

Lead Sheet Literacy in the Group Piano Lab

The profession's standard is definitive, but it never became universal. That changes what we have to teach.

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lead-sheet-lab
.netlify.app
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1 The problem: one chord, twenty-plus spellings

In 1976, two of Hollywood's busiest music copyists opened their book by listing more than twenty ways they had seen working professionals write a single C major seventh chord. Every spelling below came off a real professional score, and our students meet them the moment they open a fake book, a jazz chart, or a Sunday morning worship folder.

Cmaj7	CM7	CΔ	CΔ7	Cma7	CMaj7	C7M
CM	C(maj7)	C(Δ7)	CMAJ7	Cmj7	C(♯7)	C7+
C(+7)	CM7(♯)	Cmaj.7	CMA	C7(M)	CΔ9	...

every one of them meaning **C · E · G · B**

2 The standard: one symbol, one meaning

Carl Brandt and Clinton Roemer, *Standardized Chord Symbol Notation* (1976). One rule sits underneath every other rule.

SYMBOL	CHORD	THE RULE UNDERNEATH IT
C	MAJOR TRIAD	A sole capital letter. Adding MA or MAJ to a plain triad is not acceptable.
CMA7	MAJOR SEVENTH	MA appears only in front of 7, 9, 11, or 13. Two capitals, no ambiguity.
CMi7	MINOR SEVENTH	MI cannot be misread as major, which is exactly why it beats a lowercase m.
C7	DOMINANT SEVENTH	A bare 7 always means the lowered seventh. Same for C9, C11, C13.
C°	DIMINISHED SEVENTH	The circle is the entire four-note chord. Never write the 7 after it.
CMi(♭5)	DIMINISHED TRIAD	Spelled as what it is: a minor triad with a flat fifth. The word never appears.
CMi7(♭5)	HALF-DIMINISHED	The construction is visible at a glance instead of hidden in a shorthand.
C+	AUGMENTED	The plus sign means raised fifth, and nothing else. Never a sharp, never "add."
C7SUS	SUSPENSION	SUS is never parenthesized. It replaces the third, so it is not an alteration.
C7(♭9)	ALTERATIONS	Changes go in parentheses, accidental before the numeral, highest function on top.

3 Banned in 1976. Still everywhere in 2026.

The book's own list of symbols to eliminate completely, and what to write instead.

YOU WILL SEE	WHY THE BOOK BANNED IT	WRITE INSTEAD
Δ	The triangle. Brandt and Roemer call it by its real name, delta. It carries two contradictory meanings in the wild: major seventh, and half-diminished.	› CMA7
–	The minus sign. "The worst offender of all." It reads as a dash, a flat, or a lowered function depending on who holds the pencil.	› CMi7
ø	The slashed circle. Half-diminished purely by convention. Nothing in the symbol tells a student what notes are in the chord.	› CMi7(♭5)
M / m	Case-only distinctions. Major and minor sit one pen slip apart, and handwritten parts are where chord symbols actually live.	› CMA7 / CMi7
aug	Spelled-out abbreviations. Redundant. The plus sign already does this job in a single character.	› C+

THE THESIS, IN ONE PARAGRAPH

That book turns fifty this year and nobody has replaced it. It also never became universal, and both facts matter. Because the systems disagree, chord-symbol literacy is **two skills, not one**: write one clean standard, and recognize everything else. Modern schools spell things their own way (Berklee-style charts prefer Maj7 and –7♭5), but they agree with every ban above. Those banned symbols are still the recognition vocabulary every gigging musician needs, which is why Lead Sheet Lab drills them as a game: **Old to Standard**. See CΔ7, answer CMA7.

4 Three languages, one chord

The app teaches literacy as three connected systems. Learn them in this order, and practice in one helps strengthen understanding of the others.

CHORD SYMBOLS

Vocabulary

What to play. The spelling itself tells you the chord quality.

