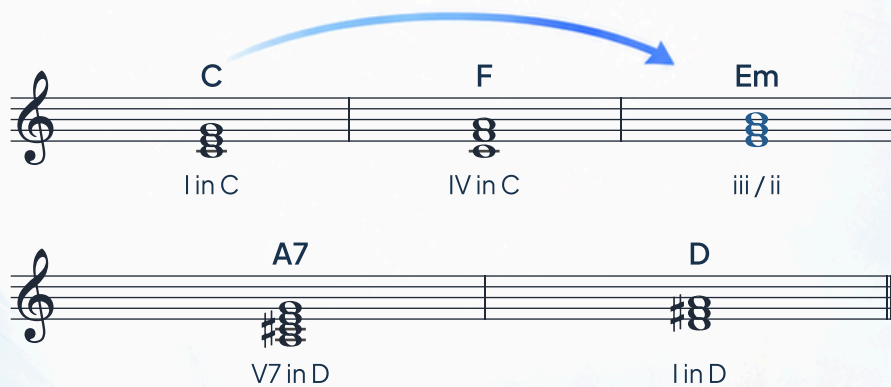




MUSIC THEORY LESSONS

The Modulation Handbook

Twenty practical routes between keys,
from quiet pivots to full-chorus lifts.



20

STRATEGIES



13

CHAPTERS



Notation

ON EVERY ROUTE

FOR TEACHERS, LEARNERS, COMPOSERS AND ARRANGERS



CONTENTS

13 chapters, 20 routes

Notation, voice-leading notes and practical tips for every route.

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HOW TO CHOOSE

Match the move to the dramatic effect

A key change works when the ear accepts a new centre of gravity. For a tonal modulation, confirm the arrival with a clear dominant-to-tonic pull. A same-tonic change of mode is a colour shift rather than a move to a new tonic.

Effect you want	Routes to try
Hardly noticed	Pivot chord • common tone • chromatic voice leading
Inevitable arrival	Secondary dominant • destination ii–V • staircase • circle of fifths
Sudden lift	Direct modulation • step-up • interval sequence
Cinematic turn	Diminished seventh • minor v • German +6 colour
Colour shift	Relative mode • same-tonic mode • melody-note anchor



01 Direct modulation

C major → E $\flat$ major

SURPRISING

Jump straight into a new key at a phrase boundary.

End in C, then start the next phrase in E-flat. The phrase break gives the ear time to reset.



Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right.

WHY IT WORKS

You are not smoothing the change harmonically; you are marking it with form. State the new tonic quickly, then confirm it with V or V7.

IN PRACTICE

Mark the cut with a breath, fill, held note, or lyric turn. Phrase modulation is the general term; the pop gear change is its loudest version.

Abrupt / Phrase boundary / Drama



02 The step-up

G major → A $\flat$ major

SURPRISING

Repeat the same material a semitone or two higher.

The melody and harmony stay recognisable; only the pitch level moves up.

G D A $\flat$ E $\flat$

I V I V

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right.

WHY IT WORKS

Recognition comes from repetition. The lift comes from higher register and fresh leading tones.

IN PRACTICE

Raise register, dynamics, or rhythmic drive so the repeat feels like escalation, not a copy.

High energy / Pop / Final chorus



03 Pivot-chord modulation

C major → D major using E minor

SEAMLESS

Hold a shared chord, then follow it with V or V7 of the new key.

E minor is iii in C and ii in D. When A7 arrives, the ear hears the start of ii–V–I in D.

The diagram illustrates the pivot-chord modulation from C major to D major using E minor. It consists of two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, showing whole-note chords.

Staff 1:

- C:** C major chord (C4, E4, G4). Labeled "I in C".
- F:** F major chord (F4, A4, C5). Labeled "IV in C".
- Em:** E minor chord (E4, G4, B3). Labeled "iii / ii".

Staff 2:

- A7:** A7 chord (A4, C#5, E5, G#4). Labeled "V7 in D".
- D:** D major chord (D4, F#4, A4). Labeled "I in D".

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right, then continue on the next staff.

WHY IT WORKS

Write out both key signatures, find a chord they share, then move to the dominant of the destination.

