






Guidelines for music notation

Notes & stems

1. Note heads should be rounded (oval) and should be about the size of a space on the staff.
2. The note head should be placed accurately, so that it is centered on either a line or space.
3. Stems should be attached directly to note heads. Do NOT leave a gap.
4. Stems should be about one octave long. Do not make them too short.
5. Stems should be straight and vertical.
6. The correct direction of stems is determined by the middle line of the staff. If the note head is below the middle line, the stem is attached on the right and extends upward (). If the note head is above the middle line, the stem goes on the left and extends downward (). The direction of stems for notes on the center line goes down, OR conforms with the majority of stems in the measure.
7. The direction of stems in beamed groups is determined by the majority of the notes in a group or by the note farthest from the middle line.

Beams & flags

8. Beams should be divided according to beats or groups of beats to show clearly the metric division of the measure. The same principle applies to tied notes and dotted notes. Try to aid the reader in keeping track of the beats. (For more, see “Notating rhythm and meter” below.)
9. Beams are always straight lines between the outside stems.
10. Beams follow the general direction of the note pattern, but are regulated primarily by the outside stems.
11. In a dotted-eighth-sixteenth group, the short sixteenth beam extends to the left. 
12. Flags ALWAYS go to the right, regardless of stem direction.  

Articulations

13. As a rule, triplet brackets, accent marks, ties, slurs, etc., should be placed next to the note heads rather than next to the stems. Long slurs may need to go on the side of the stems in some cases.

Meter signatures

14. The metric signature comes AFTER the key signature.
15. Metric signatures are NOT fractions and should not have their numbers separated by a horizontal or slanted line (solidus).
16. The metric signature is needed only at the beginning of a piece or wherever the meter changes.

Clef signs

17. EVERY staff should have a clef and key signature at the left side of the page. Note: non-pitched percussion does not use key signatures.
18. The upper loop of the treble clef should cross at the fourth line, not on the fifth line.
19. Do not make bass clefs that look like commas. They should circle around the fourth line.
20. The bass clef should extend down to line two only.

Ledger lines & accidentals

21. Ledger lines should be added at the same distance as the staff lines.
22. Accidental signs are placed directly to the left of the note head. They should be centered accurately on the same line or space as the note.
23. Be sure that the difference between sharp and natural signs is clear. Avoid extra tails on naturals.
24. Do not make accidental signs too wide, especially the flats.
25. Stems on sharps and flats should be about 2½ spaces long, and vertical.

Key signatures

26. EVERY staff should have a key signature at the left side of the page.
27. Key signatures should be neatly aligned in proper order—neither too crowded nor too spread out.

Barlines

28. Barlines should be straight and vertical.
29. In the Great or Grand Staff, all the barlines extend from the bottom of the bass staff to the top of the treble staff.
30. Final measures should end with a double bar.
31. When only a single staff is employed, a barline is not needed before the clef. The Grand Staff and scores DO NEED a barline to the left of the clef signs.
32. The last measure of each staff should be terminated with a barline, unless the measure is incomplete. It is good practice to avoid incomplete measures.

Rhythm & miscellaneous

33. Rhythmic patterns should be spaced according to the number of beats they occupy in a measure. The visual pattern should approximate the aural pattern.
34. If a measure contains a lot of rhythmic activity, it will require more space than one with a simpler pattern.
35. The whole note should be placed on the FIRST beat of the measure, NOT in the middle. Whole rests, however, are centered in the measure.
36. As a general rule, try to be conventional and clear in your music notation. Notation must be read quickly and accurately. When in doubt, consult a high-quality score OR *Hemidemisemiquavers...and other such things: A Concise Guide to Music Notation* written by Dale Wood.

Notating rhythm and meter

The way notes are grouped and beamed indicates the intended meter signature. Here are a few general guidelines.

1. Group and beam the notes according to beats.
2. If the rhythms are syncopated in any way, be sure to clearly show the “critical” downbeats as follows:
 - both beats in duple meters,
 - at least 2 of the 3 beats in simple triple meter, preferably all three in compound triple meter, and
 - beats 1 & 3 in simple quadruple, usually all in compound quadruple.
3. Do not beam flagged notes if it obscures the beat level. (This generally applies to meters where the eighth note or smaller value is the beat level.)

Simple meter means there is 2-part (duple) division of the beat. Any further divisions of these subdivisions are also 2-part. For example, ♩ = ♪♪ = ♪♪♪ or ♪♪♪ or ♪♪♪♪.

Compound meter means there is 3-part (triple) division of the beat, BUT all divisions below that level are 2-part. For example, ♩. = ♩ ♩ ♩ = ♪♪♪♪♪ or ♩ ♪♪♪♪ or ♪♪ ♩ ♪♪ or ♪♪♪♪ ♩ or ♩ ♩ or ♩ ♩ or ♩ ♩ or ♩ ♩ or ♩ ♩.

Notice the beamings by beat level.

Below are some examples of beat groupings.

$\frac{4}{4}$ ♩. ♩ | ♩ ♩. | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ |

$\frac{9}{8}$ ♩. ♩. | ♩. ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ |

The next two examples are the SAME rhythm. Notice the different groupings and consider the DIFFERENCE in the accent patterns of the two meters.

$\frac{4}{16}$ ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ |

$\frac{2}{8}$ ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ | ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ |

The next two examples are the SAME rhythm. Notice the different groupings and consider the DIFFERENCE in the accent patterns of the two meters.

