

Compound time, grouping & triplets

In simple time each beat splits into two. In compound time each beat splits into three — a rolling, lilting pulse. The triplet borrows that same three-in-a-beat feel and drops it into simple time for a bar or two.

TIME	BEATS IN A BAR	ONE BEAT IS	QUAVERS IN A BAR	COUNT IT
6/8	Two	A dotted crotchet	Six	ONE-and-a, TWO-and-a
9/8	Three	A dotted crotchet	Nine	ONE-and-a, TWO-and-a, THREE-and-a
12/8	Four	A dotted crotchet	Twelve	Four groups of three

The top number counts *quavers*, not beats — so divide it by three to find the real beats. That is the whole difference between 6/8 (two beats) and 3/4 (three beats), even though both bars hold six quavers.

BEAM IN THREES — ONE BEAM PER COMPOUND BEAT



6/8 — two groups of three. Each beam is one dotted-crotchet beat.



9/8 — three groups of three. Never beam across a beat: the pulse must stay visible.

THE TRIPLET — THREE IN THE SPACE OF TWO



A triplet squeezes three notes into the time two of them would normally take, and is marked with a small 3 over the group. Here beat 2 holds three quavers where one crotchet beat would usually hold two — the bar still adds up to four crotchets.

READING THE TOP NUMBER

6, 9 and 12 on top mean compound: divide by three for the number of beats. 2, 3 and 4 on top mean simple: the number *is* the beats. The bottom number names the note, as always.

COMPOUND TIME OR TRIPLETS?

If almost every beat is in threes, write compound time and save yourself a page of little 3s. If only a bar or two lilt, stay in simple time and use triplets.