How to Read Sheet Music: A Step-by-Step Guide – Musicnotes Now

Have you ever heard a song on the radio and thought, “Hey, it’d be really cool to know how to play that?” Do you have friends who play musical instruments, and you want to join in on the fun? Do you want to expand your general artistic knowledge? Well, learning the basics of how to read sheet music can help you achieve all of these, and in a shorter amount of time than you might think!

At its very simplest, music is a language just like you’d read aloud from a book. The symbols you see on pages of sheet music have been used for hundreds of years. They represent the pitch, speed, and rhythm of the song they convey, as well as expression and techniques used by a musician to play the piece. Think of the notes as the letters, the measures as the words, the phrases as the sentences, and so on. Learning how to read music really does open up a whole new world to explore!

Follow our step-by-step introduction to reading music and, with a little practice, you’ll be playing along in no time. Keep reading to the end for some free tools and sheet music arrangements to help you learn.

Step 1: Learn the Basic Symbols of Musical Notation

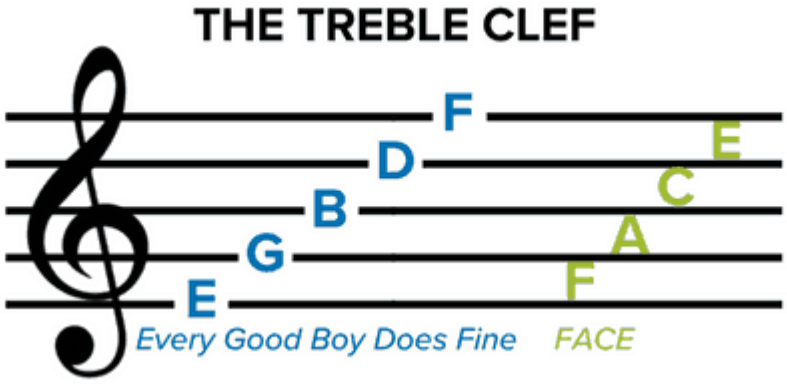
Music is made up of a variety of symbols, the most basic of which are the staff, the clefs, and the notes. All music contains these fundamental components, and to learn how to read music, you must first familiarize yourself with these basics.

The Staff

The staff consists of five lines and four spaces. Each of those lines and each of those spaces represents a different letter, which in turn represents a note. Sheet music notes, represented by lines and spaces, are named A-G, and the note sequence moves alphabetically up the staff.

Treble Clef

There are two main clefs with which to familiarize yourself; the first is a treble clef. The treble clef has the ornamental letter G on the far left side. The G's inner swoop encircles the "G" line on the staff. The treble clef notates the higher registers of music, so if your instrument has a higher pitch, such as a flute, violin, or saxophone, your sheet music is written in the treble clef. Higher notes on a keyboard also are notated on the treble clef.

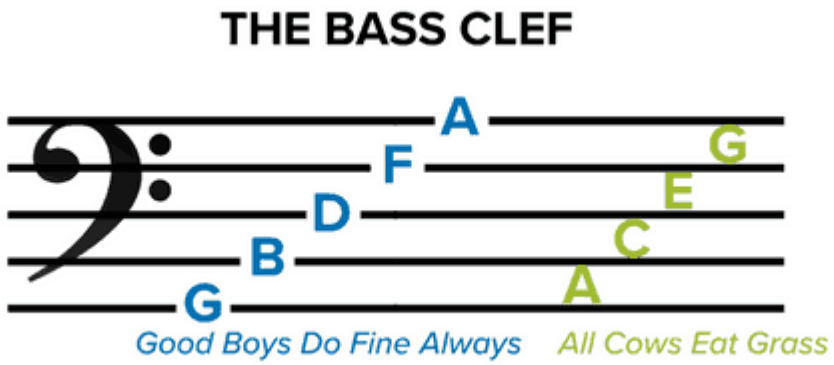


We use common mnemonics to remember the note names for the lines and spaces of the treble clef. For lines, we remember EGBDF by the word cue "Every Good Boy Does Fine." Similarly, for the spaces, FACE is just like the word "face."

