

When I was in university, one of my professors preferred to use the Socratic Method (asking the students questions to guide their learning). It's a great method when your students have a basic understanding of what you are trying to teach. Unfortunately, my professor had a PhD in mathematics & had been stuck teaching assessment practices to all the fine arts majors. As passionate as he was about the formulas he was attempting to teach us ... well, we had no idea what all those squiggly lines on the board meant.

As a parent, or adult learner starting out, looking at sheet music can bring up the same issue. After all, how often do we use obscure Italian terms in our everyday conversation? And, attempting to decipher all those weird lines on the sheet can be frustrating as well. Trying to buy music that is at the right level can be a challenging prospect. **The key to choosing music is to look for the types of notes, time signature, and key signature you are already familiar with.**

Whether you are an adult learner wanting to learn a piece of music on your own or a parent who would like to buy sheet music for your child(ren), here is your guide to the basics of sheet music, including the most common of those "obscure" terms! Feel free to skip to the section(s) that most interest you.

## How to Read Piano Music

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## Basic Anatomy of Piano Music:

While a song can vary from very simple to truly complex, they all have the same basic anatomy. Think of this framework as the cole's notes version of a song. All the terms & lines added give us the composer or arranger's interpretation of how the song can sound.

**Mary Had a Little Lamb**  
Arr. Rosemarie Penner

Time Signature

Grand Staff

Key Signature

Chord

Bar Lines

Double Bar Line

## Grand Staff

The grand staff has three parts that combine to show the right hand & left hand parts of a song. These parts are:

	Treble Clef	Usually these notes are played with the right hand.
	Bass Clef	Usually these notes are played with the left hand.
	Brace	Visually ties together both clefs to make it easier to read the music.

## Time Signature

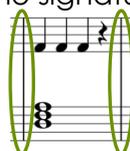
Ladies & gentlemen, all those math classes on fractions have now become useful! I've felt I should probably apologize to my math teachers as well, but that's for another time. Time signatures are really just fractions without the line in between.

{
 The top number tells us how many beats are in each measure.  
 The bottom number tells us the type of note that gets one beat (count).

Each note is given a number value for the time signature. Often times the note name gives us a clue as to the type of number we will use. Below are the most common types of time signatures.

Note	Note Name	Time Signature #	Example	Also seen as ...
	Quarter note	4	$\frac{4}{4}$	
	Half note	2	$\frac{2}{2}$	
	Eighth note	8	$\frac{6}{8}$ $\frac{8}{8}$	

What does this mean for reading music? Music is full of patterns. The space between two bar lines is called a measure. Each measure in a song has the same number of beats. As long as you know the type of note that gets one beat, you can read any time signature.



**Bar line**  
(everything in between 2 bar lines is called a **measure**)

## Key Signature

Each song is made up of many keys on the piano. Sometimes those keys are black & other times they are white. And, sometimes we just want one note in the song to change just slightly. When we want that note to go down, we call it a flat (b). When we want that note to go up, we call it a sharp (#).

What if we have a flat or sharp that should be in the whole piece? That is where our key signature comes in. Rather than writing in every sharp or flat, we use a key signature at the beginning of the piece to let the pianist know what they need to keep any eye out for.

Not sure what key signature is appropriate for you or your child? Look at the scales you have learnt. If you have mastered the scale, you can (in theory) play the song. The more sharps or flats you have to remember, the more difficult the song. Or, maybe my memory is just not as good as it could be. An online search of key signatures (major & relative minors) will show the sharps & flats for each key.

## Squiggly Lines

(Also known as **dynamics, articulations, & repeat/coda symbols**)

Now that you know the basics of how to read sheet music, we can talk about some of the more common markings in music. Remember that if you are choosing new music, try to choose music that has mostly markings you are familiar with. Even if a symbol is new, there are many online sources that have definitions for the most common. This gives you some flexibility in choosing between levels of sheet music.

**Dynamics:** The volume of the notes.

**Articulations:** How to play specific notes & the relationship between notes.

**Repeats/codas:** Show which parts of a song to repeat.

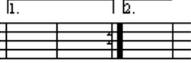
### Dynamics

Symbol	Italian Word	Translation
<i>pp</i>	pianissimo	Very soft & quiet
<i>p</i>	piano	Softly & quietly
<i>mp</i>	mezzo piano	Moderately (slightly) soft
<i>mf</i>	mezzo forte	Moderately (slightly) loud
<i>f</i>	forte	Loudly
<i>ff</i>	fortissimo	Very loudly

### Articulations

Symbol	Term	Description	Definition
	<b>Tied notes</b>	Curved line	Think of musical addition. Hold the note for the value of all the notes tied together.
	<b>Slur</b>	Curved line	Play notes legato (smoothly connected)
	<b>Phrase marking</b>	Curved line	A musical sentence. Should be played smoothly.
	<b>Staccato</b>	Dot above note	Play note detached. Pretend the keys are very hot to the touch.
	<b>Fermata</b>	Bird's eye above note	Hold note for longer than written.
	<b>Tenuto</b>	Line above note	Hold note for slightly longer than what is written <u>or</u> play louder than written.
	<b>Accent</b>	Greater than symbol above note	Emphasize note
	<b>Marcato</b>	Upside down 'V' above note	Emphasize note, but play as short as staccato note

## Repeat Signs

Symbol	Term	Definition
	<b>Repeat sign</b>	Go back to the beginning of the song.
	<b>Volta brackets</b>	A repeat sign, but with different endings each time it is repeated.
<i>D.C. al Fine</i>	<b>Da Capo al Fine</b>	Go back to the beginning of the song & play to "Fine" (the end).
<i>D.S.</i> <b>OR</b> 	<b>Da Segno</b>	Go to the sign (  ) then play to the end or "al coda"
	<b>Coda</b>	Jump forward to the ending, which is marked with the same sign. Only used after <i>D.C.</i> or <i>D.S.</i>

## Obscure Italian Terms

Thankfully, this is another section where there is plenty of information online. A quick search will oftentimes let you, or your child(ren), know how to play the song or notes. This again gives quite a bit of flexibility in choosing a piece. Below are some of the more common terms.

<b>Adagio</b>	Slowly & at ease
<b>Allegro</b>	Cheerful & happy
<b>Andante</b>	Moving at a leisurely walking pace.
<b>Crescendo (cresc.)</b>	Gradually play louder
<b>Decrescendo (decresc.)</b>	Gradually play quieter. Implies the song had a previous crescendo.
<b>Diminuendo (dim.)</b>	Gradually play quieter
<b>Moderato</b>	Moderately ... can be put before adagio, allegro & andante.
<b>Ritardando (rit.)</b>	Play gradually slower
<b>A tempo</b>	Return to the original tempo

Rosemarie Penner is the owner of Must Love Music. She loves teaching, relaxing with her husband, as well as dancing and playing piano with her twins. Over the summer, she will be looking at lots of obscure Italian terms & squiggly lines while planning for the fall.

For more information, please visit [www.mustlovemusic.ca](http://www.mustlovemusic.ca)