

Inversions and voicing are often confused.

So what is 'voicing'?

'Voicing' is determined by combination of the sounding notes.

This is essentially the order and number of times the notes are used to make the chord.

For now, when you determine how to voice a chord, you can use any of the notes, as many times as you like and in any order.

Just for a moment, think about chords you play on a guitar.

Have you noticed that there are many 'fingerings' for the same chord?

For example: the chord of G can be played in the 'open' position – also referred to as a "box chord"

this is one of the first chords a new player learns

Root [6th string, 3rd fret]

3rd [5th string, 2nd fret]

5th [4th string, open]

root [3rd string, open]

3rd [2nd string, open]

root [1st string, 3rd fret]

The G chord can also be played using the same fingering as the E chord but with a 'barre' [1st finger across all the fingerboard] at the 3rd fret.

Starting from the 6th string this gives you: root, 5th, root, 3rd, 5th, root.

So you can see that it is the same chord but the notes occur in a different order and a different number of times.

Although the chord is still a G major, the different 'voicing' generates slight differences in the overall sound.

This can be a very effective and powerful compositional tool making a nice chord progression sound even better by clever usage of voicing.

So what are 'inversions'?

Inversions are determined by the 'lowest sounding note' of a chord.

'Root inversion' is where the Root of the chord is the lowest sounding note.

'1st inversion' is where the 3rd of the chord is the lowest sounding note.

'2nd inversion' is where the 5th of the chord is the lowest sounding note

'3rd' inversion' is where the 7th of the chord is the lowest sounding note

So using our G chord, [notes root = G, 3rd = B, 5th = D]

The chord of G in root inversion would have the note G as the lowest note.

In 1st inversion, B is the lowest note.

In 2nd inversion, D is the lowest note.

Here's the notation

Remember that we use Roman numerals to represent chords, and we use lower case letters to represent inversions.

IV [with no lower case letter is chord IV in root inversion]

Vb means chord V in 1st inversion

Ic means chord I in 2nd inversion

Vd means chord V in 3rd inversion

Representing stuff like this is useful because you can talk about / study music without needing to be in a specific key and so avoids getting bogged down with all those nasty sharps and flats.

This is the favoured method for describing chord progressions when being taught formerly in a college or university.

The contemporary music world shows inversions a little differently.

And in my humble little opinion, this is a more flexible method too.

These are shown a bit like a 'fraction' where the note above the line represents the chord and the note below the line represents the note that is sounding as the bass.

Example:

G in 1st inversion means G with B in the bass.

This would be shown as: G / B

Chords illustrated this way are called 'slash chords'
- the chord - the slash - the bass note - just like our G / B

This is the way that I write chord charts for myself and others.
This method is much more visual, instantly recognisable and very flexible indeed.

Note: when playing in a band or any other ensemble, a bassist can throw the overall chord into an inversion. You as a guitarist could be playing root inversion G. Your bassist could be playing the note B below you.

So the overall result is 'G in 1st inversion'!

Tip: When writing for a band. Think beyond your own instrument.

So the next question is "why have them at all?"

You can do a few neat tricks with bass lines to make the music more interesting as an alternative to the bass simply playing the root notes. Also you can fix the bass to a single note and change chords against it. These are pretty cool things to know how to do when writing music.

The more little tricks you have, the more choice you have when creating your own music.

Let's look at a few small example chord progressions without and the with inversions:

In the key of G:

I, V, I is G > D > G

I, Vc, Ib is G > D / A > G / B

or alternatively

Ib, Vc, I which is G / B > D / A > G

You can see from this that the bass now moves G, A, B stepwise instead of leaping from G to D to G. So you'll notice that you can really change the way things sound by using inversions.

The choice is always yours as to "do you want to use inversions or not?"

Personally I love messing with this stuff. My own music is riddled with it.

Another way to mess with inversions is to keep the bass static.

Remember, there are three notes in a triad so your bass note can therefore be a root, a 3rd or a 5th.

With an open A you can play a few chords in the key of A

A > D / A > A [which is I, IVc, I]

Here is a great example. I'll add some tab [where the 1st symbol is the 1st string - the thinnest one, o = open, x = don't play it, number = fret]

a pretty common rock progression in Am is: I, VII, VI [Am - G - F]

Am > G > F [o1233ox - 3ooo23 - 112331<barre at the 1st fret>]

using inversions you can do it this way: I, VIIb, VIc

Am > G / B > F / C [o1233ox - 3ooo2x - 112233x] which sounds tremendous. The chords fall as the bass rises.

Experiment and enjoy. Work out some progressions of your own and then mess with both the voicing and the inversion of the chords. Do it on paper first. Listen carefully to the results and note the stuff you really liked. Some things work great in ballads, others in metal, others in 'what-ever else you see fit'. You can mess with this stuff for hours. It's all very good for your ears, chord knowledge, fretboard knowledge and theoretical knowledge because you are calculating things, applying it to the guitar and listening back to the results.

This is where the theory begins to become a reality.