IN PRACTICE

The pivot must sound ordinary in the first key. Only after V arrives should the listener hear it as part of the new key.

Seamless / Classical / pop / Related keys



04 Common-tone modulation

C major → A $\flat$ major, holding C

SEAMLESS

A sustained pitch links two keys while the harmony shifts underneath.

C is the root of C major, then the major third of A-flat. The held pitch ties the two keys together.

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right.

WHY IT WORKS

C stays put; E drops to E-flat and G rises to A-flat. E-flat7 then confirms A-flat major.

IN PRACTICE

Place the common tone in the melody or an inner part you can hear. Hide it in dense voicing and the connection disappears.

Lyrical / Film score / Voice-leading



05 Secondary dominant

C major → D major via A7

INEVITABLE

Lead with V or V7 of the key you are moving to.

A7 brings in C-sharp, the leading tone to D. One chromatic pitch can steer the whole phrase.

The image shows two musical staves, each with three measures. The first staff illustrates the modulation from C major to D major via A7. The first measure is C major (I in C), the second is A7 (V7/D), and the third is D major (I in D). The second staff illustrates the modulation from G major to D major via A7. The first measure is G major (IV in D), the second is A7 (V7), and the third is D major (I). The chords are represented by whole-note symbols on a treble clef staff.

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right, then continue on the next staff.

WHY IT WORKS

Name the new tonic, then find its dominant a fifth above.

IN PRACTICE

Stay in the new key for another phrase so the move reads as modulation, not a passing tonicization.

Reliable / Functional / Any destination



06 Destination ii–V–I

C major → D major via Em7–A7

INEVITABLE

State ii–V–I in the destination key.

ii sets up the move, V7 creates tension, and I confirms the new tonic.

The diagram shows a musical staff with four measures, each containing a whole-note chord. The chords are labeled above and below the staff. The first measure is C (I in C). The second measure is Em7 (ii in D). The third measure is A7 (V7). The fourth measure is Dmaj7 (I). The chords are written in 4/4 time.

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right.

WHY IT WORKS

When no shared chord is handy, write ii–V–I in the new key and voice it smoothly.

IN PRACTICE

A shared melody note or stepwise bass line helps a destination ii–V sound planned, not pasted in.

Jazz / Pop / classical / Universal route



07 Chromatic modulation

C major → F major by lowering B to B♭

SEAMLESS

Change one chord tone by semitone to give the chord a new job.

Cmaj7 belongs to C major. Lower B to B-flat and you have C7, the dominant of F.

The image displays two staves of musical notation illustrating a chromatic modulation from C major to F major. The first staff shows three chords: Cmaj7 (labeled 'I maj7'), C7 (labeled 'V7 in F'), and Fmaj7 (labeled 'I'). The second staff shows three chords: B♭ (labeled 'IV'), C7 (labeled 'V7'), and F (labeled 'I'). The C7 chord is highlighted in blue in both staves, showing the transition from Cmaj7 to C7 by lowering the B note to B♭.

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right, then continue on the next staff.

WHY IT WORKS

The bass can stay put while one inner voice redefines the chord. The altered seventh then resolves into F.

IN PRACTICE

Let the altered pitch sit in the melody or a clear inner part. The ear needs to hear the note change jobs.

Smooth / Colourful / Half-step motion



08 Circle-of-fifths modulation

A minor area → C major

INEVITABLE

Move by descending fifths until you reach the new tonic.

Each root falls a fifth. Every step feels like dominant preparation for the next chord.



Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right.

WHY IT WORKS

Start with the final tonic and work backward through its chain of dominants.

IN PRACTICE

One chord per bar feels stately; two per bar feels driven. Slow down as you approach the cadence.

Logical / Long-range / Classical/jazz



09 Chain-dominant modulation

C major → G major through E7–A7–D7

INEVITABLE

Make each chord a dominant seventh so every step points to the next.

E7 leads to A, A7 to D, D7 to G. Each dominant seventh pulls the ear to the next station.

The diagram illustrates a chain of dominant seventh chords on a treble clef staff. The first staff contains three measures: C (labeled 'start'), E7 (labeled 'V/A'), and A7 (labeled 'V/D'). The second staff contains two measures: D7 (labeled 'V/G') and G (labeled 'I'). Each chord is represented by a whole note symbol with its constituent notes (C, E, G, Bb for C7; E, G, B, D for E7; A, C, Eb, G for A7; D, F, Ab, B for D7; and G, B, D, F for G7).

