

# Written Piano Music and Rhythm





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Rhythm is something that you can improvise or change easily if you know the piano well. Think about singing: You can sing by holding some notes longer and cutting other notes shorter. You do not need to be told how to do it.

If you want to learn a new song that you do not know, written music can be used to help you understand the rhythm. Also, if you want to play in an ensemble that is playing from sheet music, you will stay in time with them better if you play from written music as well.

The first thing you need to know about rhythm is the time signatures. The time signature is written to the right of the treble and bass clefs on the first line of a piece of music. If the time signature changes within the piece, a different set of numbers is written at the point where the change is about to take place.

A time signature is two numbers, one over the other. The top number tells you how many beats there are to a measure. A measure is a unit of the musical piece that is marked off by a vertical line through the staff. There should be identical vertical lines through the treble and bass staves at various points. Try to find them on your music.



And the bottom number tells you what kind of note makes one beat. Therefore, a  $\frac{3}{4}$  time signature would mean that there are three notes to a measure and these notes are quarter notes. As you become more familiar with piano rhythms, you will see that the time signatures are more of a suggestion than an order to stamp your foot and play a quarter note with each beat. However, to begin it is easiest if you do if you tap your foot and play one beat per every note of the type listed in the bottom of the time signature.

Notes have different values based upon how they are written. A whole note is the basis of the rhythm. A measure can consist of a whole note and nothing more. In  $\frac{4}{4}$  time, a whole note is worth 4 beats. This makes sense when you consider that a quarter note is worth 1 beat. 4 quarter notes would make one measure. Four fourths equals a whole.

Music rhythm is very similar to math. In fact, it has been shown in studies that babies who are exposed to hearing music with complex rhythms are better at complex math later in life. To begin, though, you only need to

know a few simple equations.

If a whole note is worth 4 quarter notes, it can be worth two half notes as well. A measure can also be divided up into eighth notes. A whole note, two half notes, or four quarter notes are worth eight eighth notes. When you add a dot to a note, it adds half again to that note. So, a dotted half note would be worth three beats, or the duration of three quarter notes.

The whole note is a simple circle with an open center. The half note is the same, but it has a line coming up from the side of it, making it look different. The quarter note is like the half note, except that the center of the circle is filled in. An eighth note has a small flag on the line coming up from the note. It can look like this if it is alone: . Or it can look like this if it is with another eighth note: .

Look at your sheet music and identify the note values. To practice, tap your foot to establish the baseline rhythm. It should be a steady beat. Clap your hands to the rhythm of the note values. If it is a whole note, clap once and then do not clap again until you have tapped your foot three more times. If it is two eighth notes, clap once as you put your foot down and another time as you pick your foot up.

You can try clapping out rhythms of any sheet music you can get your hands on. Often there will be more than one simple line of music, so you must choose to ignore all but one line to begin. Clap out one note at a time, which is the only way you could do it anyway.

When you are good at clapping out rhythms, go on to playing notes in rhythm. If you cannot find music that is simple enough for you to understand, make up some of your own. Use the staff paper you have purchased or made. Make a 4/4 time signature and write some measures. Make sure you always put in notes that add up to 4 beats, or one whole note. You can also use rests, which are notations denoting a pause where nothing is played at all on that clef.

Play your composition from your sheet. It may not sound like a song to you, but the rhythm will be interesting if you have used different note values. It is fun to make up your own music.

Use this method to practice the particular aspects of music you are learning. When you do, you are not forced to search for music that fits the situation. At the same time, you are practicing coming up with examples of concepts you are trying to learn. It trains your mind. All along, you can also be testing out what you have learned by trying to play parts of written music that you have on hand. It can all be a part of the process.