

THE 4 NON-CHORD TONE TYPES

Four ways a melody note can sit outside the chord — each with a different motion, duration, and emotional character.

4
TYPES

1

PASSING TONE

Steps between two chord tones — brief and smooth

C CHORD

DO

→

RE

→

MI

→ NCT

A non-chord tone that **steps between two chord tones in a single direction**. The ear barely notices it as tension — it reads as motion, not conflict. Usually short (8th note or quarter note).

Sounds like: *Smooth, flowing, singable. The most natural-sounding NCT — listeners don't notice it consciously but feel the melody move.*

Use when: *You want stepwise motion that feels organic and effortless.*

2

NEIGHBOR TONE

Steps away from chord tone and returns

C CHORD

MI

→

FA

→

MI

→ NCT

Steps one degree away from a chord tone and **immediately returns** to where it started. Creates a shimmer or ornament effect — like the melody briefly questions its home then comes back.

Sounds like: *Subtle shimmer, vocal ornamentation, vibrato-like motion. Warm and expressive without leaving home.*

Use when: *You want melodic interest without harmonic disruption. Works on beats 2 and 4.*

3

ANTICIPATION

Arrives before the chord that owns it

C CHORD

MI

→

SO

→

G CHORD

→

SO

early → land

A melody note that **arrives before the chord change that would make it a chord tone**. Over the current chord it's an NCT, but it's "correct" in the upcoming chord. Creates forward rhythmic energy.

Sounds like: *Rhythmic push, forward drive, syncopation. Very common in R&B and funk — the melody "pushes" the chord change.*

Use when: *You want momentum and groove at chord changes. Keep the anticipation short (one 8th note).*

4

SUSPENSION

Held over from previous chord, resolves down

PREV CHORD

RE

→

C CHORD

RE

↓

DO

held → falls

A note held over from the **previous chord** into a new chord where it becomes an NCT. Creates a "lean and fall" — the suspended note hangs in mid-air, then resolves *downward by step*. The most emotionally powerful NCT.

Sounds like: *Ache, weight, emotional release. The longer the suspension, the stronger the resolution payoff. The signature sound of gospel and soul.*

Use when: *You need emotional weight at chord changes. Always resolve down by step — never leave it unresolved.*

PASSING	NEIGHBOR	ANTICIPATION	SUSPENSION
Steps through in one direction	Steps away and returns	Jumps ahead of chord change	Held over from previous chord
Duration: very short	Duration: short	Duration: 1-2 subdivisions	Duration: quarter note or longer
Resolves by continuing the step motion	Resolves by returning to starting chord tone	Resolves when the chord arrives to claim it	Always resolves downward by step