

# How to Read Sheet Music

## Step 1: Learn the Basic Symbols of 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.

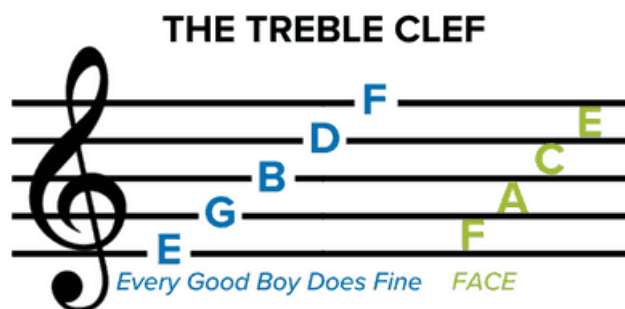
### The Staff

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. Those lines and spaces represent notes 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.

## THE BASS CLEF

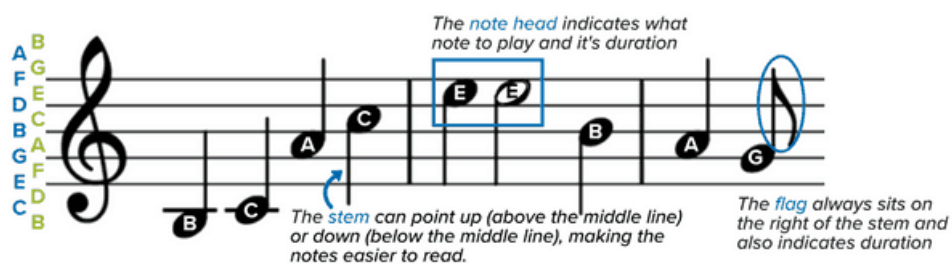


A common mnemonic to remember note names for the lines of the bass clef is: GBDFA "Good Boys Do Fine Always." And for the spaces: ACEG, "All Cows Eat Grass."

## Notes

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**.

## THE NOTES



Every note has 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 as a way 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.

## NOTE VALUES



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.

## DOTS AND TIES



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.

## NOTE VALUES



## BEAMING



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."

## NOTE VALUES



## REST VALUES



## 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 to a **measure**, the space of staff in between each vertical line (called a **bar**). The bottom number tells you the note value for a single beat, the pulse your foot taps along with while listening.

## 4/4 TIME SIGNATURE

*"Twinkle Twinkle Little Star"*

The image shows a musical staff in 4/4 time signature. The first measure contains two quarter notes (F and F) and two eighth notes (C and C). The second measure contains two quarter notes (D and D) and two eighth notes (C and C). The time signature is 4/4, and the lyrics are 'Twinkle twinkle little star'. The first measure is labeled 'first measure' and the second measure is labeled 'second measure'. The time signature is also labeled 'Time Signature'.

In the example above, the time signature is 4/4, meaning there are 4 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 3 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.

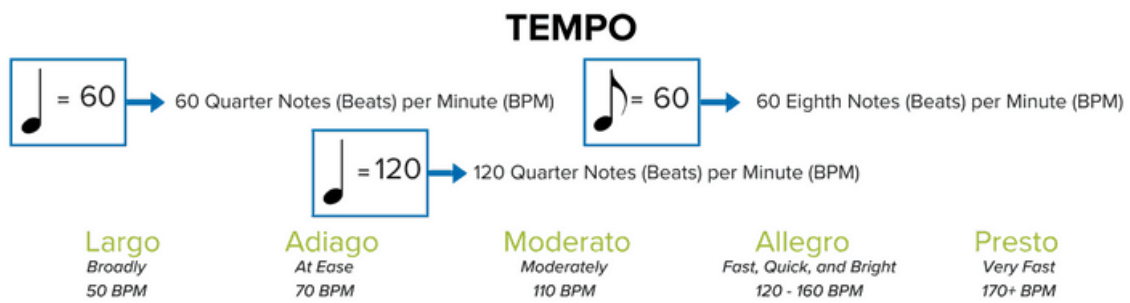
## 3/4 TIME SIGNATURE

*"Over The River & Through The Woods"*

The image shows a musical staff in 3/4 time signature. The first measure contains three quarter notes (O, v, e). The second measure contains three quarter notes (r, i, v). The time signature is 3/4, and the lyrics are 'Over the river and'. The first measure is labeled 'first measure' and the second measure is labeled 'second measure'. The time signature is also labeled 'Time Signature'.

