

Clefs Clarified

A Note Shown in Any Other Clef Would Sound as Sweet

■ A friend of yours is getting married and the solo cellist she hired to play during the ceremony had to cancel at the last minute. Your friend doesn't know any other cellists, so she asks you—a classical guitarist—to fill in. You, of course, happily agree, and she drops off the music she would like played. You start to read through the music, but your ears quickly tell you that what you're playing can't be right. The left side of the page catches your eye: instead of the familiar swirls of the treble clef, you see an odd looking symbol with two dots—a bass clef.

You vaguely recall a memory trick from elementary school music class that's supposed to help you read bass clef—something about cows and grass—but that's not getting you anywhere. The wedding is the next day and there is no time to order new music. How can you decode the mystery of bass clef? Read on!

Four different clefs are used in music today; the most common are the treble and bass clefs, and the less common are the alto and tenor clefs. Music is written in different clefs because the range of notes that exist is far greater than what can fit on one five-line staff. If music were notated in the same way for every instrument, the highest-pitched and lowest-pitched instruments would have to read an absurd number of ledger lines. Instead, each instrument uses a clef that allows most of the notes in its middle range to fall right on the staff.

To compare the four clefs, we'll show where "middle C" (the C closest to the middle of a piano keyboard) is located on the staff for each.



Treble clef can also be called violin clef, or G clef, because the curl of the clef encircles the line where the note G falls. Treble clef is used for high-sounding instruments, such as violin, guitar, mandolin, flute, oboe, English horn, clarinet, saxophone, horn, and trumpet, as well as for the upper staff of keyboard instruments. The lines of the staff, from bottom to top, are E, G, B, D, F (think back to learning "Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge") and the spaces are F, A, C, E.



Bass clef may also be referred to as F clef, because the note F is found on the line in between the two dots of the clef's symbol. Bass clef is used for low-sounding instruments, such as bass guitar, cello, double bass, bassoon, trombone, tuba, and timpani, as well as for the bottom staff of keyboard instruments. The lines of the staff, from bottom to top, are G, B, D, F, A, and the spaces are A, C, E, G (the saying is "All Cows Eat Grass").



Alto clef is often called viola clef, or sometimes C clef, since the middle line of the staff is the note C. The viola and the alto trombone are generally the only instruments that use this clef. The lines of the staff, from bottom to top are F, A, C, E, G, and the spaces are G, B, D, F.



Tenor clef is not seen very often; it is occasionally used to represent the upper ranges of the cello, double bass, bassoon, and trombone. Its symbol is identical to the alto clef, but is moved higher on the staff. Similarly, C is moved up one line from alto clef, making the notes on the lines D, F, A, C, E and notes in the spaces E, G, B, D.

Now you know how to get by if you find yourself in a situation where you need to read music from an unfamiliar clef: simply determine the note names and play them in an octave that is comfortable on your instrument. It may not be the most ideal way to read music, but the show must go on!

