How to Read Guitar TAB/Sheet Music

Written by Josh Snodgrass

(Watch a video that will help you learn this lesson here)

Guitar TAB/Sheet Music Hybrid

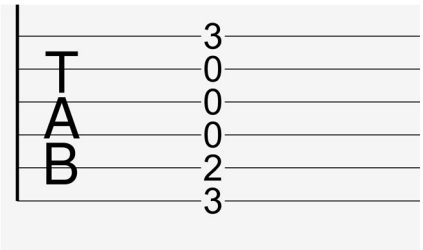
I often get questions about whether I sell "sheet music" or "TAB" (short for tablature) guitar music. I know that many guitarist don't read music and prefer TAB because it allows them to follow written music without having to try to figure out the notes. There are also the classically trained musicians who read music fluently and feel they have no need for TAB. In my opinion, due to the unique nature of the guitar, a mix of TAB and music written on the staff is actually the best approach.

The benefit of sheet music (for TAB readers) is that it shows the rhythm. TAB is just notes on lines and you can't possibly know the intended rhythm without either reading the music above or listening to the recording and trying to mimic it. I sometimes use this approach but I find it's also helpful to be able to read rhythm.

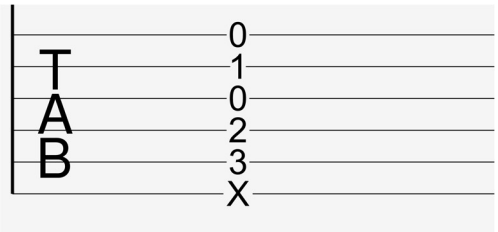
For fluent music readers, the problem with sheet music comes from the fact that there are multiple places to play some notes on the guitar. For example the E note from the open high E string could also be played on the 5th fret of the B string or the 9th fret of the G string and so on. Having the TAB provides helpful info about where the guitarist who arranged the piece played the notes on the neck so you aren't left trying to figure it out.

How to Read the TAB Portion

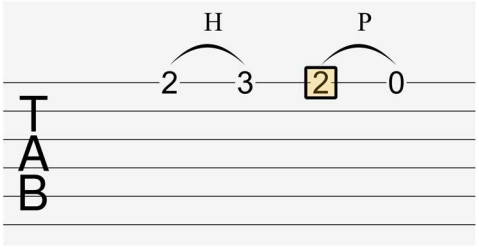
There are 6 lines in guitar TAB and each one represents a guitar string. The bottom of the 6 lines represents the low E string and the top of the 6 lines represents the high E string. Here is TAB that shows the standard G chord that many guitarists first learn:



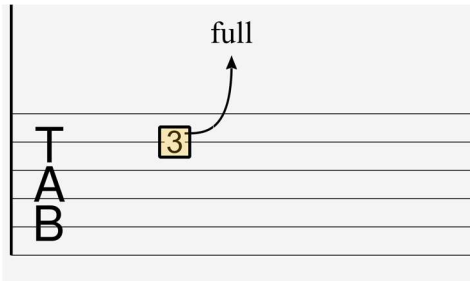
Each number represents a fret. Zeros represent an open string. When you have an X that shows a muted string. Here is the standard C chord strummed with the top string muted:



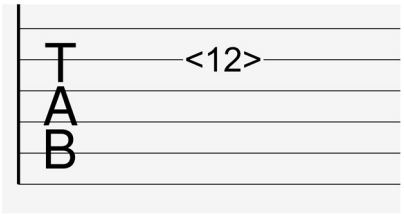
Tab also allows for many other guitar specific expressions. This example shows a hammer on and a pull off:



There are other examples of these types of guitar expressions such as bends:



