

NON-CHORD TONE SURVIVAL GUIDE

Four types of non-chord tones — how each moves, how each sounds, and when to use each one

1 PASSING TONE

Moves by step between chord tones



A non-chord tone that **steps between two chord tones** in a single direction. Brief, smooth, and melodic. The ear barely notices it as tension — it feels like motion, not conflict.

EXAMPLE

DO - RE - MI over a C chord: RE is a passing tone. *Very common in singable pop melodies.*

Use it when: *you need stepwise motion that feels smooth and natural. Short duration only — passing tones on long beats become suspensions.*

2 NEIGHBOR TONE

Steps away from chord tone and returns



A non-chord tone that **steps one degree away from a chord tone** and immediately returns. Creates a shimmer or ornament effect — like a note briefly questioning its home before returning.

EXAMPLE

MI - FA - MI over C chord: FA is an upper neighbor tone. *Creates a subtle moment of ache that resolves immediately.*

Use it when: *you want melodic ornamentation without harmonic disruption. Works well on beats 2 and 4 for rhythmic interest.*

3 ANTICIPATION

Arrives before the chord that owns it



A note that **arrives early** — before the chord change that would make it a chord tone. Over the current chord it's a non-chord tone, but it sets up the next harmony perfectly, creating rhythmic momentum.

EXAMPLE

Melody hits SO on the last 8th note of a C chord measure, while G major doesn't arrive until beat 1 of the next bar. SO anticipates the G chord. *Creates forward pull.*

Use it when: *you want rhythmic energy at chord changes. Very common in R&B and funk — the melody "pushes" the chord. Keep it short (one 8th or quarter note max).*

4 SUSPENSION

Held over from previous chord, resolves down



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

EXAMPLE

RE held through a chord change to C major. RE is not in C, so it hangs as a 9th. Then it falls to DO. *The classic "ache and release" of gospel and soul.*

Use it when: *you need emotional weight at a chord change. The longer the suspension, the stronger the resolution payoff. Always resolve downward by step — unresolved suspensions feel like errors, not intentions.*

RESOLUTION RULES — HOW EACH TYPE MUST RESOLVE

PASSING + NEIGHBOR TONES

Short duration is the key. **Keep them on weak beats or subdivision.** They resolve by stepwise continuation (passing) or immediate return (neighbor). Duration creates the distinction between these and suspensions.

SUSPENSIONS

Always resolve down by step. The downward resolution is the moment of release. Common patterns: 4–3 (FA → MI), 7–6 (TI → LA), 9–8 (RE → DO). Suspensions that don't resolve become dissonances that sound unintentional.

ANTICIPATIONS

Resolution happens **by chord arrival**, not note movement. The next chord makes the anticipation "correct" retroactively. Keep anticipations to 1–2 subdivisions ahead of the beat — earlier feels like a wrong note, not a push.

DURATION GUIDE

Passing/Neighbor = **8th note or less**
Anticipation = **1–2 subdivisions**
Suspension = **quarter note or longer**
Longer = more emotional weight on resolution