Bass Clef

The line between the two bass clef dots is the "F" line on the bass clef staff, and it's also referred to as the F clef. The bass clef notates the lower registers of music, so if your instrument has a lower pitch, such as a bassoon, tuba, or cello, your sheet music

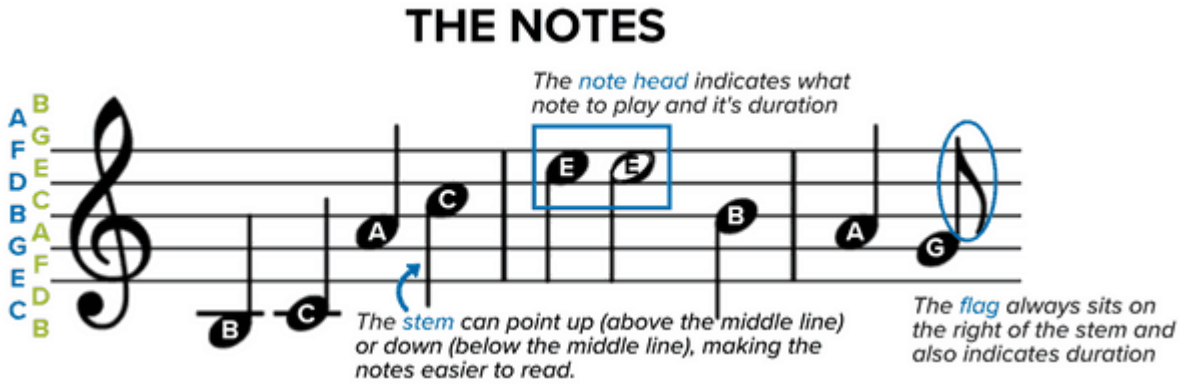
is written in the bass clef. Lower notes on your keyboard also are notated in the bass clef.



A common mnemonic to remember note names for the lines of the bass clef is: GBDFA “Good Boys Do Fine Always.” And for the spaces: ACEG, “All Cows Eat Grass.”

Sheet Music Symbols and Notes on a Staff

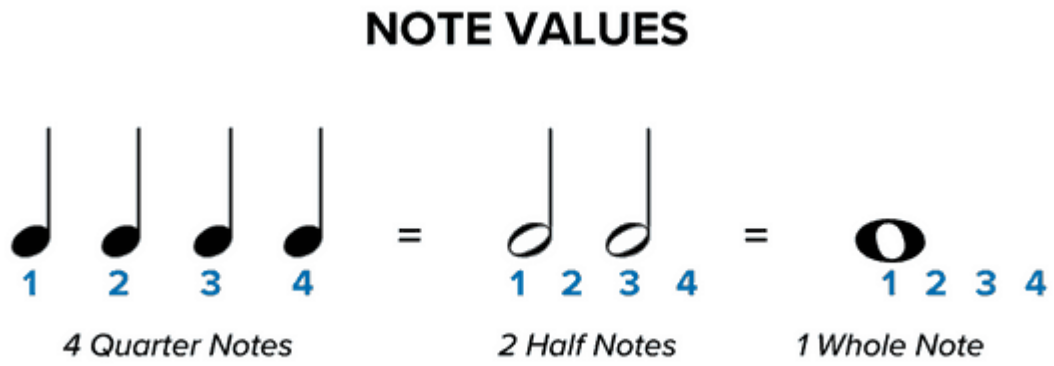
Notes placed on the staff tell us which note letter to play on our instrument and how long to play it. There are three parts of each note, the **note head**, the **stem**, and the **flag**.



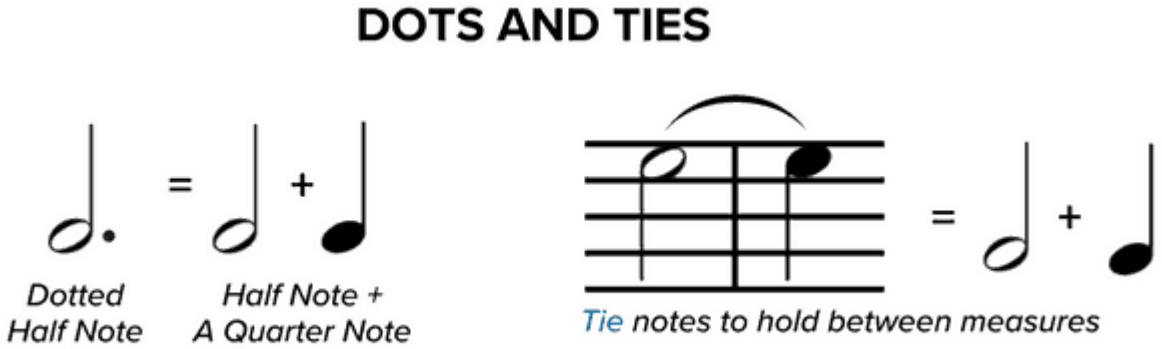
All music notes have a **note head**, either filled (black) or open (white). Where the note head sits on the staff (either on a line or space) determines which note you will play. Sometimes, note heads will sit above or below the five lines and four spaces of a staff. In that case, a line (known as a ledger line) is drawn through the note, above the note or below the note head, to indicate the note letter to play, as in the B and C notes above.

