

Time signatures

Two numbers at the start of a piece, stacked, with no line between them. The top one counts the beats in a bar. The bottom one says what kind of note gets a beat.

4
4

TOP NUMBER

How many beats fill one bar. Four here — count 1 2 3 4, then start again.

BOTTOM NUMBER

Which note is worth one beat. 2 is a minim, 4 a crotchet, 8 a quaver.

SIMPLE TIME · BEATS DIVIDE INTO TWO

2 Simple duple
4 Marches



3 Simple triple
4 Waltzes



4 Simple quadruple
4 Most songs



COMPOUND TIME · BEATS DIVIDE INTO THREE

6 Compound duple
8 Jigs, barcarolles



9 Compound triple
8 Slip jigs



12 Compound quadruple
8 Blues, shuffles



BOTTOM
NUMBER

BEAT NOTE

SO ONE BAR OF IT HOLDS

2	Minim · half note	Two minims in 2/2 — often written C , cut common time.
4	Crotchet · quarter note	Four crotchets in 4/4 — often written C , common time.
8	Quaver · eighth note	Six quavers in 6/8, felt as two dotted-crotchet beats.

TELLING THEM APART

A top number of 6, 9 or 12 means compound: divide it by three to get the real number of beats. 6/8 has two, not six.

WHERE THE STRESS FALLS

Beat one is always strongest. In 4/4 beat three takes a lighter stress — which is why it feels like two halves.