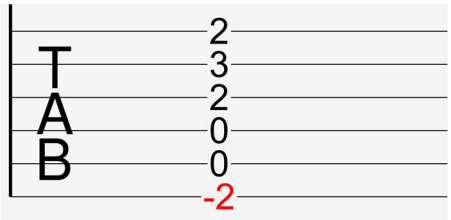
The term “natural harmonic” refers to a technique where you lightly touch the string with a finger over the 12th, 7th or 5th fret, pick the string near the bridge with the picking hand and then quickly lift your finger (on the fretting hand) to allow the string to vibrate freely. This causes the string to vibrate in 2 or more sections leading to a higher note with more of a chime type of sound. This technique is widely used in fingerstyle guitar and it’s notated like this:



I should mention one thing about my TAB that you may not see elsewhere. You will often see a -2 on the low E string in my arrangements. This is because I frequently use a drop D capo on the second fret for my music. You use this capo with standard tuning and it leaves the top string open. This creates a D chord with a low bass (like a drop D tuning except your G chord still works as normal).

I have a video that explains why I use this unique type of capo and gives a better explanation here: https://youtu.be/YQ2MKS_x_Hk

Here’s an example of TAB that shows a D chord making use of the drop D capo:

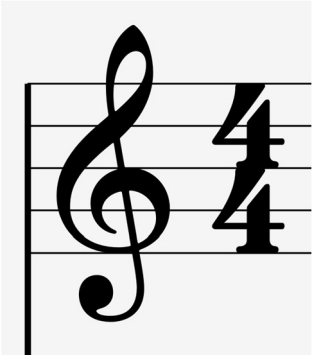


Please watch the video, it will help you understand my approach with this capo.

Reading Sheet Music

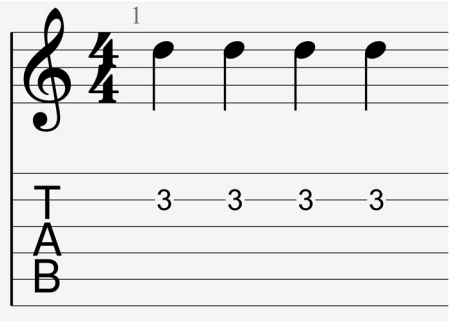
We are going to get into some technical stuff here but don't get overwhelmed. If you don't have any experience with reading music and you don't know much about note duration, it's okay.

Don't worry, if you don't know how to read music, I'm not going to ask you to learn how to find a Bb or C# (or any note) on the staff. With the TAB/sheet music hybrid notation, all we really need to get from the staff is the rhythm. The first important detail is the time signature. There are 2 numbers written at the beginning of the staff. It's kind of like a fraction that shows how many beats are in a measure (a division of time in the song that represents a group of "beats" or pulses). The top number is the quantity and the bottom number is the type of note. 4/4 time would be 4 quarter notes per measure. 6/8 would be 6 eighth notes per measure. Here's an example of what this looks like:



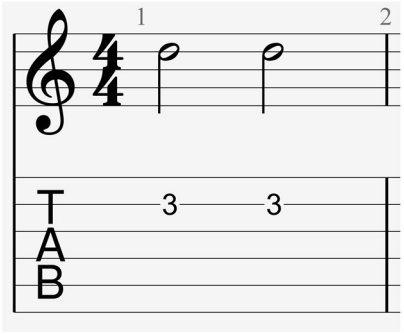
The symbol to the left of the numbers is the treble clef. If you don't read music, don't worry about that for now. The important piece of information for us is that we have 4 quarter notes per measure. That means that you can count a cycle of 4 beats.

Here is an example of a measure that shows 4 quarter notes:



Those black circles with a stem are quarter notes. The line they are on indicates the note but we don't need to really worry about that since we see below that this is going to be a note played on the 3rd fret of the B string. You would pick this note on each beat and it should be even rhythm with a 1,2,3,4.