The note **stem** is a thin line that extends either up or down from the note head. The line extends from the right if pointing upward or from the left if pointing downward. The direction of the line doesn't affect how you play the note but serves to make the notes easier to read while allowing them to fit neatly on the staff. As a rule, any notes at or above the "B" line on the staff have downward pointing stems, those notes below the "B" line have upward pointing stems.

The note **flag** is a curvy mark to the right of the note stem. Its purpose is to tell you how long to hold a note. We'll see below how a single flag shortens the note's duration, while multiple flags can make it shorter still.

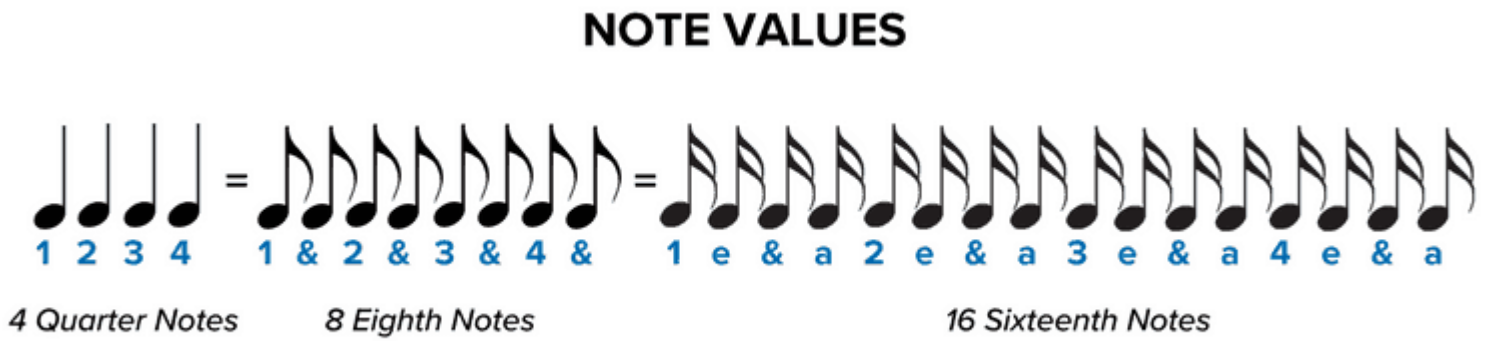


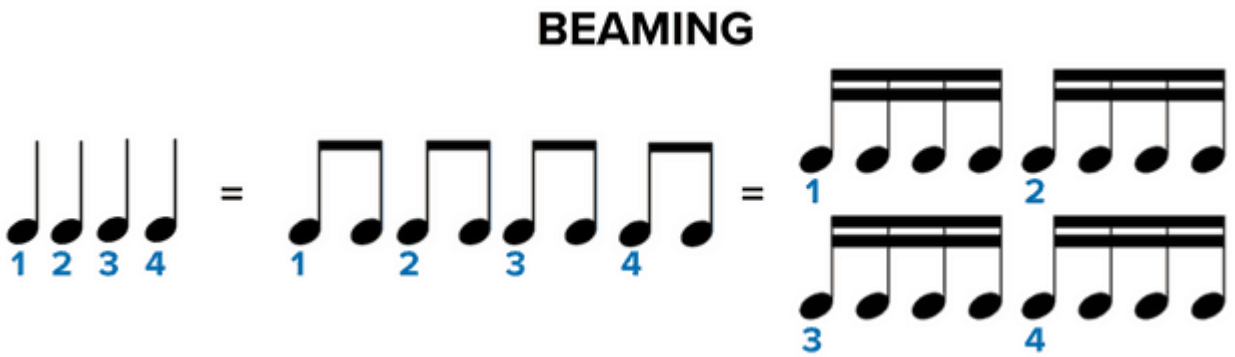
Now that you know the parts to each note, we'll take a closer look at those filled and open note heads discussed above. Whether a note head is filled or open shows us the note's **value**, or how long that note should be held. Start with a closed note head with a stem. That's our **quarter note**, and it gets one beat. An open note head with a stem is a **half note**, and it gets two beats. An open note that looks like an "o" without a stem is a **whole note**, and it gets held for four beats.