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right, then continue on the next staff.

WHY IT WORKS

Dominant sevenths add leading tones and tritone tension that diatonic fifths alone do not provide.

IN PRACTICE

Cadence in G and stay there. Without confirmation, the chain sounds like a colourful detour.

Ragtime / Jazz / Bright tension



10 Sequence / interval-chain modulation

Major-seventh chords rising by minor thirds

SURPRISING

Repeat the same chord type at a fixed transposition.

Cmaj7, E-flatmaj7, G-flatmaj7, and Amaj7 share the same quality. By the fourth chord, A major feels like the pattern's destination.

Cmaj7 Ebmaj7 Gbmaj7 Amaj7

start + m3 + m3 arrival

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right.

WHY IT WORKS

Pick the chord quality, pick the transposition interval, then cadence where you want to land.

IN PRACTICE

A clear pattern can carry distant keys when shared diatonic harmony is not available.

Pattern-driven / Baroque to film / Distant keys



11 Diminished-seventh modulation

C major → E♭ major through B°7 / D°7

CINEMATIC

Respell a diminished seventh chord as a leading-tone harmony in a new key.

B–D–F–A-flat first sounds like B°7. Respell B as C-flat and D becomes the leading tone to E-flat.

The image displays two staves of musical notation illustrating a modulation technique. The first staff shows three whole-note chords in 4/4 time: a C major chord (labeled 'C' and 'I in C'), a B°7 / D°7 diminished seventh chord (labeled 'B°7 / D°7' and 'reinterpret'), and an E♭ major chord (labeled 'E♭' and 'I'). The second staff shows two whole-note chords: a B♭7 chord (labeled 'B♭7' and 'V7') and an E♭ major chord (labeled 'E♭' and 'I'). The B♭7 chord is shown as a diminished seventh chord with notes B♭, D, F, and A♭. The E♭ major chord is shown as a major triad with notes E♭, G, and B♭.

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right, then continue on the next staff.

WHY IT WORKS

Hold some pitches steady while one voice moves chromatically to redefine where the chord is leading.

IN PRACTICE

Resolve one voice by semitone, then confirm with V–I. Without that cadence, the chord reads as colour, not a key change.

Dramatic / Enharmonic / Four exits



12 Relative-mode shift

C major → D Dorian

COLOUR SHIFT

Keep the pitch collection but centre a different scale degree.

Same white notes, new centre: D minor, G, and melodic emphasis on D establish D Dorian.

The diagram shows a musical staff with four measures, each containing a whole-note chord. Above each chord is its name, and below it is its functional label. The first measure has a C major chord (C-E-G) labeled 'C' and 'I in C'. The second measure has a D minor chord (D-F-A) labeled 'Dm' and 'i in D'. The third measure has a G major chord (G-B-D) labeled 'G' and 'IV'. The fourth measure has a D minor chord (D-F-A) labeled 'Dm' and 'i'. The staff is divided into four measures by vertical bar lines, and the final measure ends with a double bar line.

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right.

WHY IT WORKS

Confirm Dorian with its natural sixth (B-natural) and cadential emphasis on D.

IN PRACTICE

Modes need repetition, bass emphasis, melody, and cadence. Naming the mode is not enough.

Colour shift / Modal / Game / film / folk



13 Same-tonic modal shift

C Lydian → C Phrygian

COLOUR SHIFT

Keep the same bass note while the scale colour changes around it.

F-sharp brightens C Lydian; D-flat and E-flat darken C Phrygian. The bass stays on C while the interval colour shifts.

C Lydian C Lydian

C(add#11) Db/C Cm

bII over C C Phrygian

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right.

WHY IT WORKS

Hear the raised 4 in Lydian, natural 6 in Dorian, and flat 2 in Phrygian.

IN PRACTICE

The tonic may not move, but the scale framework does. Treat that as a colour shift rather than a full modulation.

Brightness / darkness / Same bass / Modal mixture



14 Borrowed minor v

C major → G minor

CINEMATIC

Borrow a minor dominant chord, then reinterpret it as the tonic of a minor key.