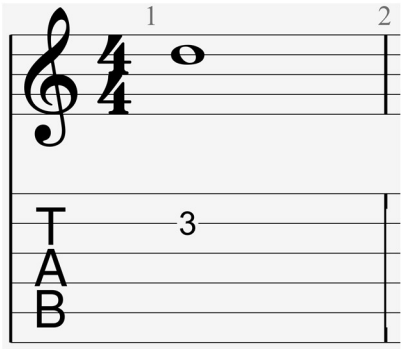
Here is an example of a measure with half notes:



A half note is an open circle with a stem and lasts twice as long as a quarter note. During the first note you would count 2 beats.

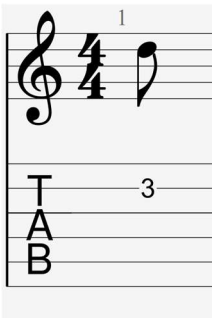
Half, Half
1, 2, 3, 4

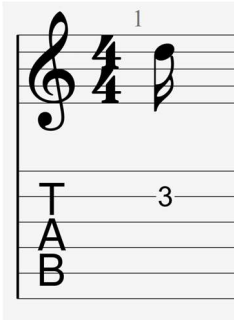
A whole note is an open circle with no stem:



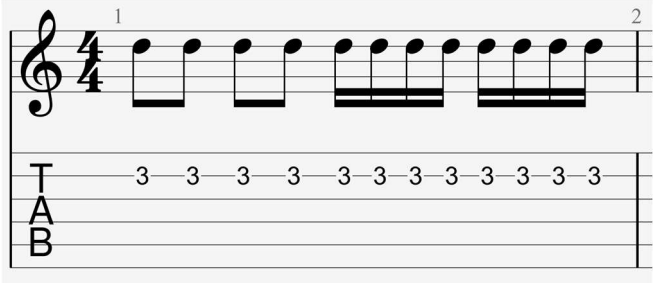
A whole note has a duration of 4 beats.

By this point you probably see the similarity to fractions! Here are examples of an eighth note (stem has 1 flag) and 16th note (stem has 2 flag)



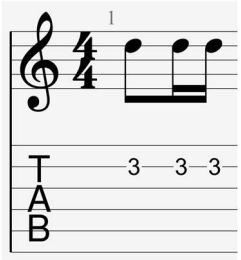


You can imagine how a measure could get kind of confusing with lots of these, so we connect them with bars (to replace the flags on the stems) to show the beats more clearly:



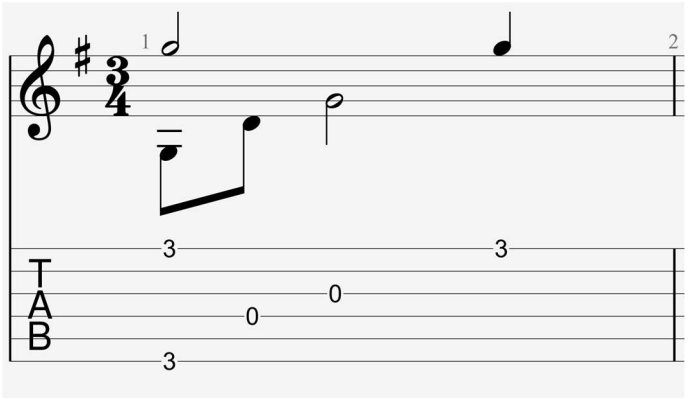
In this example we have 4 eighth notes followed by 8 sixteenth notes.

We also sometimes combine eight and 16th notes to show how they form a beat:



Here we have an eighth note followed by 2 sixteenth notes.