There are other ways to extend the length of a note. A **dot** after the note head, for example, adds another half of that note's duration to it. So, a half note with a dot would equal a half note and a quarter note; a quarter note with a dot equals a quarter

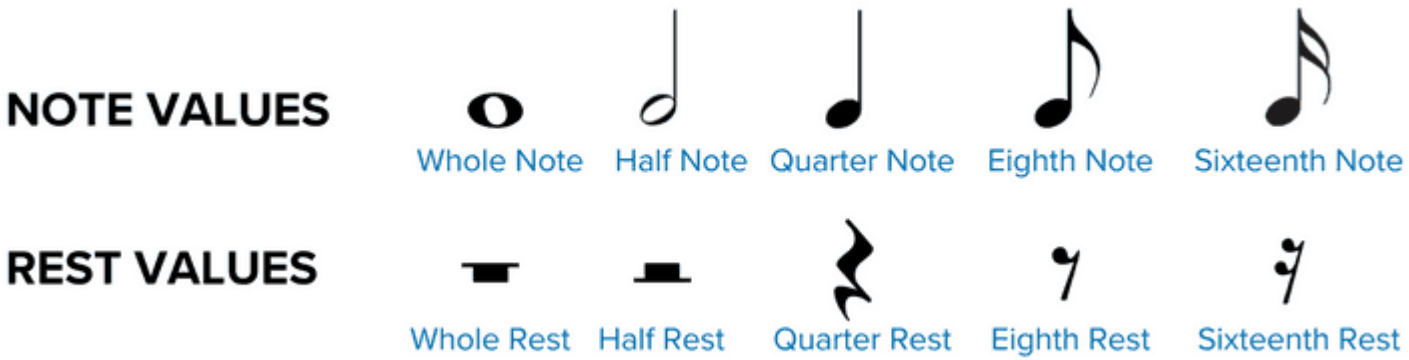
plus an eighth note. A **tie** may also be used to extend a note. Two notes tied together should be held as long as the value of both of those notes together, and ties are commonly used to signify held notes that cross measures or bars.





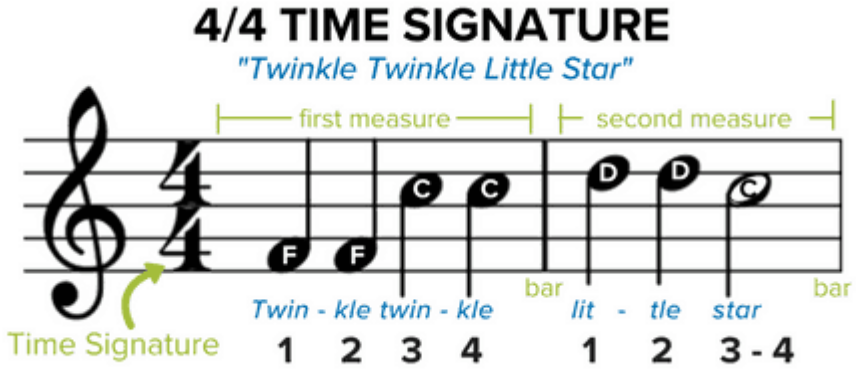
The opposite may also happen. We can shorten the amount of time a note should be held, relative to the quarter note. Faster notes are signified with either **flags**, like the ones discussed above, or with **beams** between the notes. Each flag halves the value of a note, so a single flag signifies 1/2 of a quarter note, a double flag halves that to 1/4 of a quarter note, et cetera. Beams do the same while allowing us to read the music more clearly and keep the notation less cluttered. As you can see, there's no difference in how you count the eighth and 16th notes above. Follow along with the sheet music for "Alouette" to see how beams organize notes!

But what happens when there isn't a note taking up each beat? It's easy, we take a rest! A **rest**, just like a note, shows us how long it should be held based on its shape. See how whole and quarter rests are used in the song "Here We Go Looby-Loo."



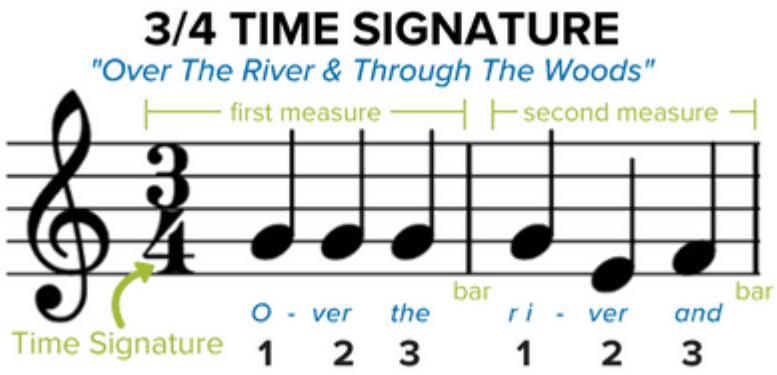
Step 2: Pick Up the Beat

To play music, you need to know its **meter**, the beat you use when dancing, clapping, or tapping your foot along with a song. When reading music, the meter is presented similar to a fraction, with a top number and a bottom number. We call this the song's **time signature**. The top number tells you how many beats are in a **measure**, the space between each vertical line (called a **bar**). The bottom number tells you the note value (the length) of each beat.