ROMAN NUMERALS

Grammar

Why it works. The standard already spells out each quality, so function analysis is a shorter step.

NASHVILLE NUMBERS

Portability

The same song in any key. Transposition becomes renumbering.

ONE PROGRESSION, THREE WAYS

Chord symbols, key of C	C	AM	F	G7
Chord symbols, key of G	G	EM	C	D7
Chord symbols, key of E $\flat$	E$\flat$	CM	A$\flat$	B$\flat$7
Roman numerals, any key	I	vi	IV	V7
Nashville numbers, any key	1	6-	4	5

Change the key and only the top three rows move. That is the whole argument for number systems, and the exact conversation we have with students who move between classical training, jazz charts, and a Nashville session.

5 What Lead Sheet Lab is

- **Runs in any modern browser.** Nothing to install, and every screen is audited down to small phones.
- **28 original mini-lessons** on chord symbols, plus lesson sets for Roman numerals and Nashville numbers.
- **45 chord types across all 12 roots.** 540 chords, and since any inversion counts, roughly 2,500 accepted positions.
- **Old to Standard drill.** The 1976 banned list turned into flashcards, so variant spellings become familiar instead of alarming.
- **Play It, with MIDI.** The app shows a symbol and listens. Real sampled piano, any octave, any voicing. Built for lab pianos.
- **Three Systems view.** One progression in all three systems at once, with 12 keys one tap away.
- **All 12 major and all 12 minor keys** in the Roman numeral and Nashville drills, with natural, harmonic, melodic and composite minor named on every question.
- **Mastery tracking per chord.** Accuracy, response time, key coverage, and what a student has not reviewed in two weeks.
- **Notation-style toggle.** Learn the standard, display jazz-style spelling if you prefer. The underlying data stays canonical.
- **Licensed CC BY-NC 4.0.** Free to use and share in your teaching.

6 Four ways to use it in a group piano class

1. Five-minute warm-up at the lab pianos

Put the QR code on the board and have students run one Symbol to Notes drill before you start teaching. The per-chord stats tell you what to reteach, in week two rather than at the midterm.

3. Transposition on the projector

Open Three Systems on the projector. Play 1, 6-, 4, 5 in one key, change the key, and let the class watch the Nashville column sit perfectly still while the chord symbols re-spell. Then have them play it.

2. Recognition day, the week charts arrive

Assign the Old to Standard drill the same week you hand out fake book or worship charts. Students stop asking what the triangle means, because they have already answered it forty times.

4. The bridge into theory class

When Roman numerals arrive, the chord quality is already spelled out in the symbol. Run Chord to Roman Numeral in a remote key such as B or F $\sharp$ to break the C-major habit before it hardens.

7 Take it with you



Lead Sheet Lab

lead-sheet-lab.netlify.app

The app from today's demo.



Key Spar

key-spar.netlify.app

Real-time duels: notes, intervals, chords.



Ginger Studios

gingherstudios.com

More free teaching tools this fall.

8 References and further reading

Brandt, C., & Roemer, C. (1976). *Standardized Chord Symbol Notation: A Uniform System for the Music Profession*. Roerick Music Co. Primary source. The standardized system this app teaches as its default.

Gould, E. (2011). *Behind Bars: The Definitive Guide to Music Notation*. Faber Music. General engraving reference, cross-checked for chord-symbol conventions.

Levine, M. (1995). *The Jazz Theory Book*. Sher Music Co. Contemporary jazz-style spelling, the recognition-drill side of the app.

Paolantonio, E. *My Years with Lennie*. Further reading, not a source for this talk. Excellent diatonic exercises for practicing chords through major and minor scales.

QUESTIONS, REQUESTS, CLASSROOM PILOTS

I would genuinely like to hear how this behaves in someone else's lab. A teacher dashboard with class codes is the next planned build, and this fall's classroom use will shape it. Write to me at ginghers23@ecu.edu.