

Rhythmic Basics

Meter

The *time signature* (or metric signature) appears at the beginning of a piece. It tells you how many beats will be in each measure. This is not just technical information - the number of beats per measure (or the *meter*) determines the overall “groove” of the piece. It is one of the most obvious things you can pick up just by listening.

The time signature includes two bits of information:



number of beats per measure

which “note value” gets the beat. For now, we’ll assume that the quarter note is getting the beat (which is the most common case, and it’s what it says here.) We’ll discuss this more later.


Note Values (and Counting)

Usually, the *quarter note* is worth one beat.  = 1 beat

If we saw a measure full of quarter notes, we might write the beats below the staff, like so:



And we’d “count it out” by simply saying “one, two, three, four”

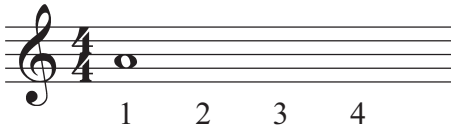
The *half note* is usually worth two beats.  = 2 beats



We would count it by saying one and three loudly, but also mentioning the two and four - so “one, (two), three, (four)”

A *whole note* is usually worth four beats.

● = 4 beats



There are also rhythmic values that are worth a fraction of a beat.

An *eighth note* is half the value of a quarter note. ♪ = 1/2 beat
(In other words, it moves twice as fast as the quarter.)

When you see eighth notes on the staff, you add a plus between the beats.



and you'd count this out by saying "one and two and three, four"

A single eighth note has a "flag" that hangs down from it, as in the measure above. However, the notes are often connected together with *beams*, like in the following example:



We'll talk more about the beams later!

A *sixteenth note* is a quarter the value of a quarter note. ♪♪ = 1/4 beat

When we see sixteenth notes, we insert "e" and "a" into the beats



and we say "one *eeh* and *uh* two *eeh* and *uh* three, four"

Rests

Rests indicate silence, rather than sound. Each note value has a corresponding rest.

quarter-note rest  = 1 beat

half-note rest  = 2 beats

whole-note rest  = 4 beats

eighth-note rest  = 1/2 beat

sixteenth-note rest  = 1/4 beat

The quarter-note rest is terribly difficult to draw the way it appears in professional music. Most people just make a kind of squiggle, like so:

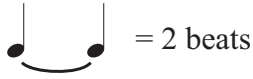


With the eighth and sixteenth-note rests, the “flag” from the note simply flies off of a diagonal line.



Ties, Beams, and “Showing the Beat”

A *tie* connects two notes together, creating one long note that is the sum of both.



This is useful when you have a long note that “hangs over” from one measure into the next. When this occurs you must break it up into parts and use a tie to connect them.

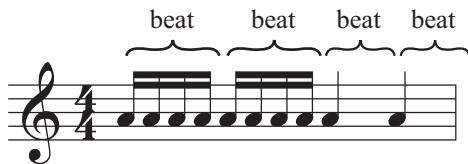


This break at the beginning of the measure is a form of “showing the beat.” Putting a note at the beginning of the measure makes the whole passage easier to read.

When you are working with the “subdivisions” of the beat (the “e-ehs”, “ands” and “uhs”), you also must take care to visually separate each beat. We’ve already seen that a *beam* simply connects consecutive notes together visually - it doesn’t change how they sound.



We beam notes within the beat together, but separate them from the notes in the next beat. This makes it easy to scan the measure and see where the beats are.



Note how there is a break in the beams where the second beat starts.

When you have notes that “hang over” from one beat to the next, you should break them into parts and tie them together.

hanging over

1 2 + (3) + a 4 + 1 + 2 e + a (3) 4

Notes that hang over the beat are *syncopated*, and they can be tricky to understand and execute.

The Dot

Adding a *dot* to any note tacks on an extra half of the value. In other words, the note is now worth one-and-a-half times what it was without the dot.

= 1 + 1/2 beats

= 2 + 1 beats (in other words, three)

= 4 + 2 beats (in other words, six)

= 1/2 + 1/4 beats (in other words, 3/4)

= 1/4 + 1/8 beats (in other words, 3/8)

The dot can be used to make the familiar “heartbeat” rhythm.

1 (2) + 3 (4) + 1 (e)(+) a 2 (e)(+) a 3 4

Showing the Beat, Part II

Perhaps you noticed that my dotted example doesn't always "show the beat." The dotted quarters hang over the beat, but I'm not breaking them up and using ties. The real rule is a bit more complicated - there are actually three levels of showing the beat. Which one you obey depends on what kind of subdivisions you are working with.

The "highest" level is at the whole measure. You *must* break up notes that hang over the bar line.

measure measure

1 (2) 3 4 (1) 2 3 (4)

When you are working with only quarter-notes and eighth notes (and no beams), most people will break up notes on the third beat. Here is the familiar "clave" rhythm, with the third beat broken into parts.

break!

2 beats 2 beats 2 beats 2 beats

1 (2) + (3) 4 1 2 3 4

When you get into sixteenth notes, or even eighth notes with beams, you usually isolate each beat.

beat beat beat beat beat beat beat beat

1 + a 2 + 3 e + 4 + 1 2 + 3 + 4

Even this three-tiered system is not a hard-and-fast "rule". You'll see some sources that deviate from it in different ways. Try to conform to it when you are starting out, and pay attention to how your professionally-printed music is written. "Showing the beat" is an important dimension of rhythmic writing that students are often completely unaware of.