Musical works written in the Baroque era would often include a part called the Basso Continuo, which would consist of a single bass clef melodic line with various numbers and accidentals printed beneath the notes. The numbers and symbols printed below the basso continuo part are called the figured bass. So how do you turn figured bass into chords?

First of all, it’s important to know that the note given on the bass clef part is always the bass note of the chord, and remember: the bass is not necessarily the root!

Second, the numbers represent intervals above the bass, even though some numbers are usually left out. Note that the intervals are always diatonic. Don’t worry about inflection... just use the notes from the key signature!

Lastly, accidentals are applied to the interval they appear with. If you have an accidental by itself, it applies to the third above the bass. Don’t overthink these: if the composer wants a note raised by a half-step and it’s flattened in the key signature, the figured bass will have a natural, not a sharp.

By the time the Classical period got going, composers stopped including a Basso Continuo part, and so figured bass fell out of use... with only one exception: music theory classes!

Realizing figured bass (writing chords given a figured bass line) makes for an excellent exercise for students to learn how to write in the common practice period style!

Woo!