

Drum Notation Cheat Sheet

The one-page key to reading drum music: positions, note values, counting, and rests.

The drum key — where each voice sits



Instrument	Notehead	Staff position
Crash / cymbals	x (with circle for crash)	Above the staff
Hi-hat (sticks)	x	Top line
Ride cymbal	x	Top space
High / mid toms	round	Upper spaces
Snare drum	round	Third space (middle)
Floor tom	round	Lower space
Bass (kick) drum	round	Bottom space
Hi-hat (foot)	x	Below the staff

Rule of thumb: drums use round noteheads, cymbals use x. Stems up = hands, stems down = feet. Notation is not fully standardized — always read the chart's own legend first.

Note values



Whole (4 beats) · Half (2) · Quarter (1) · Eighth (1/2) · Sixteenth (1/4)

Counting a bar of sixteenths



1 e & a 2 e & a 3 e & a 4 e & a

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Page 2 — articulations, rolls, and road-map symbols.

Articulations & ornaments

Symbol	Meaning
> over a note	Accent — play it louder
Note in (parentheses)	Ghost note — play it very soft
One small grace note	Flam — grace note just before the main note
Two small grace notes	Drag — two quick notes before the main note
Z through the stem	Buzz roll
One / two / three slashes on a stem	Measured roll — eighths / sixteenths / thirty-seconds
+ above hi-hat	Closed hi-hat
o above hi-hat	Open hi-hat
R / L under notes	Sticking — right hand / left hand

Road-map symbols

Symbol	Meaning
: :	Repeat the music between the signs
1. 2.	First and second endings
%	Repeat the previous measure
D.S. al Coda	Go back to the sign, then jump to the Coda
D.C. al Fine	Go back to the start, end at "Fine"
Slashes in a bar	Keep playing the established groove / time

Dynamics: pp (very soft) · p · mp · mf · f · ff (very loud). Hairpins that open out = get louder; closing = get softer.

Learn each of these hands-on with live, playable examples at groovesteps.com/drums/how-to-read-drum-music/