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Music Theory 101

Lesson 1: Rhythm Part I

This lesson is excerpted from an online course. While the navigation links on each page are not active, all of the multimedia interactions are. Have fun!

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[Course Home](#) -> [Lesson 1](#) -> **Topic 2 Page 1****Lesson 1**[Topic 1](#)[Topic 2](#)[➔ Page 1](#)[Page 2](#)[Activity 1](#)[Topic 3](#)[Topic 4](#)[Activity 2](#)[Topic 5](#)[Activity 3](#)[Activity 4](#)[Topic 6](#)**Course Contents**[☰ Syllabus](#)[➔ Bookmark](#)**Communication**[📢 Announcements](#)[📄 Class list](#)[🗨️ Discussion](#)[💬 Chat](#)**Pulse**

A regular pulse is fundamental to music. Click the play button below to hear an example.

Four Pulse

In music, some pulses or **beats** are emphasized more than others.

Say the word "**alligator**." Notice that "al" has the strongest emphasis. The strongest beat is beat 1 ("al") and is called the **downbeat**. Beat 3 ("ga") is also considered a strong beat, although not as strong as beat 1.

Say "alligator" over and over, keeping the beat regular and on each syllable. Notice how the beats are grouped into sets of four.

Click the play button below to hear the example.

[← Previous Page](#)[Next Page →](#)

Lesson 1[Topic 1](#)[Topic 2](#)[Page 1](#)[➔ Page 2](#)[Activity 1](#)[Topic 3](#)[Topic 4](#)[Activity 2](#)[Topic 5](#)[Activity 3](#)[Activity 4](#)[Topic 6](#)**Course Contents**[☰ Syllabus](#)[➔ Bookmark](#)**Communication**[📢 Announcements](#)[📄 Class list](#)[🗨️ Discussion](#)[💬 Chat](#)**Pulse****Three Pulse**

Say "crocodile" over and over. Here, the beats are grouped into sets of **three**. The downbeat is on the syllable "croc."

Click the play button below to hear the example.

Two Pulse

Next say "lizard" over and over. What do you notice? Yes, "lizard" has 2 beats. The downbeat is on the syllable "liz".

Click the play button below to hear the example.

[⬅️ Previous Page](#)[Next Activity: 2, 3, 4, and 5 Pulse Words](#)

Lesson 1

[Topic 1](#)[Topic 2](#)[Activity 1](#)**Topic 3**➔ [Page 1](#)[Page 2](#)[Topic 4](#)[Activity 2](#)[Topic 5](#)[Activity 3](#)[Activity 4](#)[Topic 6](#)

Course Contents

☰ [Syllabus](#)➔ [Bookmark](#)

Communication

! [Announcements](#)📄 [Class list](#)🗣️ [Discussion](#)💬 [Chat](#)

Meter



When beats are grouped together, the pulse is said to be in **meter**. Most music has a regular underlying meter. Each group of beats is called a **measure** or **bar**.

In music notation, meter is indicated by a **time signature**. A time signature usually has two numbers, one above the other.

The **top** number indicates how many beats are in each measure. For example:

In this time signature, $\frac{4}{4}$, there are **four** beats per measure.

In this time signature, $\frac{3}{4}$, there are **three** beats per measure.

In this time signature, $\frac{2}{4}$, there are **two** beats per measure.

We will look at the time signatures of 2/4, 3/4 and 5/4 more thoroughly in the next lesson, Rhythm Part II.


For now, let's focus on the 4/4 time signature, or as it is also called, **common time (C)**.



Bar lines separate measures, and the music ends with a **final bar line**--a thin and thick line.

Mouse over the image below to learn more.


[Previous Activity Page](#)
[Next Page](#)






Lesson 1
Topic 1
Topic 2
Activity 1
Topic 3
Page 1
 Page 2
Topic 4
Activity 2
Topic 5
Activity 3
Activity 4
Topic 6

Meter

Exercises



Course Contents
 Syllabus
 Bookmark

Communication
 Announcements
 Class list
 Discussion
 Chat

Let's continue by learning how beats are grouped.

 [Previous Page](#)

[Next Topic: Notes](#) 