

Time Signatures & How They Group

Two numbers, two questions. The top number says how many beats fill a bar; the bottom says what kind of note counts as one. Everything else — the swing of the music, where the accent falls — comes from how those beats divide.

SIMPLE TIME — EACH BEAT SPLITS INTO TWO

2
4



Simple duple

TWO CROTCHET BEATS

Marches. A strong beat and a weak one, over and over.

COUNT

ONE two

3
4



Simple triple

THREE CROTCHET BEATS

Waltzes and minuets. One heavy beat, then two light ones.

COUNT

ONE two three

4
4



Simple quadruple

FOUR CROTCHET BEATS

The commonest of all. Beat three carries a second, lighter stress.

COUNT

ONE two Three four

2
2



Cut common time

TWO MINIM BEATS

The same notes as 4/4 felt two-in-a-bar, so the music moves twice as broadly.

COUNT

ONE two

COMPOUND TIME — EACH BEAT SPLITS INTO THREE

6
8



Compound duple

TWO DOTTED CROTCHET BEATS

The lilt of a jig or a barcarolle. Six quavers, but only two beats.

COUNT

ONE two three Two two three

9
8



Compound triple

THREE DOTTED CROTCHET BEATS

A waltz whose every beat is a triplet. Nine quavers in threes.

COUNT

ONE two three Two two three Three two three

12
8



Compound quadruple

FOUR DOTTED CROTCHET BEATS

Four-in-a-bar with a triplet swing under every beat. Common in slow blues and pastorales.

COUNT

ONE two three × 4

5
4



Irregular time

FIVE CROTCHETS · 3 + 2

Five and seven divide unevenly. The composer's beaming shows which grouping is meant — 3+2 here, but 2+3 is just as good.

COUNT

ONE two three Four five

Reading the two numbers

The top number counts. The bottom number names: 2 is a minim, 4 a crotchet, 8 a quaver, 16 a semiquaver.

A time signature is not a fraction and is never written with a line between the numbers.

It is printed once, after the key signature, and again only when the time changes.

Simple or compound

Ask what one beat divides into. Two — simple. Three — compound.

In compound time the top number is the count of divisions, not of beats. Divide it by three to find the beats: 6/8 has two, 9/8 three, 12/8 four.

The beat in compound time is always a dotted note, because only a dotted note splits into three.

The two old signs

C means 4/4 — common time. It is a broken circle left over from medieval notation, not the letter C.

¢ means 2/2 — cut common time, or *alla breve*. The same bar, counted in two.

Beaming follows the beat, not the bar. Group notes so a reader sees each beat whole, and never beam across the middle of a 4/4 bar.