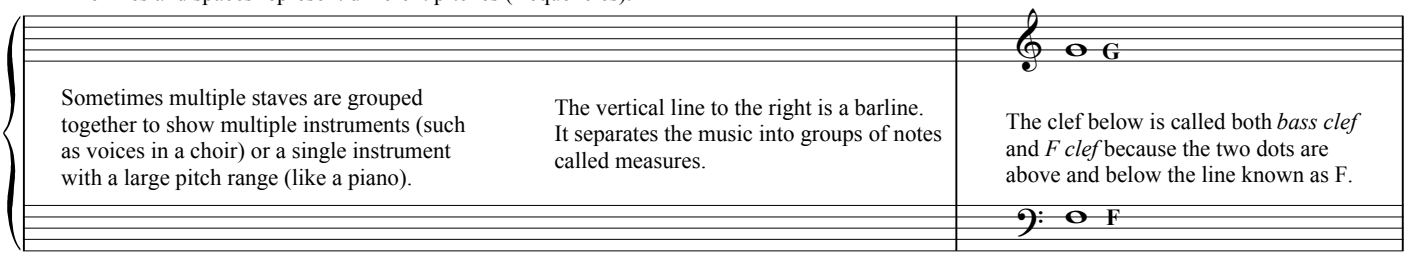
Basic Music Notation

by John Jorgensen

This is the staff. Each staff consists of five lines on which notes are placed. The lines and spaces represent different pitches (frequencies).

Clefs specify how to read the lines and spaces by giving a reference point. The clef below is called both *treble clef* and *G clef* because the spiral is circling the second line known as G.



Sometimes multiple staves are grouped together to show multiple instruments (such as voices in a choir) or a single instrument with a large pitch range (like a piano).

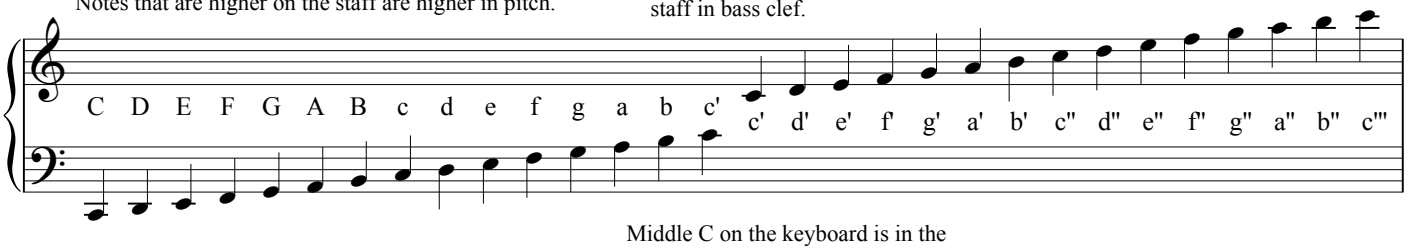
The vertical line to the right is a barline. It separates the music into groups of notes called measures.

The clef below is called both *bass clef* and *F clef* because the two dots are above and below the line known as F.

Here are the main notes in the treble and bass clefs. Notes that are higher on the staff are higher in pitch.

The note called *middle C* is on a leger line below the staff in treble clef, and above the staff in bass clef.

Lines called *leger lines* are added above and below the staff to show notes that don't fit on the staff.



Middle C on the keyboard is in the center of the keyboard directly to the left of two black keys.

The notes shown above correspond to the white keys on the keyboard. The black keys correspond to accidentals (sharps and flats.)

There are more notes and keys on a piano than shown here. Additional ledger lines can be used to show these on the staff.

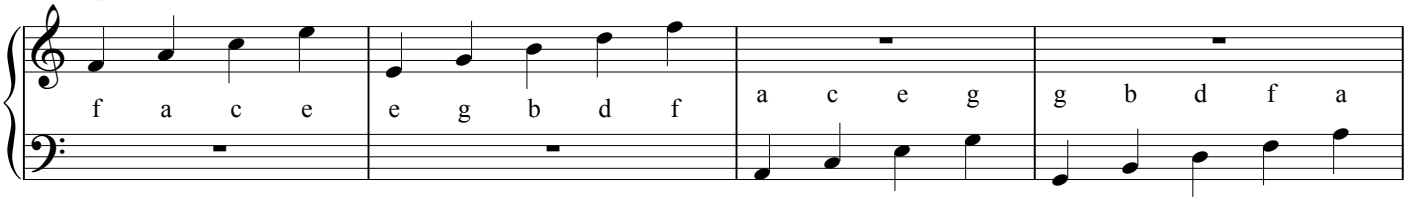
Here are some ways to remember the notes.

treble clef *space* notes spell "FACE"

treble clef *line* notes "Every Good Boy Does Fine"

bass clef space notes "All Cows Eat Grass"

bass clef line notes "Good Boys Do Fine Always"



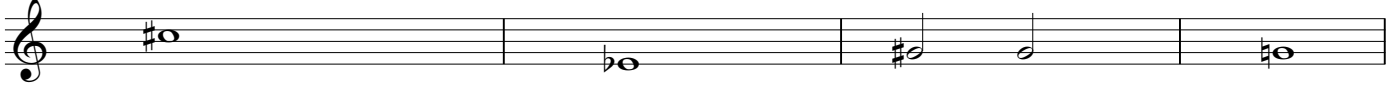
Accidentals allow us to specify pitches immediately above and below the named notes. The black keys on a piano can only be notated using accidentals.

