

Lesson 4: Note Lengths

Basic Music Theory for Guitar

What you will learn: how long to hold each note, and how to count the beats.

The beat

Music has a steady pulse, like a clock: tick, tick, tick, tick. Each tick is called a **beat**. When you tap your foot to a song, you are tapping the beat.

Use the **metronome** on the Training page to hear a steady beat.

The 4 basic notes

The **shape** of a note tells you how many beats to hold it:

Name	Looks like	Length	Count
Whole note		4 beats	1 - 2 - 3 - 4
Half note		2 beats	1 - 2
Quarter note		1 beat	1
Eighth note		1/2 beat	1 &

How to tell them apart: a hollow note is long (whole, half). A filled note is short (quarter, eighth). A flag on the stem makes it even shorter.

How they fit together

Each note is **half as long** as the one above it. All four rows below last the same time: **4 beats**.

Whole note	4 beats			
Half notes	2		2	
Quarter notes	1	1	1	1
Eighth notes	1 &	2 &	3 &	4 &

When you play eighth notes, count "**1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and**". Play on the numbers **and** on the "and".

Rests: the silent notes

A **rest** means **silence**. You stop the sound, but you keep counting. Every note has a rest with the same length:

Name	Looks like	Length	Tip
Whole rest		4 beats	hangs under a line
Half rest		2 beats	sits on a line
Quarter rest		1 beat	a zig-zag shape
Eighth rest		1/2 beat	looks like a small 7

On guitar, to make a rest, touch the string lightly with your hand to stop the sound.

Practice

Turn on the metronome at a slow speed. Play the open string 6 (E):

1. **Whole notes:** play once, hold for 4 beats. Count "1 - 2 - 3 - 4".
2. **Half notes:** play on beats 1 and 3. Count "1 - 2, 3 - 4".
3. **Quarter notes:** play on every beat. Count "1, 2, 3, 4".
4. **Eighth notes:** play twice on every beat. Count "1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and".
5. **Rests:** play beat 1, stop the string on beat 2, play beat 3, stop on beat 4.

Next lesson: Beats and Measures