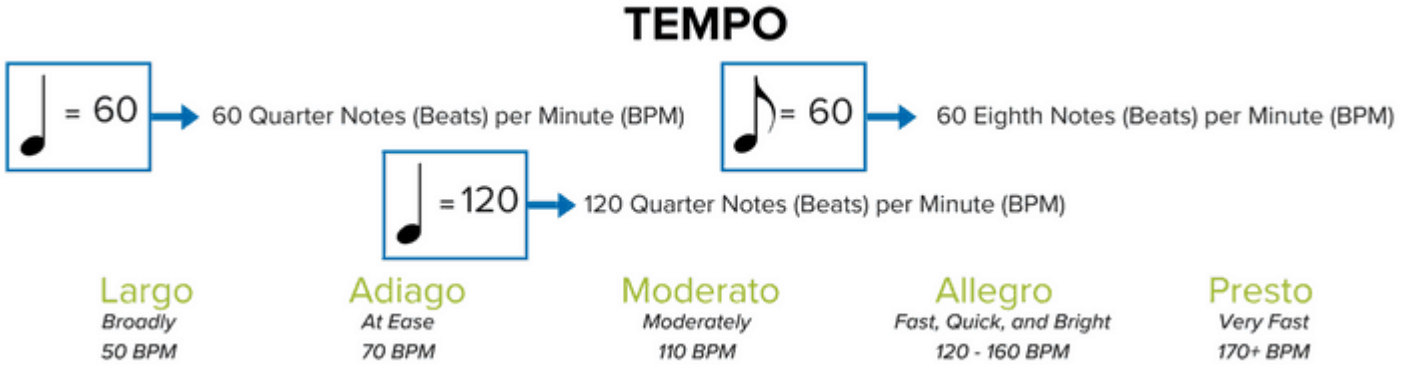
In the example above, the time signature is 4/4, meaning there are four beats per bar and that every quarter note gets one beat. Click here to listen to sheet music written in 4/4 time, and try counting along 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4 with the beat numbers above.

In the example below, the time signature is 3/4, meaning there are three beats per bar and that every quarter note gets one beat. Click here to listen to sheet music written in 3/4 time, try counting the beats, 1,2,3 – 1,2,3.



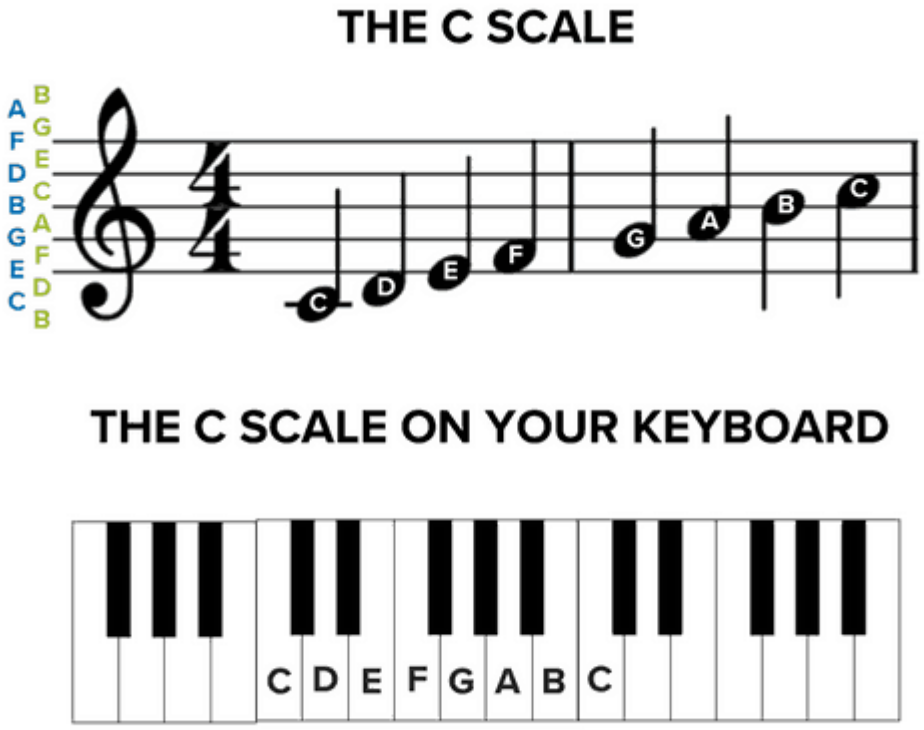
Let's look again at the above examples. Notice that even though the 4/4 time signature in "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" calls for four beats per bar, there aren't four notes in the second bar. That's because you have two quarter notes and one half note, which added together equal four beats.