G minor is borrowed v in C major, then becomes i in G minor once D7 confirms the arrival.

The diagram shows a sequence of four whole-note chords in 4/4 time, read from left to right. The chords are represented by whole notes on a treble clef staff. Above each chord is its name, and below it is its functional label. The first chord is C major (I in C). The second chord is G minor (v/i), with a blue flat symbol on the B line. The third chord is D7 (V7), with a blue sharp symbol on the F line. The fourth chord is G minor (i), with a blue flat symbol on the B line.

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right.

WHY IT WORKS

At first the chord sounds like mixture from the old key; after confirmation it reads as the new tonic.

IN PRACTICE

B-natural to B-flat is the semitone that turns G major's dominant colour into G minor's tonic colour.

Film score / Modal mixture / Gentle turn



15 German +6 colour / semitone dominant

C major → E major via F7

CINEMATIC

Place a dominant-seventh sonority a semitone above the destination and resolve each voice by step.

F7 resolves into E by semitone motion in every voice: F to E, A to G-sharp, C to B, E-flat to E or D-sharp.

The image displays two musical staves illustrating the resolution of the F7 chord to the E major chord. The first staff shows the progression: C major (labeled 'start'), F7 (labeled 'Ger+6 colour'), and E major (labeled 'I'). The second staff shows the progression: B7 (labeled 'V7') and E major (labeled 'I'). The chords are represented by whole-note symbols on a five-line staff. The F7 chord is shown with a flat sign, and the B7 chord is shown with two sharp signs. The E major chord is shown with a sharp sign.

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right, then continue on the next staff.

WHY IT WORKS

The sonority shares the colour of augmented-sixth harmony and can be respelled toward the target key.

IN PRACTICE

Voice each line by ear before filling out the chord. The move works because the parts resolve, not because the symbol looks advanced.

Advanced / Chromatic / Uncanny



16 Root becomes the major third

Hold G: G major → E $\flat$ 7/G → A $\flat$

SEAMLESS

Hold the old tonic and hear it as the third of the destination dominant.

G starts as the tonic of G major, becomes the third of E-flat7, then resolves into A-flat major.

The musical notation shows three measures of whole-note chords in 4/4 time. The first measure contains a G major chord (G, B, D) with the label 'G' above and 'I' below. The second measure contains an E-flat 7/G chord (Eb, G, Bb, D) with the label 'Eb7/G' above and 'V7 of Ab' below; the G note is highlighted in blue. The third measure contains an A-flat major chord (Ab, C, Eb) with the label 'Ab' above and 'I' below. The G note is held across all three measures.

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right.

WHY IT WORKS

The ear tracks the held pitch while the lower voices change its harmonic job.

IN PRACTICE

State the melody note clearly, bring in the new bass, then let the destination chord arrive.

Sophisticated / Ballad/jazz / Melody anchor



17 Root becomes the major seventh

Hold G: G major → A $\flat$ maj7

COLOUR SHIFT

Hold the old tonic and hear it as the major seventh of the new key.

G becomes the major seventh of A-flat, a half-step above the new root.

Diagram illustrating the chord progression: G major (I) → A $\flat$ maj7 (Imaj7 in A $\flat$) → E $\flat$ 7 (V7) → A $\flat$ maj7 (I). The G note in the first chord is highlighted in blue, showing it becomes the major seventh of the new key (A $\flat$).

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right.

WHY IT WORKS

The melody stays still while the bass moves up a semitone and the harmony changes colour underneath.

IN PRACTICE

Resolve G down to F or up to A-flat for closure, or leave it hanging for a more modern colour.

Modern / Floating tension / Common tone



18 Minor third becomes the ninth

Hold F: Dm7 → E ♭ m9 → A ♭ 7 → D ♭ maj7

COLOUR SHIFT

Turn the minor third of the old ii chord into the ninth of a new ii chord.

F is the minor third of Dm7, then the ninth of E-flatm9. The melody keeps its colour while the harmony moves to D-flat major.

The diagram shows a sequence of four whole-note chords in 4/4 time, written on a single staff. The chords are Dm7, Ebm9, Ab7, and Dbmaj7. The F note is highlighted in blue in each chord, illustrating its role as the minor third of Dm7 and the ninth of Ebm9. The chords are labeled with their functional roles: ii in C, ii in Db, V7, and I.

