

The Written Rules

ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED NOTATION QUESTIONS

Even if you've been reading music for most of your life, you may draw a blank when putting pencil to paper and attempting to write it yourself. Here are some of the most common questions about music notation.

“Where should articulation and dynamics marks be placed?”

Articulation marks, such as staccato marks, should be written above the note head for a note with the stem pointing downward, and below the note head for a note with the stem pointing up. Slurs follow the same rule; when slurs connect two notes with stems pointing in different directions, as shown in the example below, the average pitch of the two notes is used to determine the placement of the slur. Dynamics are always written directly under the staff.



“How do I determine the direction of a note stem?”

Note stems (which appear on half notes, quarter notes, eighth notes, and smaller note values) can either point up or down. For the sake of conserving space, notes on the middle line of the staff and above have stems pointing down, and notes below the middle line have stems pointing up. Keep in mind, also, that downward-pointing stems are drawn on the left side of the note head and upward-pointing stems are drawn on the right side of the note head. For beamed notes (for example, a pair of eighth notes), the average pitch of the notes is used to determine the stem direction.



“How do I determine the best way to notate complex rhythms?”

Often, there are numerous possible ways to represent the same rhythm. However, there is usually one “best way” that will be easiest for a musician to follow. As with beamed notes, try whenever possible to show the beats or meter. In the first example below, the beats are obscured because the second quarter note straddles beats two and three. The second example is easier to follow because the division of beats two and three is shown with eighth notes, which are tied to create the same rhythm found in the first example.



“How do I decide when to beam notes together?”

Eighth notes and smaller note values appearing in succession are often grouped together, or beamed, with a connecting line above or below the group of notes. The notes should be beamed in a way that indicates the beats or meter. For example, six eighth notes in 6/8 time (which is often felt in two) are typically beamed in groups of three, to show the separation of two big beats.