In addition to your note values and time signature, the last piece to feeling the rhythm is knowing your **tempo**, defined by the beats per minute. Tempo tells you how fast or slow a piece is intended to be played, and often is shown at the top of a piece of sheet music. For example, a tempo of 60 BPM (beats per minute) means you play 60 of the signified notes every minute or a single note every second. Likewise, a tempo of 120 doubles the speed to two notes every second. You may also see Italian words like "Largo," "Allegro," or "Presto" at the top of your sheet music, which signifies common tempos. Musicians use a tool called a metronome to help them keep tempo while practicing a new piece. [Click here to see an online metronome tool]() and click on the circles next to the BPM values to see how a tempo can speed up and slow down.

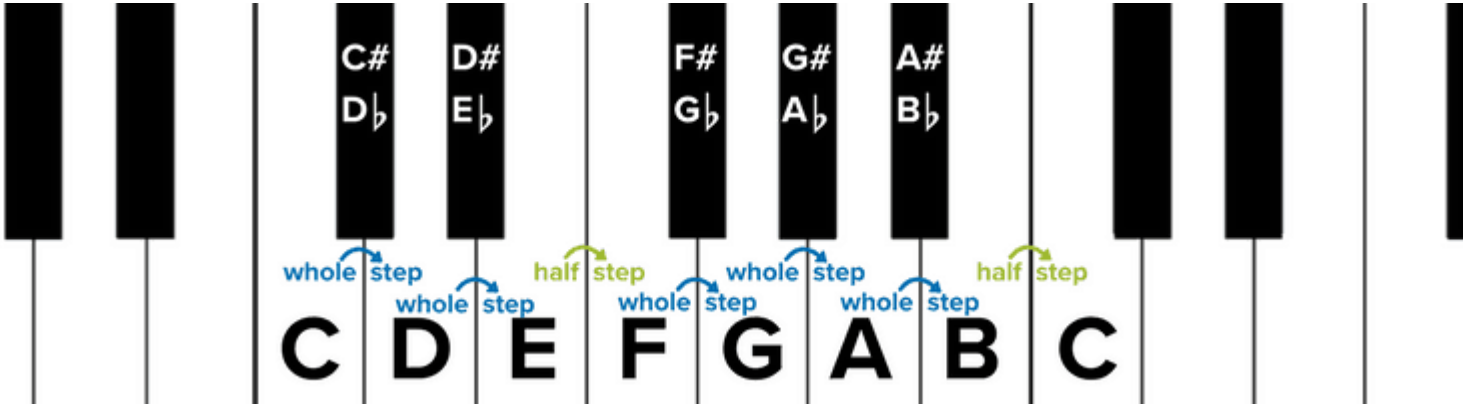


Step 3: Play a Melody

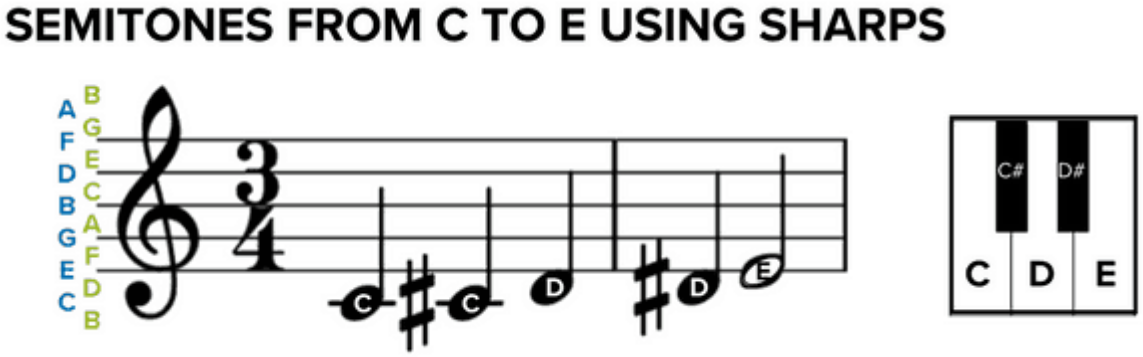
Congratulations, you're almost on your way to reading sheet music! Next, let's look at **scales**. A scale is made of eight consecutive notes. For example, the C major scale is composed of C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. The interval between the first note of the C major scale and the last is an example of an **octave**. We recommend practicing the C major scale as much as possible, since knowing it makes it easier to learn the other major scales. Each of the notes of the C major scale corresponds with a white key on your keyboard. Here's how the C major scale looks on a staff and how that corresponds to the keys on your keyboard:

