Learn2 Read Music

Music to your eyes

A lot of people think music is difficult to read--but it's not. It's actually the simplest written language there is. And once you get the basics down, the rewards will last a lifetime.

Whether it's classical, rock, hip hop, techno, reggae, ambient, country, folk, jazz or anything else, music is written and recognized in the same way throughout most of the world.

Learning how to read music is a significant step toward eventually being able to play, sing or even write any song you want. And while this 2torial won't turn you into the next Duke Ellington overnight, it will provide the skills you need for a basic read.

Before you begin...

Before you tackle these steps, get your hands on some beginner-level sheet music to use as a reference as you're going along. See if you can find a copy of a song you like. This will be a tremendous help in familiarizing yourself with the basic fundamentals we'll present.

Another big help will be to find yourself an instrument. Even though you don't need one to read music in general, an instrument can be invaluable when it comes to understanding how a note's sound relates to what appears on paper. We'll focus on music for keyboard instruments, such as the piano or organ. However, music theory is generally universal, regardless of what instrument you're playing (including your voice).

If you don't have access to an instrument of your own, try renting or borrowing one from a friend. Sometimes community centers or religious organizations have instruments (especially pianos or organs) that are available for public use. Even if you're planning to sing the music you learn to read, it's important to know how it should sound and where to start.

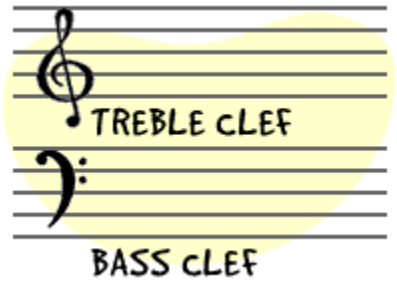
On that note...

Step 1: Learn the names of notes and clefs

In modern, standardized music, there are seven note names which correspond with the first seven letters of the alphabet: A, B, C, D, E, F and G.

If you play or sing the notes in order, beginning with A, you would restart with "A" after "G," only at a higher pitch. For example: **A**, B, C, D, E, F, G, **A**, B, C and so on. Eight notes in a row (in this case, from "A" to "A") are called an **octave**.

Since notes can range in tone from a deep bass (very low) to a high soprano, they're separated in written music by two different clefs: treble and bass.



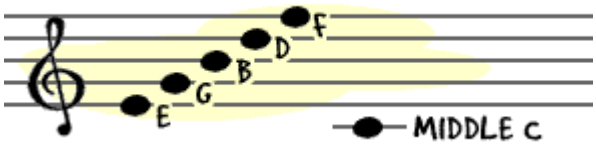
As a general rule, notes that follow a treble clef range from mid-level up to very high in tone. Notes that follow a bass clef range from mid-level down to the lowest of tones.

NOTE: There is also a "C" clef, which is sometimes used for cello, tenor trombone, bassoon and viola. However, we'll only be discussing the treble and bass clefs.

Step 2: Find where the notes fall on staves

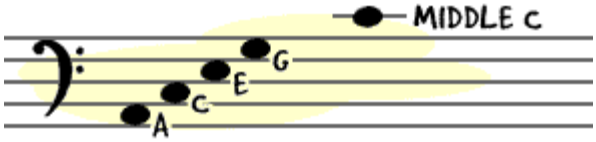
Each clef has a stave. Staves are made up of five lines and four spaces. Each line and space represents where a particular note will fall.

The treble stave. Starting from bottom to top, the lines on the treble stave read: E, G, B, D, F (one note for each line). A well-known way of remembering this is to say "**E**very **G**ood **B**oy **D**oes **F**ine" or "**E**very **G**ood **B**oy **D**eserves **F**udge," depending on if you're into chocolate or not. The spaces in between the lines follow the same order, and the notes are F, A, C, E, respectively.



Note how the treble clef, also called a G clef, encircles the G line. This is a good way to remember where notes fall, too.

The bass stave. Starting from bottom to top, the bass stave is: A, C, E, G (one note for each space rather than each line). A popular way to remember this is to say "**A**ll **C**ars **E**at **G**as" or "**A**ll **C**ows **E**at **G**rass." The corresponding lines from bottom to top are G, B, D, F, A, respectively.



Note that the bass clef, also called the F clef, has dots surrounding the F line.

In most written music, the treble and bass staves appear concurrently on the page, with the treble stave above the bass stave, separated by an open space (like the illustration in Step 1). This is because the treble and bass lines are played simultaneously but written separately. On a keyboard, for example, the bass line is played with the left hand and the treble is played with the right.

Short lines that appear with notes written above or below a stave are called **ledger lines**. For example, middle C (the key that falls approximately in the center of a piano) appears on the first ledger line below a treble stave, or the first ledger line above a bass stave (see the two diagrams above). Ledger lines correspond with the main stave lines. The higher a note falls on a stave (or above), the higher its pitch will be.

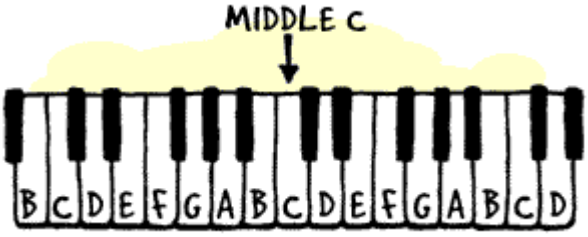
When two or more notes are written and played as a single unit, they're called **chords**.

Step 3: Find where the notes fall on a keyboard

On a keyboard, the white keys are the "natural" notes, and the black keys are the "sharp" and "flat" notes. Naturals, sharps and flats are discussed further in Step 6.

