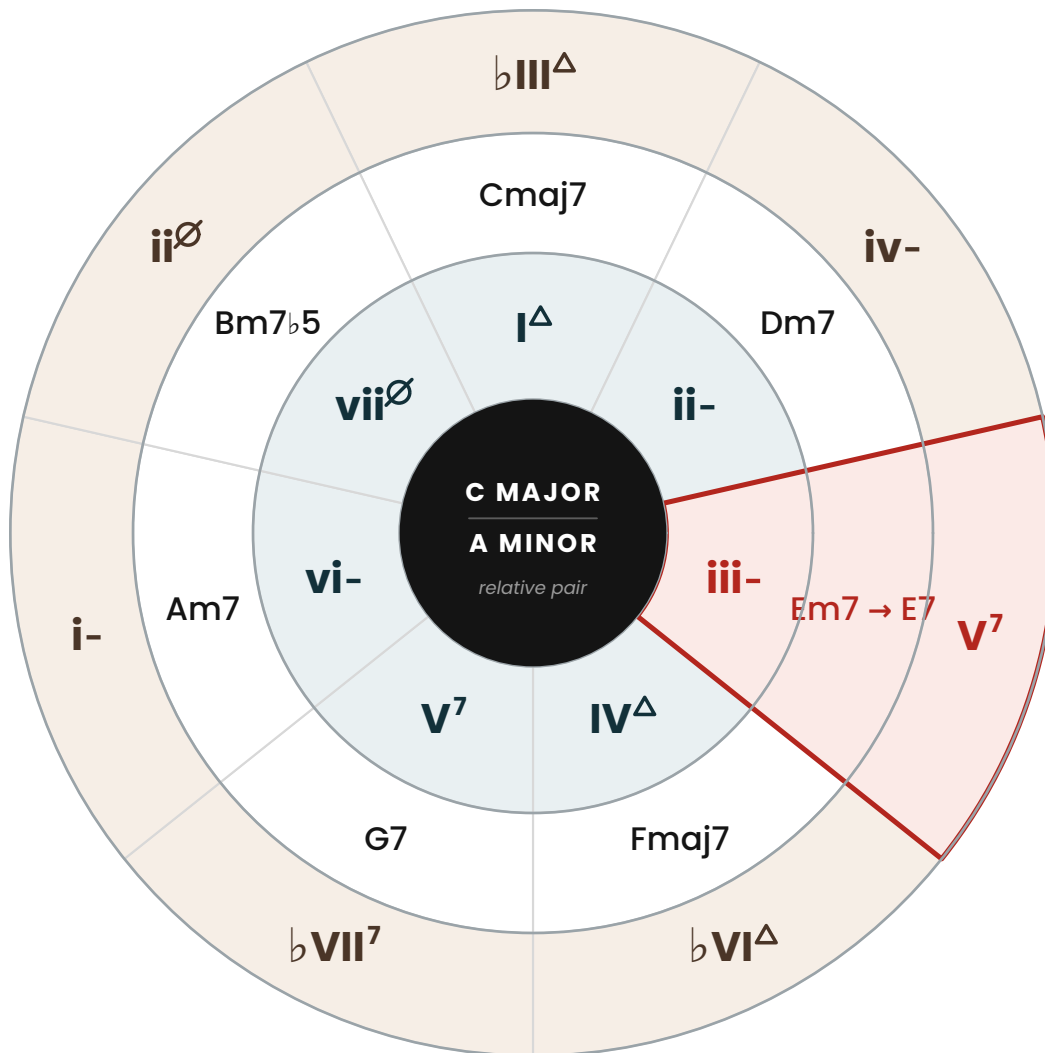


The Minor Key Wheel

Six of the seven chords in A minor are chords of C major wearing a different name. The seventh is not, and that is the lesson.



Inner ring
numeral in C major

Middle ring
the chord you actually play

Outer ring
numeral in A minor

One spoke changes.

Read straight off the wheel, the fifth degree of A minor is Em7, and a minor seventh chord has no leading tone and no tritone. It will not resolve. Raise G to G sharp and Em7 becomes E7. That one accidental is the only disagreement between the two rings, and it is the only reason minor has gravity.

Seven spokes, fourteen names

Same seven notes, two starting points. Read the chart across and you are reading one chord doing two different jobs.

THE CHORD	IN C MAJOR	IN A MINOR	WHAT IT DOES IN MINOR
Cmaj7	I ^Δ	bIII ^Δ	The relative major. Brightest chord on the wheel.
Dm7	ii-	iv-	Subdominant minor. The setup chord. Leads to the five.
Em7 / E7	iii-	v ⁷	The dominant. The one spoke where the quality changes.
Fmaj7	IV ^Δ	bVI ^Δ	Where the five goes when it lies to you. Deceptive target.
G7	v ⁷	bVII ⁷	Still a dominant, but it pulls to the relative major, not to i.
Am7	vi-	i-	Home. Same chord the major key treats as its relative minor.
Bm7 ^b 5	vii ^Ø	ii ^Ø	The two chord of the minor two five one. Half diminished, not full.

Six of these rows are free

Nothing is added and nothing is taken away. C major and A minor share a key signature, so six of the seven chords are literally identical and only the roman numeral changes. That is why a student who already knows the major numbers is most of the way to knowing the minor ones. They are not learning seven new chords. They are learning one.

The row that is not free is the third one. Built from the key signature, the five chord of A minor comes out Em7, and a minor seventh chord cannot function as a dominant. Play Am7, Dm7, Em7, Am7 and it drifts. It is pretty and it never lands.

The seam

Why the five chord is the only chord on the wheel that has to move.

Stack a seventh chord on E using only the notes of C major and you get E, G, B, D. That is Em7. It has no half step under the tonic and no tritone inside it. There is nothing in the chord that leans anywhere, so it cannot close a phrase. This is the sound of pure natural minor, and it is why unaltered minor behaves more like a mode than like a key.

Raise one note. G becomes G sharp, and Em7 becomes E7: E, G sharp, B, D. Now there is a leading tone a half step under A, and there is a tritone between G sharp and D. The G sharp leans up into A, the D leans down into C, and the chord resolves itself without any help. That is gravity, and A minor did not have it until you put it there.

One accidental. It is the only place the two rings of the wheel disagree, and it is the entire difference between minor as a color and minor as a key.

Play these back to back

A

Am7	Dm7	Em7	Am7
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Everything straight off the wheel. No accidentals. It circles.

B

Am7	Dm7	E7	Am7
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One note raised. Same four bars. It arrives.

Save this part for later

Raising the seventh degree does not only change the five chord. G7 becomes G sharp diminished seven and Am7 becomes Am major seven. Those are real and they are worth knowing, but they are a second conversation. On day one the student only needs to know that the five chord got a dominant seventh and why.

Moving the wheel

None of this is about C and A. The relationships are fixed, so turn the hub to any key and every spoke keeps both of its names. If a student already owns a major key chart, they already own the minor key chart. They just have to start reading it from a different spoke.