This is a sharp. It indicates that the actual pitch of the note should be raised slightly (by one half step) above the natural note.

This is a flat. It indicates that the actual pitch of the note should be lowered slightly (by one half step).

If there are two or more notes with the same name in the same measure and the first note has a sharp or flat, then the second note will be sharped or flatted as well, even if there isn't a sharp or flat sign.

A note without a sharp or a flat specified is a natural. Sometimes a natural is shown explicitly with the natural sign.



This note is C sharp. It represents the black key on the keyboard to the right of C.

This note is E flat. It is to the left of E on the keyboard. It is the same black key as D sharp.

The first G has a sharp, so the second G will be sharped as well.

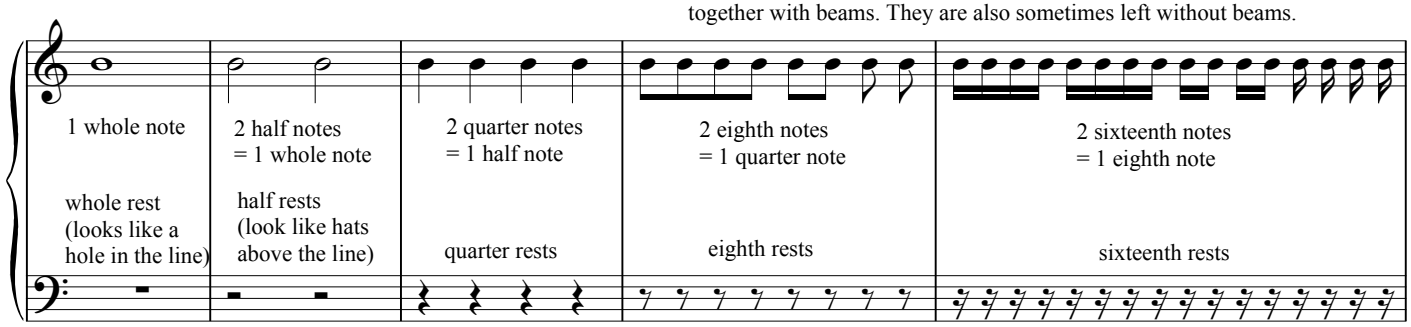
This is G natural. It is a white key on the keyboard.

The note duration specifies how long a note is to be played. Notes have fractional durations.
A *half note* is half as long as a *whole note*. A *quarter note* is half as long as a *half note*.
An *eighth note* is half as long as a *quarter note*. A *sixteenth note* is half as long as an *eighth note*.

Each measure below contains notes whose total duration is equal to 1 whole note.

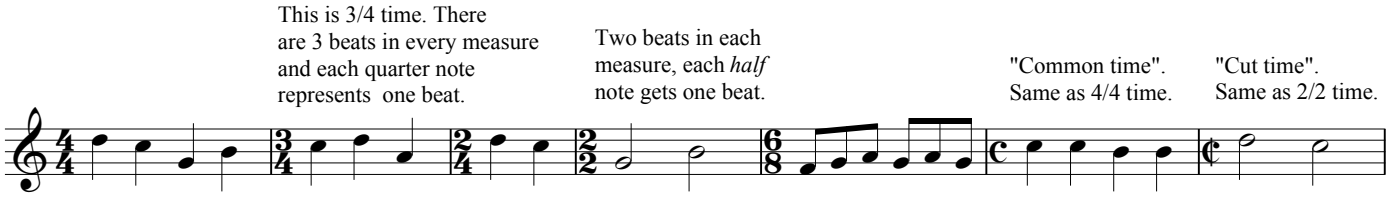
For more music theory, including training with games and flashcards, visit *http://www.musictheory.net/* and *http://musictheoryblog.blogspot.com/*. You can also buy flash cards and music theory books at a music store.

Eighth notes and sixteenth notes are usually connected together with beams. They are also sometimes left without beams.



Rests are used to indicate silences in music. They have duration but no pitch.
The bass clef above contains rests.

Time signatures tell us what the meter is and what notes values comprise the beat. Time signatures are written as two numbers, one above the other. The top number tells us how many beats are in the measure. This is also the meter. The bottom number tells which note value comprises one beat.



A dot after the note means to increase the duration of the note by half the value of the note.