G, Am, F (lazy shapes)	You can play each without the chart
3	C → G → Am → F with Pattern 1	Changes feel smooth at a slow count
4	Add the left-hand root notes	Both hands land together
5	Try Patterns 2, 3 and 4	One pattern feels "musical" to you
6	"Ode to Joy" play-along	You can play it start to finish
7	Play the loop with songs from the list	You enjoy it — the whole point

Little habits that help

- 10–20 minutes, a few times a week, beats one long Sunday session.
- Leave your keyboard out and switched on if you can.
- Stop before you get frustrated, and finish on something you can already play.
- Record yourself on your phone now and again — it's encouraging to hear how far you've come.

Where to go from here

You now know four chords, one of the most-used progressions in pop music, and a few ways to play it. That's a real foundation, whatever pace you went at.

Path 1: keep going on your own

- Move the loop to the key of G: G – D – Em – C (table on page 10).
- Play every song on page 12 with each of the four rhythm patterns.
- Keep the 10–20 minute habit from page 14. Little and often.
- Listen for the loop in songs you love. Your ear gets better every time.

Path 2: follow a complete, step-by-step course

The course I recommend is Pianoforall by piano teacher Robin Hall. It uses the same chord-first, play-by-ear idea as this kit, then builds on it in order. The vendor lists:

- Rhythm-style piano: popular rhythms and classic song progressions
- Blues and rock 'n' roll, then inversions and chord changes
- Advanced chords, improvisation and jazz
- Reading music as you play by ear, working up to classical pieces

See the full course outline →

Affiliate link: if you buy through it, I may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

Either path is a good one. The most important thing is that you keep playing.

Turn the page for the course at a glance, including the price and guarantee as the vendor states them.

Your next step: Pianoforall at a glance

The course I recommend after the 4-Chord Starter Kit. Facts below are as the vendor states them.

What it is	A self-paced online piano course by piano teacher Robin Hall, with an online course player plus downloadable ebooks with the video and audio built into the pages, so you can also learn offline.
Who it's for	The vendor says: people who can't play a note yet, people who play a bit and want to improve, players of other instruments, and people who read music but can't play by ear. You don't need to read music to begin.
Who it's not for	Anyone who wants face-to-face feedback every week. It's self-paced (the vendor offers email help and a student community, not private lessons).
Price	One payment of \$49, lifetime access, no subscription. Tax may vary by location. The vendor also offers a 7-day free trial: you enter your card at checkout, \$0 is charged today, and the one-time \$49 is charged after 7 days unless you cancel through ClickBank.
Guarantee	The vendor states a 60-day money-back guarantee. Payments are processed by ClickBank.

Start the 7-day free trial →

Card entered at checkout · \$0 today · then a one-time \$49 after 7 days unless you cancel through ClickBank. The vendor states a 60-day money-back guarantee.

Affiliate link: if you buy through it, Chords by Ear may earn a commission at no extra cost to you.

Prices and terms checked on the vendor's site on 20 October 2026. Always check the current terms on the order page.

No pressure. The kit is yours either way. If you have a question, just reply to any of our emails.

Happy playing,

The Chords by Ear team

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