

Introduction to Chord Inversions

This is a brief explanation of chord inversions. For a deeper dive into music theory for guitar players, check out my book [Guitar Theory Modules](#). Here's a [playlist for Guitar Theory Modules](#). You may also want to download the Chord Formulas PDF from my [free downloads page](#).

A triad is made of three notes stacked in 3rds, and a 7th chord is made of four notes stacked in 3rds. The D major triad in the example below is spelled D-F#-A from bottom to top. The D7 chord is spelled D-F#-A-C from bottom to top.

D Major Triad

Root 3rd 5th

D F# A

T
A
B

D7 Chord

Root 3rd 5th 7th

D F# A C

T
A
B

Each note of a chord has a label describing its function in the chord.

The parts of a triad are the **root, 3rd, and 5th**. In a D major triad:

- D is the root.
- F# is the 3rd.
- A is the 5th.

The parts of a 7th chord are the **root, 3rd, 5th, and 7th**. In a D7 chord:

- D is the root.
- F# is the 3rd.
- A is the 5th.
- C is the 7th.

You can distribute the notes of a chord any way you like. When you place the notes as closely together as possible, the chord is in closed voicing. With the notes spread out, the chord is in open voicing. (See next page).

**D Major Triad
Closed Voicing**

D•F#•A

T 2
A 4
B 5

3fr. 5fr.

R 3 5

**D Major Triad
Open Voicing**

D•A•F#

T 7
A 7
B 5

5fr. 7fr.

R 5 3

**D Major Triad
Root Position**

D•F#•A•D

T 3
A 2
B 4
5

3fr. 5fr.

R 3 5 R

Whether a chord is in closed or open voicing, if the **root** of the chord is the lowest sounding note, that chord is in **root position**. If **any other note** that belongs in the chord is the lowest sounding, the chord is **inverted**.

- If the **3rd** is the lowest sounding note, the chord is in **1st inversion**.
- If the **5th** is the lowest sounding note, it's in **2nd inversion**.
- For 7th chords, if the **7th** is the lowest sounding note, it's in **3rd inversion**.

**D Major Triad
1st Inversion**

F#•A•D•F#

T 2
A 3
B 2
2

3fr. 5fr.

3 5 R 3

**D Major Triad
2nd Inversion**

A•A•D•F#

T 2
A 3
B 2
0

3fr. 5fr.

5 5 R 3

**D7 Chord
3rd Inversion**

C•A•D•F#

T 7
A 7
B 7
8

5fr. 7fr. 9fr.

^b7 5 R 3

Slash Chords Aren't Always Inversions

A slash chord is not necessarily an inversion. In a slash chord, whatever appears before the slash is the the main chord. The note appearing after the slash is the note the composer wants you to play as the bass note (lowest sounding note). Essentially, the note that follows the slash alters the chord in some way.

With a slash chord, you can assign **any** note as the lowest sounding note, but for a **chord to be an inversion, the lowest note has to be a regular part of that chord** – not an additional note.

For example, the D major chord is made up of D, F#, and A.

- **D/F#** (D over F#) is a slash chord and is an inversion because there is an F# a D major triad.
- **D/G** (D over G) is a slash chord but **not** an inversion because there is no G in a D major triad.

The diagram illustrates two slash chords: D/F# and D/G. Each is shown with a musical staff, a chord diagram, and a fretboard diagram.

D/F#: The musical staff shows a treble clef with a sharp sign and a D note on the second line. The chord diagram shows notes F# (blue), A (blue), and D (red). The fretboard diagram shows the 3rd fret on the 3rd string (F#), 5th fret on the 2nd string (A), and 3rd fret on the 1st string (D). The 4th and 5th strings are marked with 'X'.

D/G: The musical staff shows a treble clef with a sharp sign and a D note on the second line. The chord diagram shows notes G (blue), A (blue), and D (red). The fretboard diagram shows the 4th fret on the 3rd string (G), 5th fret on the 2nd string (A), and 3rd fret on the 1st string (D). The 4th and 5th strings are marked with 'X'.