Section 4.2.1
Four-Note Voicings: Major, Minor, Dominant

Voicing  Voicing is which chord notes to play and where to play them. The most common chord voicings, four-note voicings (or rootless voicings) use the third, fifth, seventh, and ninth. They can be played in the left hand of the piano when playing with a bass player, or in the right hand with the left hand playing the chord root underneath. They are also the basis for many jazz arrangements.

7/9 surrounding patterns  Think of sevenths and ninths as a pair of notes surrounding the root. For a major seventh chord, the ninth is a whole step above the root, and the seventh is a half step below. For minor seventh and dominant seventh chords, both the seventh and the ninth are a whole step away from the root. The examples below use D as the root.

Voicing minor seventh chords  To voice minor seventh chords, start with the minor seventh 7/9 pattern and add the third and fifth (3/5). The 3/5 can be above or below the 7/9, so the lowest note will be the seventh or the third. Keep the lowest note between middle C and the C an octave below so the chord doesn’t get too high or too low.
Voicing major seventh chords

Voice major seventh chords like minor sevenths: start with the 7/9 major seventh surrounding pattern and add the third and fifth above or below. Again, the lowest note will be the third or the seventh, and should be between middle C and the C below.

For major-minor seventh (dominant seventh) chords, jazz players usually play the thirteenth (=sixth) instead of the fifth. Otherwise, the process is identical to voicing minor seventh chords and major seventh chords.

Stack-of-thirds voicing

When the third is voiced on the bottom, the third, fifth, seventh, and ninth form a stack-of-thirds voicing. Some authors call this Type A voicing. For major seventh chords and minor seventh chords, the stack-of-thirds (3/5/7/9 without the root) will be the opposite of the chord quality (major for minor, minor for major). Consider:

- D^7
  - 3,5,7,9 spells an F# min7 chord
- D-7
  - 3,5,7,9 spells an F maj7 chord
Stack-of-thirds pattern for dominant chords

For dominant sevenths with the third on the bottom (stack-of-thirds voicing or Type A voicing), the pattern is a perfect fourth a half step below the 7/9. Remember the fifth (here A) from the “stack-of-thirds” pattern is replaced by the thirteenth (=sixth, here B) when jazz players play dominant sevenths.

Pair-of-thirds pattern

When the 7/9 pair is on the bottom, a “pair-of-thirds” voicing pattern results: the 7/9 third and the 3/5 third. Some authors call this Type B voicing. For minor sevenths, the 7/9 and 3/5 are each major thirds with a whole step between. For major sevenths, the thirds are minor with a half step between. Again, notice the thirds are the opposite quality of the chord: major for minor sevenths and minor for major sevenths.

Pair-of-thirds pattern for dominant chords

For dominant sevenths (major minor sevenths) with the 7/9 on the bottom, the pattern is a perfect fourth a whole step above the 7/9.

Four-note voicing summary

To voice minor seventh, dominant seventh, or major seventh chords:
1. Keep the bottom note between middle C and the C an octave below.
2. Do not include the root in the voicing.
3. Either the third or the seventh goes on the bottom.
4. Use the correct 7/9 surrounding pattern (see above).
5. Use 3/5 for major seventh and minor seventh chords; use the third and the thirteenth (=sixth) for major-minor (dominant) seventh chords.