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right.

WHY IT WORKS

E-flatm9–A-flat7–D-flatmaj7 is ii–V–I in D-flat major.

IN PRACTICE

Before moving the melody, look for a destination chord where the note becomes a useful extension.

Jazz / Melody-first / Colour tone



19 Up a minor third via ii-V

C major → E♭ major via Fm7–B♭7

INEVITABLE

Move up a minor third, then state ii–V–I in the new key.

Fm7 and B-flat7 state the grammar of E-flat major at once.

C Fm7 B♭7 E♭maj7

I in C ii in E♭ V7 I

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right.

WHY IT WORKS

A minor third is far enough to sound fresh; ii–V–I makes the arrival unmistakable.

IN PRACTICE

The same idea works at any interval. Build ii–V–I in the destination and let voicing, melody, and timing do the rest.

Jazz standard / Fresh lift / Reliable arrival



20 The Staircase Method

Destination C major: $G \rightarrow A/C\# \rightarrow Dm7 \rightarrow G \rightarrow C$

INEVITABLE

Create a smooth, uplifting approach to ii, then let ii–V–I reveal the destination.

C major is our destination in this example, not a required starting key. G is the surprise chord; A/C# then leads into Dm7 before the familiar ii7–V–I cadence.

Whole-note chords in 4/4. Read left to right, then continue on the next staff.

WHY IT WORKS

A/C# is V^6/ii : the first-inversion dominant of D minor. Its C# bass rises one semitone to D. That chromatic step and the bright major harmony create forward motion; smooth melody and inner voices make the route convincing.

IN PRACTICE

Build $V \rightarrow V^6/ii \rightarrow ii7 \rightarrow V \rightarrow I$ in your chosen major destination. Use melody and voice leading to connect the approach to the key you are leaving.

Chromatic bass / Voice leading / Flexible destination



STRATEGY 20 / WORKED EXAMPLE

Build the staircase

Destination: C major. The final $Dm7 \rightarrow G \rightarrow C$ is $ii7 \rightarrow V \rightarrow I$; the first two chords provide the approach.

1 The surprise chord: G major

Begin with G major, the dominant of our destination. Depending on the key you are leaving, G may be unexpected. Treat that moment as the surprise chord; the listener need not know the destination yet.

2 Begin the staircase: A/C#

A major is the dominant of D minor, the ii chord of C major. With C# in the bass, A/C# is V^6/ii : a first-inversion secondary dominant. Its unexpected major colour adds brightness while the bass moves upward.

3 Move up one semitone: C# → D

Raise C# by one semitone to D. This chromatic bass step leads A/C# into Dm7, the destination's ii7. Connect the upper voices smoothly: in this voicing E rises to F while A stays common.

4 Complete the cadence: Dm7 → G → C

Complete $ii7 \rightarrow V \rightarrow I$. The familiar cadence reveals the new tonic. Continue in C for another phrase so the listener hears a settled key change, rather than a brief visit to the chord.

SAME PRINCIPLES, MANY DESTINATIONS

The pattern belongs to the destination, not to one starting key. From a key such as C major, it can lead toward many other keys. Rebuild the chords for the destination and connect them to your opening phrase through melody and voice leading.

KEY IDEA

The harmony supplies the steps, but the melody and voice leading convince the listener to walk up them.



TAKE IT FURTHER

Practice challenges

Transpose each example, compare two routes to the same destination, and score the key change at a lyric reveal or scene shift.

01 One arrival, three paths

Take C major to D major three ways: pivot chord, direct change, and destination ii–V.

02 Keep one pitch fixed

Hold G and find three chords in a new key that give it a different harmonic job.

03 Chain four dominants

Write dominant sevenths by descending fifth and cadence in the final key.

04 Score a dramatic turn

Place the key change at a lyric reveal, scene shift, or change of viewpoint.



Keep the examples moving

Explore the interactive handbook online: hear each progression, toggle close voicing, and filter by dramatic effect.

worksheets.musictheorylessons.net/socials/handouts/modulation-handbook

Music Theory Lessons · Free reference resource