Hopefully this isn't getting too confusing yet. Let me show you a measure of actual fingerstyle guitar music:



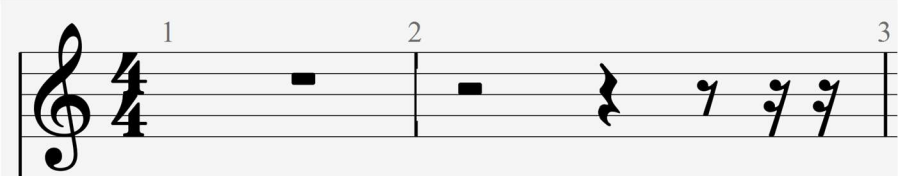
This measure is in ¾ which means 3 quarter notes per measure (or between the vertical measure lines). You will notice that we have stems point up and down on different notes. In fingerstyle guitar we are trying to play the melody (stems pointed up) and accompaniment (stems pointed down) at the same time. I generally tab music so that the notes played with the fingers have the stems up and the notes played with the thumb have stems pointed down.

The notes with the stems pointed up form one rhythmic group. In this case, you see that there is a half note followed by a quarter note. Together they equal 3 beats. The notes with the stems pointed down have 2 eighth notes followed by a half note. They also add up to 3 beats.

Rests

The times when you aren't playing a note are called "rests". Sometimes the notes you don't play are just as important as the notes you do play.

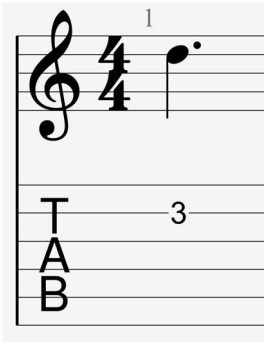
Rests have durations just like notes but the symbols are very different:



The black rectangle that hangs below the line is a whole rest and the next one that rises above the line is a half rest. I was taught to remember that the whole note hangs because it's full (measure) and the half notes rises because it's only half full. Continuing to the right we have a quarter rest (looks like a scribble), eighth rest and 2 sixteenth rests to fill out the measure. Notice that the eighth rest and sixteenth rest have one or two dots attached similar to the way the notes have one or 2 flags.

Dotted Notes

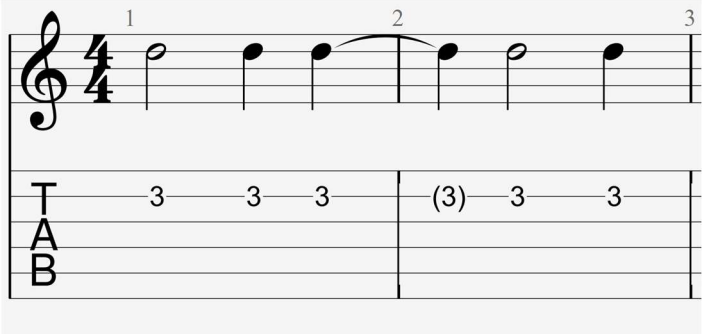
Some notes have durations that don't fit as easily into our little fraction system. For example, what happens when a note lasts for the equivalent of 3 eighth notes? To deal with this possibility we used dotted notes. Here is a dotted quarter note:



When you see a dot next to a note it adds half of the duration of the note (or multiplies x1.5). In this case a quarter note would become like a quarter note and aneighth note combined. You can see why people relate music to math.

Tied Notes

Another system used for extending the duration of a note is called a tie. This is especially helpful when a note continues past the measure line. Here is an example:

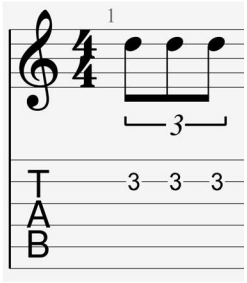


The quarter note at the end of the first measure and the quarter note at the beginning of the second measure are actually the equivalent of a half note. Only the first of those 2 notes is picked and then it is allowed to ring out until the end of the second note.

Triplets

Triplets are a system used when the rhythm is broken into 3 parts. These can get tricky but they are pretty common in music so we need to understand them.

