

Time Signatures

Understand the numbers. Feel the beat. Read the rhythm.



What is a time signature?

A time signature tells us how rhythmic values are organised into each **bar (measure)**. It appears as two numbers stacked vertically. It describes metre; it does not tell us how fast to play. Speed is given by the tempo.

The top number: how many units?

The **top number** tells us how many of the note units named by the bottom number fit into one complete bar. In 4/4 and 3/4, these units are also the main beats. In 6/8, six eighth-note units are normally grouped into **two main beats**.

The bottom number: which note value?

The **bottom number** identifies the note value used as the counting unit. It is not the number of notes you must write. Notes and rests can be combined, provided their total duration fills the bar.

1 = whole note **2** = half note **4** = quarter note
8 = eighth note **16** = sixteenth note

How it sits on the staff

The time signature comes after the clef and any key signature, before the first note. The upper number occupies the upper half of the staff; the lower number occupies the lower half. Its meaning stays the same with every clef.

Treble clef - 4/4



Bass clef - 4/4



Alto clef - 4/4



Tenor clef - 4/4



Reading rule: the clef gives the pitches; the time signature organises the rhythm. A note has the same duration in treble, bass, alto and tenor clefs.

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4/4 - simple quadruple metre

Four quarter-note beats per bar. Count **1 - 2 - 3 - 4**. Beat 1 is strongest; beat 3 often has a secondary accent. Each beat can divide into two eighth notes.

Two-bar motif: Flute | Treble clef



Bar 1: four quarter notes (1 + 1 + 1 + 1).

Bar 2: half note + two quarter notes (2 + 1 + 1).

3/4 - simple triple metre

Three quarter-note beats per bar. Count **1 - 2 - 3**, with the strongest accent on beat 1. Each beat can divide into two eighth notes. This gives a familiar waltz feel.

Two-bar motif: Cello | Bass clef



Bar 1: three quarter notes (1 + 1 + 1).

Bar 2: half note + quarter note (2 + 1).

6/8 - compound duple metre

Six eighth-note units per bar, grouped **3 + 3**. Feel two main beats, each a dotted quarter note. Count **ONE-la-li TWO-la-li**, or **1-2-3 4-5-6** with accents on 1 and 4.

Two-bar motif: Viola | Alto clef



Bar 1: six eighth notes, beamed in two groups of three.

Bar 2: two dotted quarter notes (3 + 3 eighth-note units).

3/4 and 6/8 have the same total note duration per bar, but a different beat grouping: 3/4 feels like three groups of two eighths; 6/8 feels like two groups of three.