

The Ultimate Guide to Creating Great Chord Charts

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1 Layout

1.i Structural Components

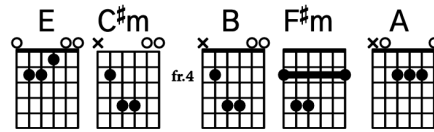
Your chord chart will or may include all of the following: Title, Composer/Songwriter(s), Guitar chord diagrams (optional, see Section 1.ii), Key (with Capo indication if necessary), Tempo and/or Stylistic indication, Copyright information, Time signature (usually unnecessary if the song is in 4/4, but helpful if otherwise).

1.ii Page Layout

Ideally, a chord chart for a song should fit on one page, so try to avoid unnecessary white space. Either condense two lines onto one, or use columns if you can still avoid lyric lines wrapping to a new line. In some cases one may be able to deploy a small amount of reduction in character spacing in order to stop the line wrapping, as long as the lyrics are still clearly legible.

However, one should avoid reducing text size too much as a strategy to fit a song onto one page – see section 2.ii on Lyric text. If it is not possible to fit a song onto one page, don't be afraid to use a second page – musicians are likely to be able to find ways to adapt to a 2-page chord chart, either with two pages printed spread across a music stand, or with a simple page-turn gesture if viewed on a tablet device.

If guitar chord diagrams are given, they should be indicated in a row at the top of the chord chart beneath the Title, with one diagram given for each chord used in the song, regardless of how many times the chord appears in the song:



For this it is highly recommended to use Dan Kreider's fantastic MusFrets font, available at notationcentral.com

1.iii Chord Symbol Positioning

A chord symbol should align with the left-hand edge of the first letter of the syllable to which the chord relates.

If a syllable contains more than one chord, elongate the syllable either with a hyphen (and spaces if necessary to extend the space further) ' - ' if the syllable is not the last in the word, or with an underscore if it is the end of the word:

C D G C D G
A - - men. / Is-ra-el.

G E Am D G C D
Come_____ and worship

Where chord spacing is not defined by syllabic placement (i.e. during instrumental passages or extreme-length syllables (see example above)) chord positioning should be defined roughly according to rhythmic length by using the tab key or a set number of spaces between chords.

In instrumental passages, the pipe character '|' may be used to denote bar lines; please note these would be more effective than a capital 'I' or lower case 'l' which in some cases and in some fonts may not be so easily distinguishable from chord names; the pipe character extends higher and lower than either character, making it more appropriate to use as a bar line. If bar lines are indicated, the final bar line in the passage must be included, to avoid any confusion about the length of the chord. Bear in mind the time signature of the song when placing chords according to a rough rhythmic value; a song in 3/4 will need to include more white space after chords with a two-beat duration than chord with a one-beat duration. (See section 1.i on time signatures).

G E |Am D |G C |D |
Example 2.a instrumental chord placement in 4/4

G E |Am D |G C |D |
Example 2.b instrumental chord placement in 3/4

For even clearer rhythmic resolution, a slash ‘/’ mark may indicate one additional beat in the bar without changing the chord. In other words, the chord symbol indicates the first beat on which it changes; subsequent slashes indicate clearly how many beats this chord lasts for, before the next chord symbol is given. If deployed, use this consistently for any metered passages that include bar lines ‘|’ etc.

G / E / |Am / D / |
Example 2.c instrumental chord placement in 4/4 with slashes to indicate additional beats

G / E |Am / D |G / C |D / / |
Example 2.d instrumental chord placement in 3/4 with slashes to indicate additional beats

Chord symbols should be given for every verse of the song, even if the chords are identical throughout (as they will be most of the time, but see below). This will help the guitarist-singer not have to keep their eyes jumping around the page to refer to chords while singing the lyrics of a different verse. If this creates problems of space, see Section 1.ii on Page Layout. Please note that care should be taken to reposition the chords in each verse according to which syllable they fall on; a simple copy-and-paste will not suffice as the chords likely won’t fit the positioning of the new line they have been copied to.

If alternate chords are given for a verse (e.g. a descant verse of a carol), it may help the reader to indicate this in some way, either by making these chords bold, or by indicating with a footnote.