Middle C, discussed in Step 2, is a natural (white) key, and is approximately the center key of a piano, which has 88 keys. Some keyboards and organs have less than 88 keys, but the same basic rule applies.

As you'll notice (especially if you're looking at a keyboard), not all notes have sharps or flats (there's no C or F flat, nor is there B or E sharp).



Step 4: Understand note length

There are various types of notes, each of which is held for a different length of time. The way a note appears indicates how many beats it should last.

In most music:

 Whole notes last four beats.

 Half notes last two beats.

 Quarter notes last one beat.

Any note shorter than a quarter note has one or more "hooks" to indicate its length. Each hook cuts the note's length in half.

 Eighth notes (one hook) last one-half beat.

 Sixteenth notes (two hooks) last one-quarter beat.

These continue on to thirty-second and sixty-fourth notes (with three and four hooks, respectively). If two or more notes requiring hooks appear in a row, they're often connected with "beams." The number of horizontal lines in a beam indicates note length.

 Two eighth notes connected by a beam

Music also has rests, which indicate silent beats. They're counted in the same way as notes, and correspond to the notes they represent.

 Whole note rest

 Half note rest

 Quarter note rest

 Eighth note rest

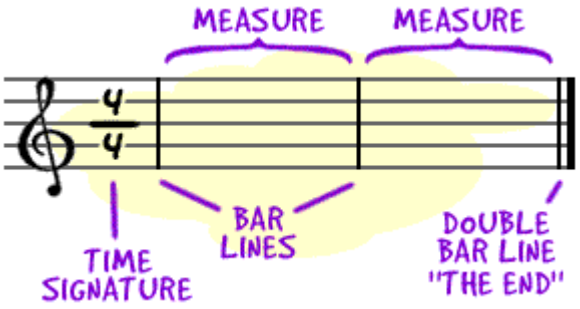
 Sixteenth note rest

and so on...

Step 5: Understand time signatures

Music usually has two numbers at the beginning, one on top of the other. This is called a time signature. The time signature indicates how many beats there are in a measure (the space between bar lines), as well as what the general pace (rhythm) of a song will be.

Bar lines are vertical lines that intersect the entire stave at regular intervals. The end of a piece of music is indicated by a double bar line.



The top number of a time signature indicates how many beats are in a measure. The bottom number indicates the type of note that makes up each beat.

The most common time signature in popular music is 4/4 (four beats in each measure, and each beat is made up of a quarter note). Sometimes 4/4 time is indicated with a large "C" centered vertically on the stave at its beginning (which stands for "common time").

Step 6: Understand key signatures

Natural notes appear by themselves in written music. But sharps and flats have their own symbols:

 Sharp

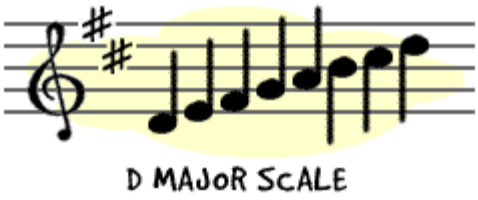
 Flat

On a keyboard, a sharp note is the black key that's one note higher than its natural counterpart (the white key). A flat is a black key that's one note lower than its natural counterpart.

When sharps and flats are written into music as needed (next to the notes), they're called accidentals. But sometimes they are shown at the beginning of a stave, right after the clef. In this case, they indicate a **key signature**.

Key signatures show which notes are to be played or sung as sharps or flats throughout the song. So if there's a sharp sign on "F" and one on "C", every "F" and "C" note throughout the song should be played as a sharp. There will be no "F" or "C" natural unless specifically indicated by a natural symbol:

 Natural



Key signatures (in this case, D Major) indicate the general tone of a song, as well as where its basic scale begins and ends. For example, a song in the key of D is based on the D Major scale, which begins and ends with "D" -- with "F" and "C" played sharp throughout. However, the same song can be written and played in different keys.

Step 7: Know the common words and symbols

Tempo and volume also play an important role in music. A song's tempo (how fast or slow it should be played) is often written at the beginning in English or Italian. Here are the common terms in both languages:

English	Italian
Very slow	Lento; Largo
Slow	Adagio
Walking pace	Andante
Medium	Moderato
Fast	Allegro
Lively	Vivace
Very fast	Presto; Molto Allegro

Common symbols indicating volume (how loud or soft a song should be played) are as follows:

Symbol	Italian	English
ppp	Pianississimo	As soft as possible
pp	Pianissimo	Very soft
P	Piano	Soft
mp	Mezzo-piano	Moderately soft
m	Mezzo	Medium
mf	Mezzo-forte	Moderately loud

f	Forte	Loud
ff	Fortissimo	Very loud
fff	Fortississimo	As loud as possible
pf	Piu forte	Louder
fp	Fortepiano	Quickly move from loud to soft
<	Crescendo	Gradually louder (this symbol will appear over several notes at once)
>	Diminuendo	Gradually softer (this symbol will appear over several notes at once)

Additional symbols are used to give music more personality and variety:

Symbol	**Meaning**
	A dot below or above the note indicates it should be played or sung staccato -- shortly with a silent space between it and the next note
	A dot after a note or rest means you should add half its original length (so a half note followed by a dot would count as three beats, a whole rest followed by a dot

would count for six beats, and so on)

Play or sing strongly

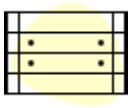
Notes should blend together smoothly

Hold the note

Repeat note once

Repeat the previous bar

Repeat previous two bars



Repeat section before going on

Once you've perfected these basic steps, you'll be well on your way toward trying something more complex. In the meantime, be patient with yourself. (In other words, put that Rachmaninoff down and stick with something simple for a while.) With enough practice, you'll have taken a significant step toward eventually being able to play, sing or even write any song you want.

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