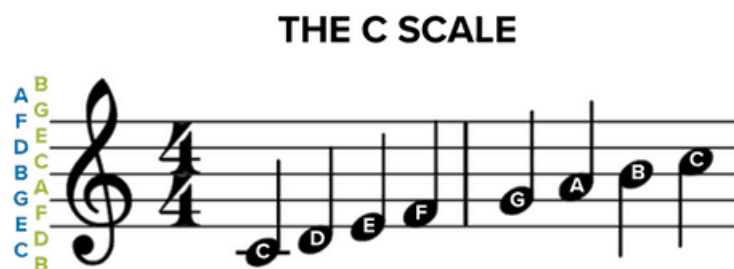
Let's look again at the above examples, notice that even though the 4/4 time signature in "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" calls for 4 beats per bar, there aren't 4 notes in the second bar? That's because you have two quarter notes and one half note, which added together equal 4 beats.

In addition to your note values and time signature, the last piece to feeling the rhythm is knowing your **tempo** or 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. A tempo of, say 60 BPM (beats per minute) would mean you'd play 60 of the signified notes every minute or a single note every second. Likewise, a tempo of 120 would double the speed at 2 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 music! First, 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 your C major scale and the last is an example of an **octave**. The C major scale is very important to practice since once you have the C scale down, the other major scales will start to fall into place. Each of the notes of a C major scale corresponds with a white key on your keyboard. Here's how a C major scale looks on a staff and how that corresponds to the keys on your keyboard:

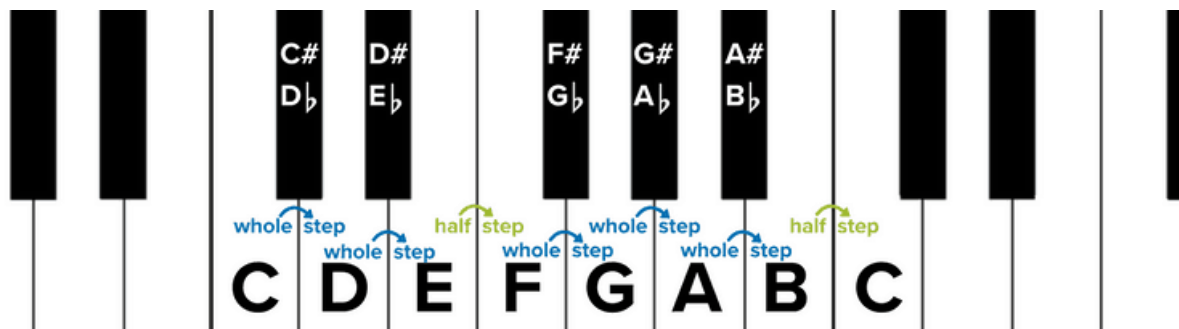


### THE C SCALE ON YOUR KEYBOARD



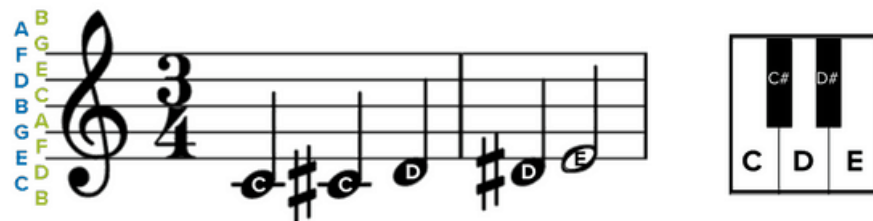
You'll notice that as the notes ascend the staff, and move to the right on your keyboard, the pitch of the notes gets higher. But, what about the black keys? Musically, **whole tones**, or whole steps between the note letters, would limit the sounds we're able to produce on our instruments. Let's consider the C major scale you just learned to play. The distance between the C and the D keys in your C scale is a whole step, however, the distance between the E and the F keys in your 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 you'll play on a keyboard 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 on, but for now, let's focus just 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  $\sharp$  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  $\flat$  symbol, means the note is a semitone *lower* than the note head to its right. You'll 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.

### SEMITONES FROM C TO E USING SHARPS



### SEMITONES FROM C TO E USING FLATS



There's one more symbol to learn regarding semitones, and that's the **natural**, denoted by a  $\natural$ . 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.

## KEY SIGNATURES WITH SHARPS

[illegible]

First, we're offering you a FREE Beginner Notes download! [Click here for the sheet music to "Mary Had a Little Lamb,"](#) just add the free song to your cart and proceed through checkout to claim your copy, and be sure to take a look at our [huge Beginner Notes sheet music assortment](#), 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', or "[Hallelujah](#)" by Leonard Cohen, just to



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We've also created a handy 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. For those who don't have access to a keyboard, you can download a free keyboard app for your iPad [here](#), or a free Android keyboard app [here](#).

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Good luck, and most importantly, have fun!