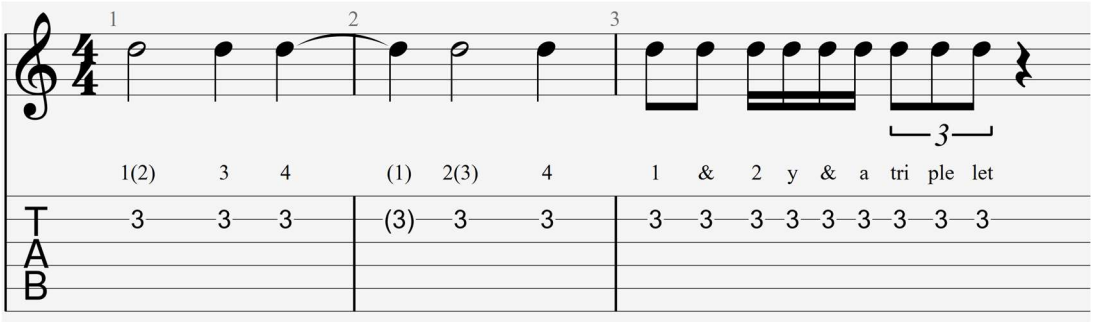
Here is an example of how triplets are notated:



In this case we have 3 eighth note triplets taking up the space of 2 eighth notes. Sometimes this is counted as “tri, ple, let”. If you have a series of triplet notes it would count “Tri, ple, let, Tri, ple, let, etc…). You may find this system of counting helpful.

Counting Rhythm

Use this measure to practice counting rhythm:



With 16th notes I frequently use this system to count: One, ee, and, a, Two, ee, and, a

I write this out like this: 1, y, &, a, 2, y, &, a

Practicing Rhythm

Counting rhythm is a very important skill for a musician that many guitarists lack. I intend to provide more resources in the future that will help you develop your sense of rhythm. This is something I struggled with for years since I am primarily self-taught. Practicing counting rhythm from sheet music has helped me immensely!

The Limits of Written Music

If you listen to a really talented and experienced guitarist, you will recognize that there is a level of musicianship that can't be fully captured in written music. All of the notes are played with different volumes and the "touch" or "feel" of each section may be unique in a way that can't be fully notated in writing. It is always best to listen to a recording of the song you are trying to learn and really try to catch the subtleties. One thing you should be aware of is that the written form of a song will often not be an exact representation of a recorded version of a song. This is okay, you can learn the written version or try to learn the recorded version by listening. Also, feel free to make little variations to arrangements. It's unlikely that the original guitarist ever plays the song exactly the same way twice so it's okay if you don't try to memorize it exactly note for note.

Learning Challenging Fingerstyle Guitar Songs

Attempting to learn fingerstyle guitar songs that are beyond your current ability is very frustrating and discouraging. I would encourage you to start with picking exercises over chord changes before trying to learn how to play the chords and melody at the same time. When you do start to learn fingerstyle guitar songs, start with easier songs. Don't try to learn a Tommy Emmanuel song as your first fingerstyle guitar piece. I tried that when I first started and it doesn't end well! It's like trying to learn rocket science math when you are only ready for basic math.

I have come up with a few strategies in dealing with difficult music. The most obvious is to take it really slow. I will often play through one measure over and over at a very slow tempo before advancing to the next measure. It can take a while to learn a song at this speed but the advantage is you will be growing as a guitarist and you will be developing muscle memory. Another approach I often take is to practice the parts of each hand separately. Play just the fingering of the chords and melody movement without picking and then pick the strings in the right tempo with the fretting hand muting the strings. Do each of these exercises over and over for several minutes and then repeat that if necessary over a couple of days. I know this is an unusual trick but I find it very helpful. Also, imagine yourself playing a measure or phrase without actually playing it with your hands. This helps your mind to memorize the music so you aren't just depending on muscle memory. As you work on difficult music, you will develop your own strategies in learning but probably the biggest tip is to just keep working on it! Don't set deadlines for yourself, just commit to spending time practicing and you will learn. It doesn't always come as quickly as we would like but steady practice works wonders.

I hope you found this guide helpful! You can find guitar TAB/sheet music for popular hymns here:

JoshSnodgrass.com