

The Dominant Seventh Chord (V^7)

The dominant seventh chord is exactly like the dominant triad, except that it contains an extra note that is dissonant. It therefore behaves almost exactly the dominant triad. For instance, we expect it to resolve to a tonic chord — not to a pre-dominant. However, V^7 's inherent dissonance makes it is much less suitable for use in a half cadence, because the dissonance undermines our sense of temporary rest. On the other hand, it is especially useful at strong authentic cadences, because resolving the dissonance contributes to our sense of forward motion.

The dominant seventh chord contains two tendency tones that need to resolve: the leading-tone ($\hat{7}$), which wants to resolve up by step, and the seventh ($\hat{4}$), which wants to resolve down by step. (Be very careful not to confuse $\hat{7}$ with the *seventh*, because they lead in opposite directions!) The examples below illustrate a variety of good and bad resolutions of V^7 .

a. good	b. good	c. good	d. bad!	e. bad!	f. not good	g. good	h. bad
G: V^7 I V^7 I V^7 I V^7 I V^7 I V^7 I V^7 vi V^7 I ⁶							

- Both tendency tones resolve, producing an incomplete tonic chord. This is quite acceptable.
- The alto employs a “leading-tone drop,” thereby creating a complete tonic chord. This is acceptable as long as the leading-tone is in an inner voice.
- When we begin with an incomplete V^7 chord (fifth omitted, root doubled — okay if the chord is in root position), both tendency tones are able to resolve and the tonic will be complete.
- Unresolved leading-tone in the soprano is unacceptable.
- Unresolved seventh in the tenor is unacceptable.
- The tendency tones resolve properly, but the third of the I chord is doubled (not often desirable). If we want to retain the same soprano line, we should use V rather than V^7 (the tenor would sing a D for both chords).
- Good deceptive cadence. Notice that using V^7 rather than V makes the voice-leading entirely stepwise.
- Objectionable direct octave between outer voices. Although the soprano moves by step, the resolving dissonance makes the octave stand out more than it normally would. This is even problematic if the seventh appears in an inner voice. Notice also that the progression $V^7 - I^6$ is guaranteed to double the tonic’s third. This progression should be avoided.

All inversions of the dominant seventh chord are extremely common and may be used freely, although of course only the root-position V^7 is appropriate at strong cadential points. The seventh is often approached by step or common tone, especially when using root-position V^7 . Upward leaps are possible when approaching the seventh of inverted V^7 chords, but downward leaps are rare. Inverted V^7 chords tend to appear between tonic chords; they may also be approached through pre-dominant chords, but this is less common. Some typical examples appear below. Notice that the tendency tones consistently resolve: $\hat{7}-\hat{1}$ and $\hat{4}-\hat{3}$.

i.	j. ↓ Not parallel fifths — P5-d5!
b: i V_5^6 i V_2^4 i ⁶ i ii ^{o6} V^7 i F: I — 6 V_3^4 I ii ⁶ V^7 I	

Cadential $\frac{7}{4}$ chords often resolve to a dominant seventh chord rather than a dominant triad. Notice the familiar stepwise descent of the upper voices. Examples *k* and *l* are extremely typical. Example *m* shows how sometimes the sixth above the bass may step up to the seventh rather than down to the fifth. This is acceptable because the sixth is a consonant interval. (Many people do not reflect this detail in their figures.) Example *n* demonstrates how a cadential $\frac{7}{4}$ can resolve to a $V\frac{4}{2}$ chord instead of a root-position chord. (Naturally, this would only occur in the middle of a phrase.)

k. l. m. n.

A: I IV $V\frac{8-7}{6-5}$ ₄₋₃ I I IV $V\frac{8-7}{6-5}$ ₄₋₃ vi I ii⁶ $V\frac{6-7}{4-3}$ I I ii⁶ $V\frac{6-6}{4-4}$ ₂ I⁶

Even in the absence of a cadential $\frac{7}{4}$, it is possible for one form of the dominant to follow another, as long as the second dominant does not fall on a metrically stronger beat. Keep in mind that progressions usually sound better when they create a sense of increasing momentum, stemming either from a gradual strengthening of chords or from the use of tendency tones (especially in the outer voices). Some typical examples appear below. Note: V-V⁷ is good, but V⁷-V is not.

o. p. q. r.

a: i iv $V\frac{8-7}{5-4}$ i i⁶ $V\frac{4-2}{5-4}$ i⁶ i iv $V\frac{6-5}{5-4}$ i i $V\frac{6-7}{5-4}$ i

Important exceptions: Two useful melodic patterns you should know appear below. Although $V\frac{4}{2}$ chords usually resolve smoothly, example *s* shows a common exception. The dramatic leap in the soprano can make an otherwise dull melody much more interesting, and it can also save you from range problems if your melody gets too low. Example *t* demonstrates the only exception to the rule that sevenths must resolve down by step. Because the seventh is consonant with the bass, it is able to move in parallel tenths (or occasionally in parallel thirds) with the bass as $V\frac{4}{3}$ resolves to I⁶.

s. t.

B \flat : I $V\frac{4}{2}$ I⁶ I $V\frac{4}{3}$ I⁶

Helpful hint: with the exception of the patterns above, if your soprano line rises, it is usually easier to use a V triad rather than a V⁷ chord. Choose your combination of harmony and melody wisely!