Capo chords. If capo chords are included alongside non-capo chords, they must be bracketed after the non-capo chords to match the indication in the header (e.g. ‘Key of A (Capo 2 in G)’). Please note the horizontal space that this will use up, and that chords will not appear directly over the syllable they go with. Alternatively, capo chords may be placed above non-capo chords, but this will reduce vertical space. In my view it is best to produce capo-specific chord charts, and an alternative chord chart for non-capo readers (e.g. piano players, bassists or more skilled guitarists!). But the convention tends to be to use bracketed chord symbols immediately after the non-capo chord symbol, e.g.:

D(C) E(D) A(G)

2 Appearance

2.i Chord Symbols

Chord symbols should be rendered using a font designed for displaying chord symbols for two reasons:

1. To distinguish them from lyrics and musical structure;
2. For the proper display of sharps, flats and other chord-specific symbols.

Many chord-specific fonts are included with specialist music notation software such as Sibelius, and can be used in standard word-processing applications. However if the user does not have access to chord fonts this way, some can also be purchased, for example from notationcentral.com

Chords must be given according to the key of the song, or the internal key of the section (if different from the song as a whole), rather than as a best-guess chord. It is not uncommon to see chord charts, typically created by guitarists, giving flat chords in a sharp key, or vice versa, because it's what they know the shape as in the usual position they play it on the guitar. E.g. a song in E might give the chord A^bm but this should properly be G[#]m in the key of E. The exception, as hinted above, is where the key changes internally to the song, e.g. in the pop ballad 'Total Eclipse of the Heart', in the key of A flat, but which visits the keys of E and D flat.

2.ii Lyric text

Lyrics should be displayed in a roman font at a size of around 14pt. Small adjustments to font size or character spacing may be allowed where layout constraints are an issue.

3 Creating Chord Charts

Of course, one easy way to produce chord charts is to use ChordPro formatting. This format includes the appropriate header information, places chords correctly within the text, and allows for transposition, meaning no need to produce separate capo charts. However, this format is still not easy to produce without use of proprietary applications, and takes some work to understand.

If one is using standard word processing software to create chord charts it is strongly recommended to do the following:

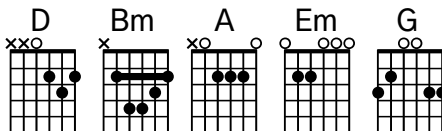
1. Enable or download chord-specific fonts such as those available at notationcentral.com
2. Create a document template containing a placeholder Title, song information and first line and a few chord symbols above the first line, ready to fill in, using correct fonts.
3. Use the word processor's text styles feature and create styles for your musical structure indications, Chords, Verse lyrics and Chorus lyrics, as well as optionally for the header and footer information. It is further recommended to look into how to assign keystroke shortcuts to these text styles so that you can quickly invoke them as you go through creating your chord chart.

4 Example Chord Chart

See the next page for an example chord chart using many of the conventions detailed above.

CHORD
CHART
Key of E
(Capo 2 in D)
♩ = c.110

Angels From the Realms of Glory



VERSE 1:

D
Angels from the realms of glory,
Bm A D
Wing your flight o'er all the earth
D A D
Ye who sang creation's story,
Bm A D
Now proclaim Messiah's birth

REFRAIN:

D Bm Em A D G A
Come _____ and worship
D G A
Worship Christ the King
D Bm Em A D G A
Come _____ and worship
D G A D
Worship Christ the newborn King

VERSE 2:

D
Shepherds in the field abiding
Bm A D
Watching o'er your flocks by night
D A D
God with man is now residing,
Bm A D
Yonder shines the infant light.

REFRAIN

VERSE 3:

D
Sages leave your contemplations
Bm A D
Brighter visions beam afar
D A D
Seek the great desire of nations
Bm A D
Ye have seen his natal star

REFRAIN

VERSE 4:

D
Saints before the altar bending
Bm A D
Watching long in hope and fear
D A D
Suddenly the Lord descending
Bm A D
In his temple shall appear

REFRAIN