

Compound Time Signatures

Music Theory Foundations — Quick Reference

Compound time signatures are new for Grade 3 Theory. Unlike simple time (where each beat splits into two), in compound time each main beat splits naturally into three.

6/8 — Two Main Beats Per Bar



Two dotted-crotchet beats per bar, each splitting into three quavers.

9/8 — Three Main Beats Per Bar



Three dotted-crotchet beats per bar.

12/8 — Four Main Beats Per Bar



Four dotted-crotchet beats per bar.

Key Rules to Remember

- The top number in compound time is always divisible by 3 (6, 9, or 12) — that's your first clue it's compound, not simple.
- Divide the top number by 3 to find how many main beats are in the bar ($6/8 = 2$ beats, $9/8 = 3$ beats, $12/8 = 4$ beats).
- Each main beat is a dotted note (a dotted crotchet in 6/8, 9/8, and 12/8), which naturally divides into 3 quavers.
- Beam quavers in groups of 3 in compound time, matching each main beat — this is the compound-time version of the beat-grouping rule from Grade 2.