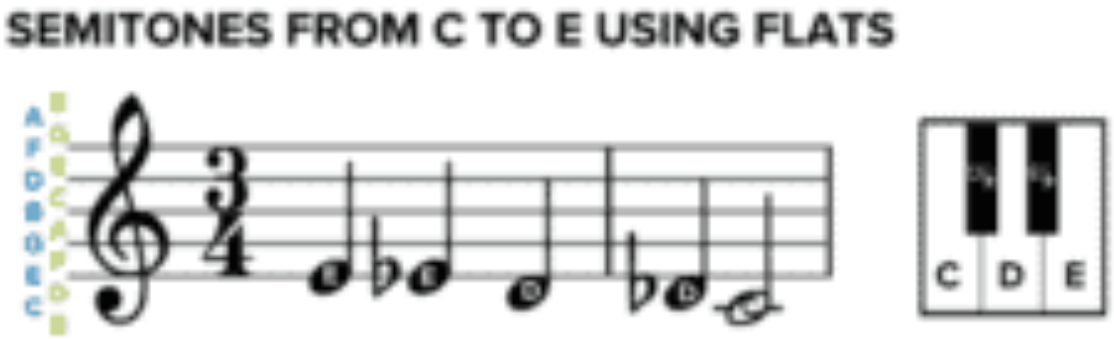


Notice that as the notes ascend the staff, and move to the right on your keyboard, the pitch of the notes become higher. But what about the black keys? Musically, **whole tones**, or whole steps between the note letters, would limit the sounds we're able to produce on our instruments. Let's consider the C major scale you just learned to play. The distance between the C and the D keys in the C scale is a whole step. However, the distance between the E and the F keys in the C scale is a half-step. Do you see the difference? The E and the F keys don't have a black key in between them, thus they're just a half step away from one another. Every major scale has the same pattern: whole-whole-half-whole-whole-whole-half. There are many other types of scales, each with unique sounds, like minor scales, modal scales, and more that you'll come across later. For now, let's focus only on major scales and the major scale pattern. Look at the C major scale again on the keyboard below.

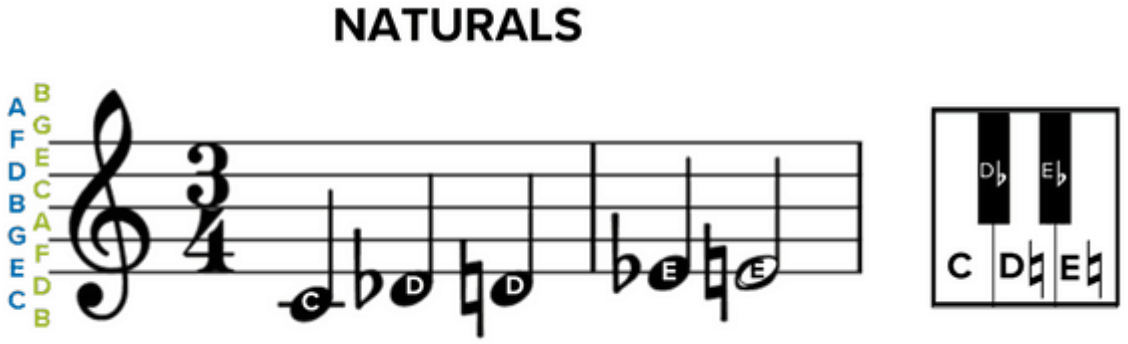


Semitones, or half-steps on the keyboard, allow us to write an infinite variety of sounds into music. A **sharp**, denoted by the ♯ symbol, means that note is a semitone (or half step) *higher* than the note head to its right on sheet music. Conversely, a **flat**, denoted by a ♭ symbol, means the note is a semitone *lower* than the note head to its right. Notice on the keyboard picture and notated staff below, showing each half step between the C and the E notes, that whether you use the sharp or the flat of a note depends on whether you're moving *up* or *down* the keyboard.

