

Lesson 6: Time Signatures

Basic Music Theory for Guitar

What you will learn: how to read the two numbers at the start of the music, and the 4 most common time signatures.

What is a time signature?

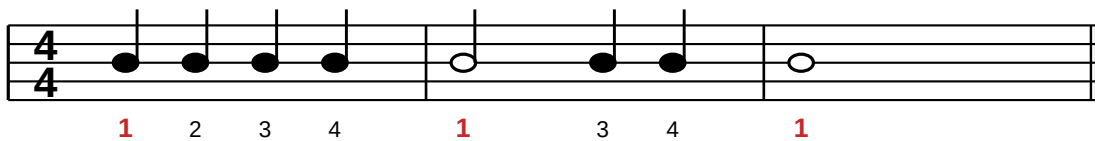
At the start of the music, you see **two numbers**, one on top of the other. This is the **time signature**. It tells you how to count the music.

Top number	How many beats are in each measure
Bottom number	Which note gets 1 beat (4 = quarter note, 8 = eighth note)

In the pictures below, the **strong beats** are in **red**. Play them a little louder.

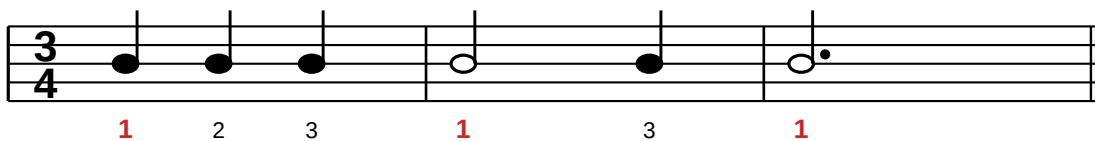
4/4: the most common

4 beats in each measure, and the **quarter note** gets 1 beat. Most rock, pop, blues and country songs use 4/4. It is also called **common time**, and is sometimes written as a big letter **C**.



3/4: the waltz

3 beats in each measure, and the quarter note gets 1 beat. Count "**ONE**, two, three". It has a swaying, dancing feel, like a waltz.



A **dot** after a note makes it longer by half. A half note (2 beats) with a dot = **3 beats**. It fills a whole measure in 3/4.

2/4: the march

2 beats in each measure, and the quarter note gets 1 beat. Count "**ONE**, two". It feels like marching: left, right, left, right.



6/8: two groups of three

6 beats in each measure, and the **eighth note** gets 1 beat. Count "**ONE**, two, three, **FOUR**, five, six". Beats 1 and 4 are strong, so it feels like 2 big swinging groups. Many ballads and folk songs use 6/8.



Quick summary

Time	Beats per measure	Count	Feel
4/4	4	1 2 3 4	Rock, pop, blues
3/4	3	1 2 3	Waltz
2/4	2	1 2	March
6/8	6 (in 2 groups)	1 2 3 4 5 6	Ballad, folk

Practice

Turn on the metronome at a slow speed, and play the open string 6 (E):

1. **4/4**: play 4 quarter notes per measure. Say "**ONE**, 2, 3, 4".
2. **3/4**: play 3 quarter notes per measure. Say "**ONE**, 2, 3".
3. **2/4**: play 2 quarter notes per measure. Say "**ONE**, 2".
4. **6/8**: play 6 eighth notes per measure. Say "**ONE**, 2, 3, **FOUR**, 5, 6".
5. Listen to a favorite song and tap your foot. Can you hear if it is in 4 or in 3?

Next lesson: Tempo