

Counting & subdivision

A bar of 4/4 is one length of time, cut into smaller and smaller equal pieces. Counting out loud gives every piece a name, so a rhythm you cannot yet play becomes a rhythm you can say. Gold marks the main beats — the ones your foot taps.

ONE BAR OF 4/4, DIVIDED

Whole beats

Crotchets

1

2

3

4

Halves

Quavers · "and"

1

&

2

&

3

&

4

&

Quarters

Semiquavers · "e and a"

1

e

&

a

2

e

&

a

3

e

&

a

4

e

&

a

Thirds

Triplets · "trip-a-let"

1

la

li

2

la

li

3

la

li

4

la

li

Every row lasts exactly the same time. Say each row out loud at a steady walking pace before you play it — the mouth learns a rhythm faster than the fingers.

FOUR RHYTHMS TO SAY OUT LOUD

STRAIGHT QUAVERS

1

&

2

&

3

&

4

&

Even and marching. Everything sounds; nothing is held.

OFF-BEATS ONLY · SYNCOPATION

-

&

-

&

-

&

-

&

Keep tapping the numbers; play only the ands. The pull against the beat is what makes it groove.

DOTTED RHYTHM · LONG-SHORT

1 & e

a

2 & e

a

Three quarters held, one quarter short. Say "long — quick, long — quick".

TIED OVER THE BEAT

1

&

2

&

3

&

4

&

The shaded pair is one sound lasting two counts — beat 3 is felt, not played.

COMPOUND TIME — BEATS THAT DIVIDE INTO THREE

6/8

Two beats of three

1

2

3

4

5

6

Count all six when slow; when it speeds up, feel only the two gold beats and let the rest run underneath — "ONE-two-three, TWO-two-three". 9/8 gives three such beats, 12/8 gives four.

GROUPS THAT DON'T FIT

GROUP	FITS IN THE SPACE OF	SAY IT AS	WHERE YOU MEET IT
Triplet · 3	Two of the same value	trip-a-let	Everywhere — the commonest borrowed grouping
Duplet · 2	Three of the same value	ta — te	In compound time, when a bar wants two even halves
Quintuplet · 5	Four of the same value	hip-po-pot-a-mus	Flourishes and cadenzas; rare in early grades

Subdivide the hard bar. If a rhythm keeps collapsing, count the next level down. A bar counted in sixteen small pieces cannot drift.

Clap the rests. Silence has length. Count rests aloud with the same voice you count notes, or they shrink every time.

Slow is the fastest route. Set the metronome where the hardest bar is comfortable, not where the easy ones are, and move up in small steps.