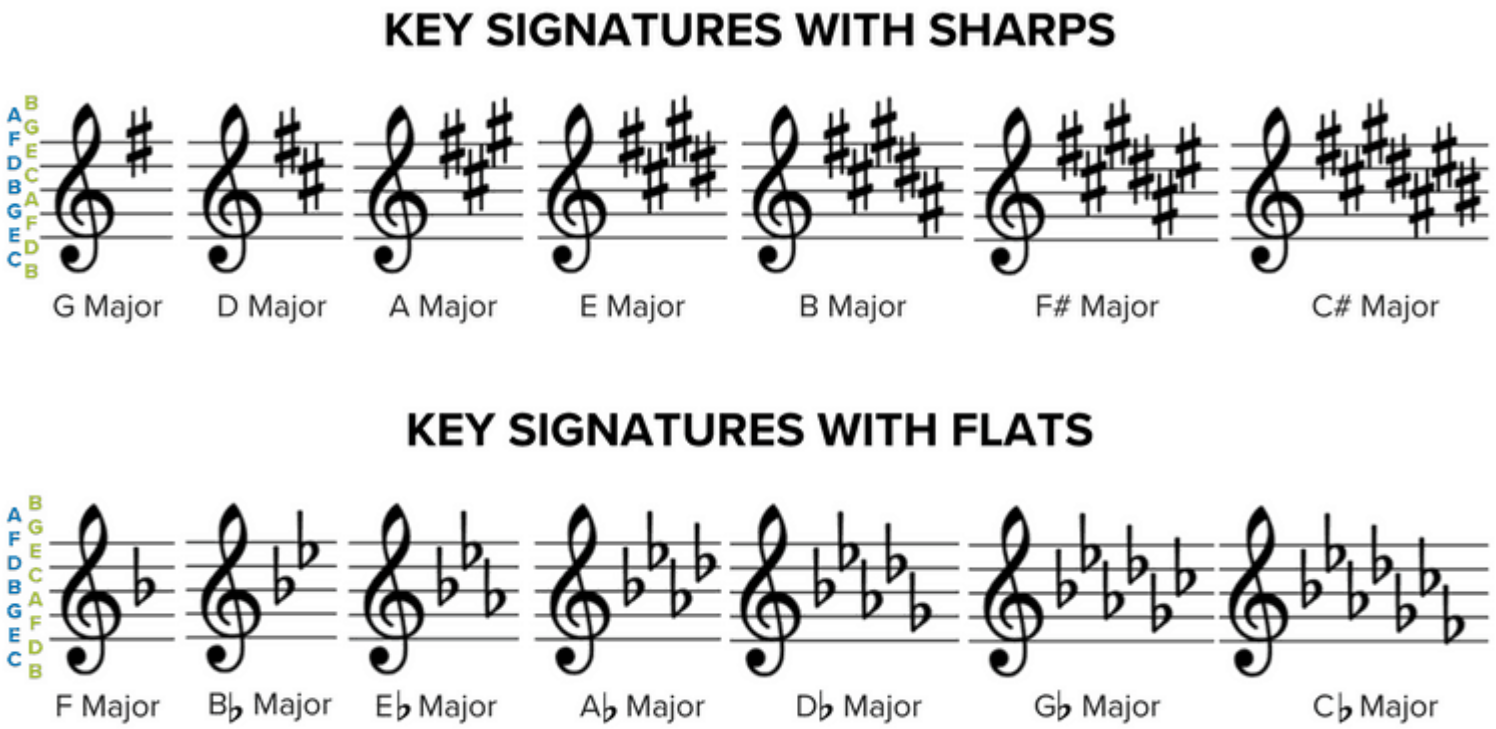




There's one more symbol to learn regarding semitones, and that's the **natural**, denoted by a ♮. If a note is sharp or flat, that sharp or flat extends throughout the measure, unless there's a natural symbol. A natural cancels a sharp or flat within a measure or a song. Here's what playing C to E would look like with natural symbols.



The last key to learning how to read music is understanding **key signatures**. As an example, the C major scale you learned above was in the key of C. Scales are named after their **tonic**, the preeminent note within the scale, and the tonic determines what key you play in. You can start a major scale on any note, so long as you follow the whole-whole-half-whole-whole-whole-half pattern. Following that pattern in keys other than the key of C will require you to use sharps and flats. Since that's the case, we place the sharps or flats for your song's key signature right before the meter, after the clef, on your sheet music. That tells you to maintain those sharps or flats throughout the music unless there's a natural symbol to override it. You will begin to recognize the key signatures of pieces based on which sharps or flats are shown. Here's a quick glimpse at some key signatures using sharps and flats:



Step 4: Free Tools to Help You Learn

The steps above are a great place to start as you learn to read music. To help you along on your musical journey, we've also created a few free tools to begin practicing with.

First, download a free arrangement of "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Just add the song to your cart and proceed through checkout. For more variety, check out the rest of our sheet music for beginners, all of which you'll be able to play using the steps above. Play popular hits like the Star Wars Theme, "Let It Go" from 'Frozen', "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen, and more. We're adding new Beginner Notes daily, so be sure to check back often and learn to play all your favorite songs!

We've also created a helpful guide for lettering the keys on your keyboard or piano. Download your Keyboard Note Guide here to print, fold, and place on your keyboard. Once you become familiar with the keys, you can easily remove it and continue to strengthen your note-reading skills.

Finally, don't forget to download the free Musicnotes app! Enjoy instant access to all your Musicnotes sheet music files, plus

tools and features created by musicians, for musicians. As you progress and learn how to read sheet music, your collection of arrangements will grow. Our app makes it easy to keep everything organized on the go. If you have any additional questions or need help finding songs to practice, reach out to our team of experts and we'll be happy to help. Good luck and, most importantly, have fun!

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