

Basic Modulation

“To modulate” means to transition from one key to another. There are many ways to do this. Here are a few. Play them on the piano, starting from all keys and chord positions.

1. Up or Down by Fifths

Start with a major chord. To ascend by fifths, lower the root by a half step and the third by a whole step, and keep the fifth. To descend by fifths, raise the third by a half step and the fifth by a whole step, and keep the root. Keep going, and you’ll get around the full Circle of Fifths. Examples:

Two staves of music in 3/4 time showing the Circle of Fifths. The first staff shows ascending by fifths: C, G, D, A, E, B, F#, Db, Ab, Eb, Bb, F, C. The second staff shows descending by fifths: C, F, Bb, Eb, Ab, Db, F#, B, E, A, D, G, C.

2. Up or Down by Major Thirds

Start with a major chord. To ascend by major thirds, keep the third, flatten the root, and sharpen the fifth. Repeat two more times, and you’re back at the starting chord. To descend by major thirds, keep the root, flatten the third, and sharpen the fifth. Example:

One staff of music in 3/4 time showing modulation by major thirds: C, E, Ab, C, C, Ab, E, C.

3. Using Diminished Seventh Chords

Start with a major chord. Lower the root by a half step and the third by a whole step, keep the fifth, and add a diminished fifth. That gives you a dominant 7 chord. Sharpen the root of that chord to get a dim7 chord. Now you have many options. Here are two.

Option 1: Flatten any one of the notes of the dim7 chord, other than the sharpened root. That gives you a new dominant 7 chord. Resolve that chord into a new major chord. Example:

Two staves of music in 4/4 time showing modulation using diminished seventh chords. The first staff shows: C, G7/B, B dim7, E7, A, C, G7/B, B dim7, C#. The second staff shows: F#, C, G7/B, B dim7, Bb7, Eb.

Option 2: Raise any three of the four notes of the dim7 chord. That gives you a new dominant 7 chord. Resolve that chord into a new major chord. Example:

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Note that Option 1 gives you access to three new keys, Option 2 to four.

4. Going Up Chromatically

Start with a major chord. Keep the root, flatten the third and the fifth, and add a minor sixth. That gives you the dominant 7 chord of the key a half step above you starting key. Resolve into that major chord. Keep going like this, and you'll go chromatically through all keys. Example:

Example of chromatic progression:

This can also be done with minor chords. Example:

Example of chromatic progression: