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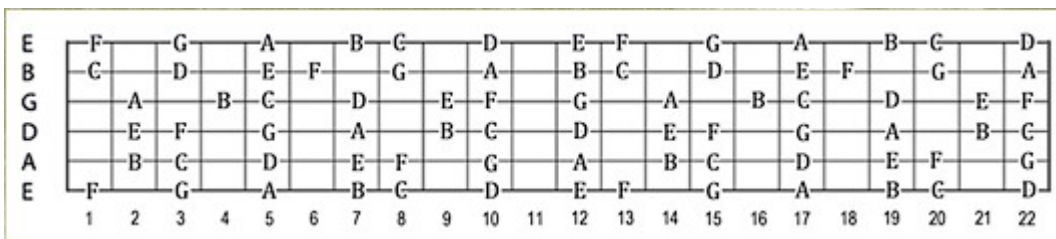
Reading Music with My Guitar Lessons

To be completely honest, in order to play electric guitar, you don't really need to know how to read music. Unless you're planning on being a professional session musician, or a classical guitarist, you'll get along more than fine only knowing how to read tablature. As far as **'My Guitar Lessons'** are aware, Jimi Hendrix couldn't read music, Slash can't, Dimebag couldn't and you probably don't need to either.

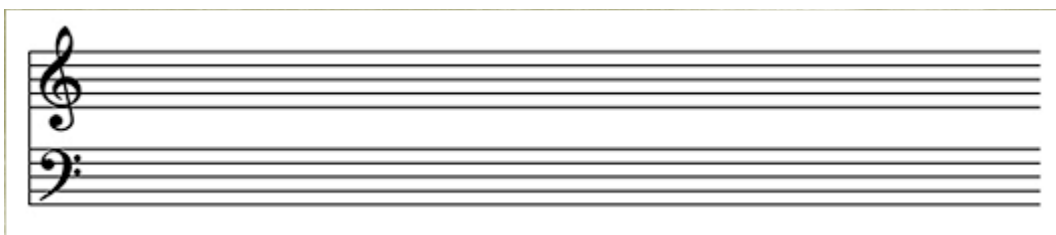
Even if you're playing classical guitar, it's probably a wise idea to read the music, then write it down as tab anyway - by the time you're playing any piece more elaborate than one for a complete beginner you're gonna have to start shifting up and down the neck, so having a tab score handy will make things a lot easier than attempting to sight-read the piece every time you play it and remember it all - as soon as you start going higher up the neck (or into drop D) you're gonna start running into ledger lines (the little lines with notes sitting on them off the top or bottom of the stave) that will become increasingly difficult to decipher that higher (or lower) they go.

Anyway, **'My Guitar Lessons'** is going to show you how to read music. If your intention is solely to play riffs and solos in a rock band you can probably skip this part and go put the kettle on. If, however, you're wanting to do music grades (I wouldn't bother with that unless you want to become a teacher, really - if you read your favourite guitarist had never passed his grade five theory test, would you care?), play classical guitar or be able to read some crazy piece or other straight off the score BBC Proms-style, then this is something you're going to have to get your brain around. And honestly, it's not really that hard, regardless of what people might tell you - there's just a bit to remember.

Just in case you're unaware of where the different notes are fingered on your guitar, here's a diagram - For the moment, you can ignore # and b signs because we're not getting into that until we've covered the notes. On this diagram, the blank spaces are where the sharps/flats would be, but don't worry about that for the moment...

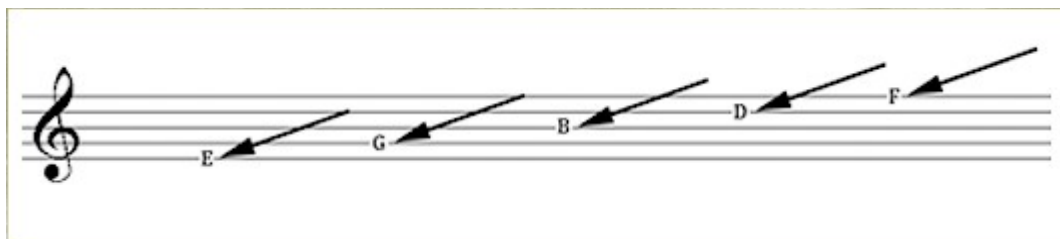


Clefs



This symbol at the beginning of the "stave" (that's the posh word for the lines you see

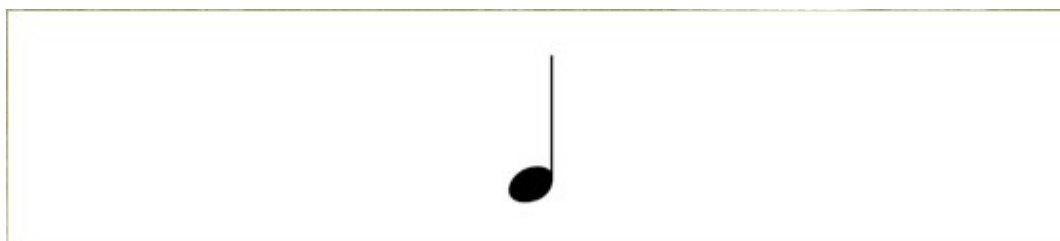
here) is called a "clef". This one (on top) in particular is a treble clef (sometimes, but almost never called a "G" clef), and indicates the name and pitch of the notes that are going to follow it. The one below is a bass clef - but we're not playing bass or piano here so don't worry about it. Notes on the lower lines of the stave are lower in pitch - the higher up the stave you go, the higher in pitch the notes are gonna get. We'll get to that in a moment - for the moment, put simply, if you see the treble clef (which you will on ALL notation intended for the guitar) the lines, from top to bottom, are going to be representing notes as follows:



NOTE: Should you see a "C" next to the clef, this does NOT mean you're in the key of C - the C stands for "common time", which basically means the piece is to be played in a 4/4 rhythm - i.e. there are four beats in a bar.

ANOTHER NOTE: A 'bar' in music is a given amount of time comprising of a certain number of 'beats'. Put simply, in 4/4 timing (or 'common timing' - 99% of everything you're going to play on the guitar) there are 'four beats in a bar'. You can count this as '1-2-3-4...2-2-3-4' as soon as you hear the beat start. Bars are separated by 'bar lines' - vertical lines on the stave dividing the piece up into bits, if you like. In a 4/4 piece of music, everything contained within two vertical bar lines (one at the beginning, one at the end) is referred to as 'a bar'. Any notes contained within the bar will add up to four beats. No problem! Moving on...

If you've never seen a musical note before, I'm going to assume you've spent your entire life to date living on Neptune, in a cave, with your eyes shut and earplugs in, but here's what one looks like just in case:

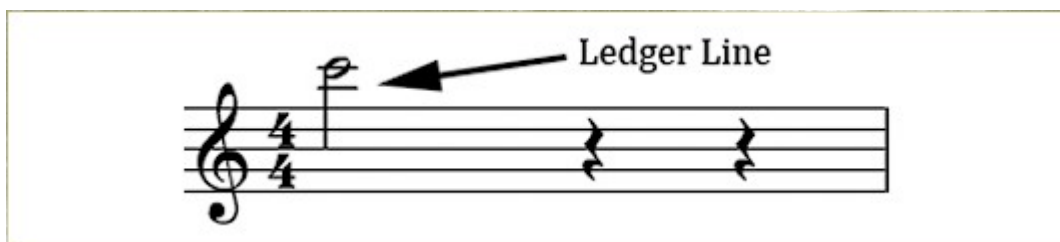


This particular note is called a CROTCHET (or "quarter note"), but we'll get into that later. If you're impatient, check out the ['My Guitar Lessons'](#) music directory. The black circle at the bottom is referred to as the "head", and the line attached to it the "stem", but all you need to know for now is that wherever you see this symbol, or variation thereof, sitting on a line on the stave a note is to be played. So looking at the stave, and seeing a TREBLE clef at the beginning of it, we know that a note sitting on the BOTTOM line will be an E. Any note on the second line from the bottom will be a G, middle line a B, second to top line a D and the top line an F. There are age-old ways to remember this order - "Elephants Always Do Good Biology Exams" or "Every Good Boy Deserves Football" will do fine if you really need to remember one of them (though then you're just remembering two things instead of one)... "Every Great Big Dinosaur Farts" would also do the same thing. Who cares?! Anyway...

Next you will notice there are spaces between the lines, and each one of these represents a note too. With a treble clef, these spaces represent (in order, from bottom

to top), F, A, C and E. You can either remember this simply as FACE, or invent your own hilarious abbreviation. You'll notice that from the bottom line to the top line, including the spaces in-between, the notes ascend in order - E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F. A note sitting on the top of the stave (sitting ON TOP OF the "F line") would be G. The note under (but touching) the bottom "E line" would be D. Following me? Okay - now let's get onto the next bit.

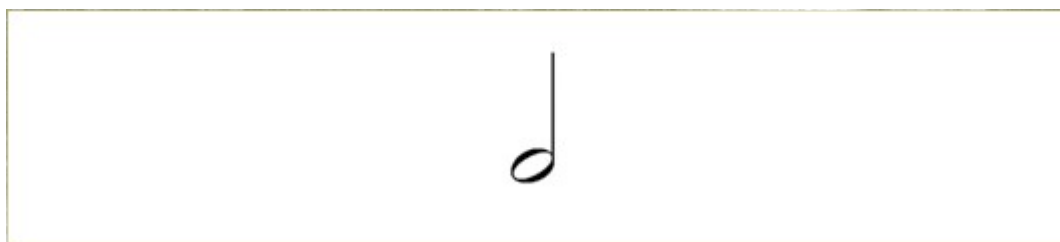
If the note to be played is higher than the G sitting on the top of the stave (which would be played at third fret on the top E string) or lower than the D under the stave (open D string) it sits above or below the stave on its own little line, called a "ledger line". Here's what one looks like:



By the time you're able to start playing some tricky pieces, you're inevitably going to find a bunch of ledger lines ruining the fun! The reason they're awkward is because the higher (or lower) the note is, the more ledger lines it's going to have with it. The "A" note at 17th fret on the top E string, for example, would be sitting above four ledger lines above the top of the stave - and just like on the stave, spaces between ledger lines count as notes too. A quick run high up the guitar neck is going to be a headache of ledger lines and very difficult to play at a glance - this is the reason why, if I'm learning a difficult piece, I find it easier to write down a tablature score as I'm going along - it's much easier to read it off that when you need to practice it for hours on end, rather than counting endless ledger lines every time you get the guitar out. The musical notation can simply be used to determine the timing.

Different Types Of Note

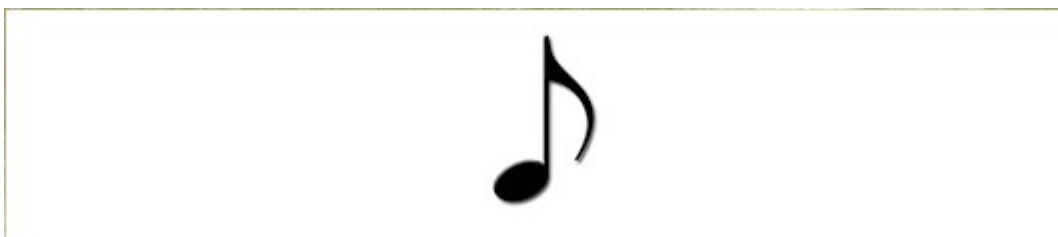
There are different types of notes you're going to see on your notation, and each one of them means something slightly different. A crotchet (or "quarter note" - we mentioned that one before) is going to last for ONE beat. With your metronome going, a bar with four crotchets in would require you to play one note on every beat. The 1-2-3-4 count of the bar would quite simply be NOTE-NOTE-NOTE-NOTE. But inevitably, any piece where every note is the same length would be astoundingly boring, so there are other symbols on your notation depicting notes that are to be played to ring out for different lengths of time. Here we go:



This is called a "minim", or a "half note". The head of a minim is always "hollow" i.e. not filled in black and it's a note that is two beats long. So in your 1-2-3-4 bar, you can only fit two minims in there. The first one would last for the count of 1-2, and the second one would last for the count of 3-4. Get it? A bar like this...



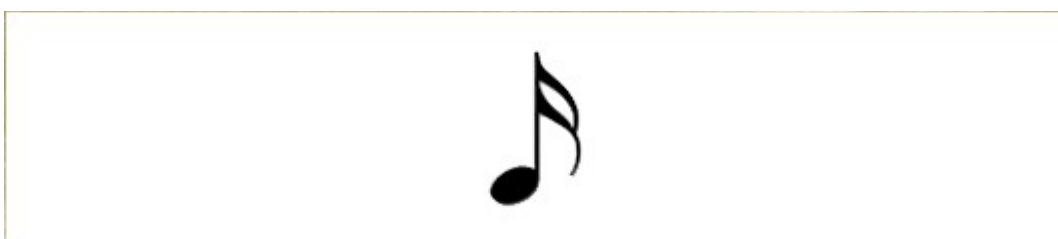
...would have you play the minim for the count of two (note that it's a C we're playing here, coz the notes are sitting in the second space down) then the two crotchets for one beat each. Three notes altogether making up four "beats", the minim ringing out for twice the length of the following two crotchets. No problem. Next.



This note is called a "quaver" or "eighth note", and it rings out for half the length of a crotchet - in exactly the same way that a crotchet rings out for half the length of a minim. Following me? It basically looks the same as a crotchet, but has a "flag" on its stem. When two or more quavers are played in succession, it's very common to see them joined together, and looking like this:



Sometimes (though almost never) you may hear notes joined together in this fashion referred to as "beamed notes" - yet another little piece of information you don't really need to know! After the quaver would come the "semi-quaver" - or "sixteenth note", which looks like this:



...and is - you guessed it - half the length of the quaver. You can tell what type of note it is by the number of "flags" on the stem of the note. After that would come the "demi-semi-quaver" (or a "thirty-second note", though it's very rare to hear anyone refer to those - with three flags on its stem)...and after that comes the nightmare of the "hemidemisemiquaver" (easily the most ludicrously-named note in music, can also be referred to as a "sixty-fourth note") that lasts for 1/64 of a bar, has four flags on its stem, is inevitably played at ridiculous warp speed and honestly, almost never appears. Put simply, the more "flags" on the stem of the note, the less time it is going to ring for. Usually, by the time we're seeing sixteenth notes - or certainly thirty-second notes/sixty-fourth notes, they're going to be played pretty quickly.

NOTE: The reason they're referred to as "quarter notes", "eighth notes", "sixteenth notes" etc is because that's how many of them will fit into a standard bar of music in 4/4 timing. So if your metronome is running, and you come upon a bar filled with sixteenth notes, you know that all of those notes have to last the same length, and be played by the time your metronome hits the 5th beat - which would usually mean they're to be played very quickly, unless your piece is particularly slow.



Finally, we have the "semi breve", or "whole note". This note is the longest note you'll ever see on your sheet music and lasts for a whole four beats. Note that it has no stem, and isn't filled in - basically it's a circle and looks unmissably different from any other note on your manuscript.

With that in mind, here's a nice easy piece of music to play. I'm not going to tell you what the piece is; you're going to have to work it out for yourself. Pay attention not just to the lengths of the notes but to what the notes actually are. And as if by magic, you've now read a piece of music entirely from sheet music - that is, of course, if you can tell what it is!



OK - now that we've got that out of the way, let's make it a little more difficult. Here's the next two symbols you're going to see regularly and are going to need to know what they mean.

Sharps And Flats



Whenever you see a sharp, "flat" or "natural" sign (I'm getting to them!) within a bar of music, printed just before a note, they are referred to as "accidentals". This symbol above, printed just before a note, indicates that the note is "sharp". This is really pretty straight forward - if a note is "sharp", it is to be played one semitone (one fret) higher than normal. For example, a G is to be played at 3rd fret on the E string - G # is to be played at fourth fret. If a note is flat, it's simply the opposite - a B could be played at 4th fret on the G string, and a B flat - you guessed it - would be played at 3rd fret. Here's what a flat sign looks like:



If you see one of these signs within a bar of music, they alter the pitch of the note they're next to until either you see a "natural" sign (just about to mention those in a moment) or the bar ends - once you've gone into a new bar, you go back to playing the notes normally unless, of course, the sharps and flats are contained within the "key signature". This is already sounding more complicated than we hoped it would but stick with us!

Most of the time, the place you need to look for sharps and flats is right at the beginning of the piece, next to the clef. If you see, for example, a # sign sitting on the F line, right at the beginning before the piece has begun, that's telling you that EVERY F in the piece is to be played "sharp" - one fret/semitone higher than normal. Likewise, a b sign on, say, the B line - tells you that every B note in this particular piece is to be played one semitone/fret lower than normal. Following me? The arrangement of flats and sharps at the beginning of the piece, next to the clef, is referred to as the "key signature", and you can see what key the piece is in. For example, if the F and C lines have sharps sitting on them, your piece is in D major...or B minor.

NOTE: D major and B minor are, fingering-wise, exactly the same but just based around a different note. For this reason, D major is referred to as the "relative major" of B minor, and B minor is referred to as the "relative minor" of D major. If you were to play a guitar solo using the D major scale, then another using the B minor scale, you would realise your fingering patterns are exactly the same, and you're playing exactly the same notes - you're just playing around a different root note. Exactly the same is true of C major and A minor, F major and D minor, Bb major and G minor and so on. Simplest way to remember this? If you're playing in a minor key, the note three frets above your root note is the root note of your relative major. If you're playing in a major key, the note three frets below your root note is the root note of your relative minor. Playing a guitar solo over an A minor chord progression, using only C major licks, and landing on a C every time, will fit perfectly well - and inevitably have people praising you for your "melodic" approach to guitar playing! Also note, for example, that the chords in the key of C major are EXACTLY the same as those in A minor - both key signatures are exactly the same thing...but simply based around a different starting position/root note.

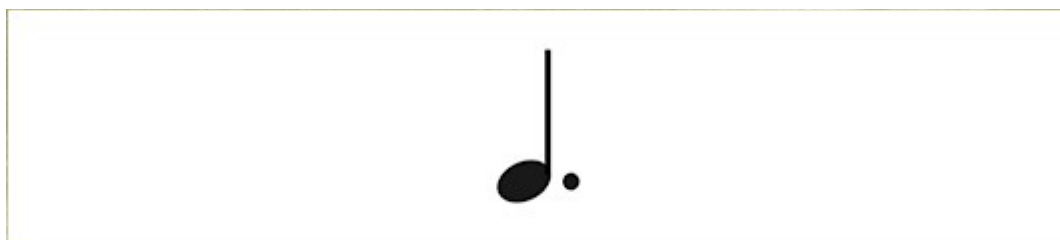
The third symbol you're going to need to recognise here is the "natural" sign:



You'll only see this after the sheet music has told you that all of a certain note are to be played flat/sharp. If you see this before a note, you are to play the note completely normally - a "natural" sign cancels out any flat or sharp sign that came before it. If you see this in a bar, you are to play the corresponding note totally normally until you see another flat/sharp sign appear or the bar ends.

NOTE: We have mentioned this twice now, but I'll explain it a little clearer - if the sharp/flat sign is in the key signature (right next to the clef at the very beginning), it applies to the whole piece, all the way through. If there are sharps/naturals in the key signature, and then you see a natural sign, it applies either til the end of the BAR or until you next see a sharp/flat sign re-correcting the natural sign. If there are no flats or sharps in the key signature (such as in any piece in C major/A minor) any sharp or flat sign you see will only apply for the length of that bar. If a piece has no sharps or flats in the key signature, then suddenly you get to a bar with an F# in it, ALL F notes IN THAT BAR will be played one fret higher than normal - even though only the first sharp F in that bar will actually have the sharp sign next to it. As soon as you get to the next bar, unless you see more sharp signs, go back to playing the notes normally.

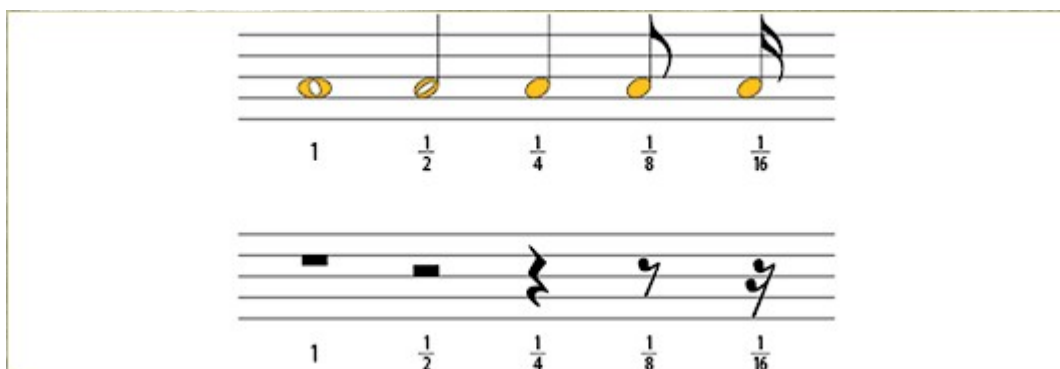
Other Symbols You'll Need To Recognise



When a note has is "dotted" like the one in this image, its length has been increased by half. For example, a "dotted crotchet" is to ring out for one-and-a-half beats instead of just one. A dotted minim/half note is to ring for three beats instead of two...and so on. This can start to be a headache should you be unfortunate enough to come upon, for example, a random dotted sixteenth note in the middle of a passage somewhere and can take a bit of getting used to. Just to make things more confusing, if a note has two dots after it its length has been increased by $\frac{3}{4}$ more than it was originally, as the second dot is worth half of the first one. Confused? A double-dotted minim/half note, should you see one, is to be played for three and a half beats - the note was originally two beats long, the first dot added one beat (half the note's original length) and made it three beats long...and the second dot is worth half of the first one, and so added half the value of the first dot and therefore brought the note to three and a half beats long. Likewise, a third dot would add half the value of the second dot (we'd now be at $3\frac{3}{4}$ beats if we were unfortunate enough to encounter a triple-dotted minim)...what a headache! Don't worry - you'll almost never see a double-dotted note, and I can't remember ever seeing a triple dotted one, ever. Apparently they're out there though! Moving on...

Rests

It won't be long before you come across "rests" - and whenever you see one, nothing at all is to be played for the period of time that each particular one is worth. Every type of note we've talked about so far has its own unique length, and indeed also has its own corresponding rest sign. Rather than have me babble on about them individually, here's the notes we've just covered with their own corresponding rest signs - whenever you see one of these rest signs, you're going to play nothing at all for the length of time that the corresponding note is worth...and we've already covered that! There's no easy way to remember these, really - you'll just have to soak them into your grey cells.



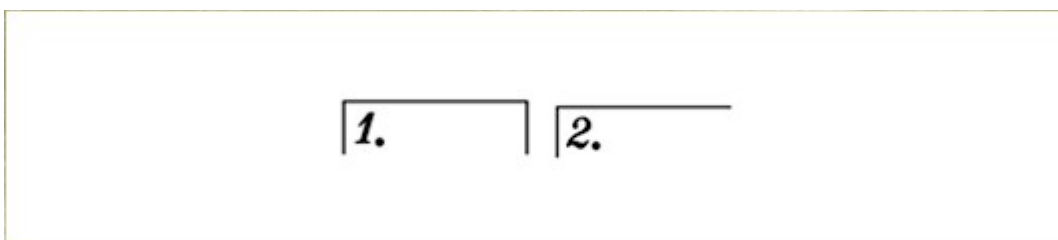
Repeat Signs / Codas



A double-bar line will appear at the end of a piece of music to show that the piece has ended. But watch out for repeat signs - two dots on the staff just before the double bar sign that show you to repeat a certain passage of music. When you see this sign, you are to find this sign:



...and re-play the piece from there. Once you get back to the repeat sign that sent you back, don't repeat it again. It's just a one-time thing!



These are referred to as "volta brackets" and basically depict two different ending to a piece. Coming at the end of a passage, bracket 1 is the one you play first, do the repeat, but when you get back to the '1' bracket ignore it entirely and play bracket 2 instead. It's very rare that you would ever see more than two brackets, but if you did, simply do the repeat again after playing bracket 2, then ignore 1 and 2 and play 3, and so on.



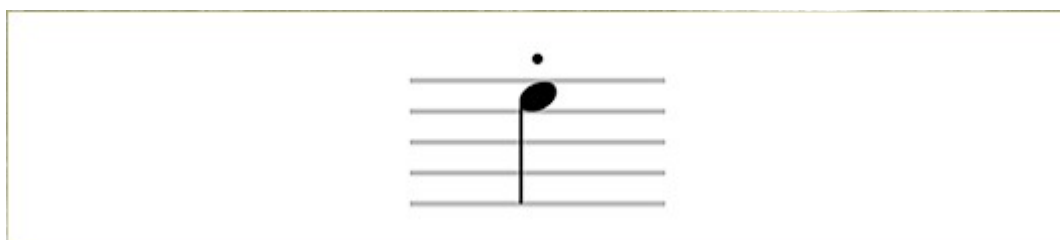
This sign is called a 'coda', and whenever you see it you are to jump forward to the 'ending passage' of the piece, which is marked with the same sign.

Should you see "D.C" marked anywhere; it stands for "da capo" and is telling you to repeat the piece from the beginning. "D.C. al coda" would want you to repeat the piece from the beginning but once getting to the coda sign, jump forward again. Confusing? I wouldn't worry about it too much. Unless you're intending to be a pro session player/classical guitar maestro you really don't need to know the majority of these bits... and even if you are, it's just a case of repetition to remember it all.

Miscellaneous Music Symbols

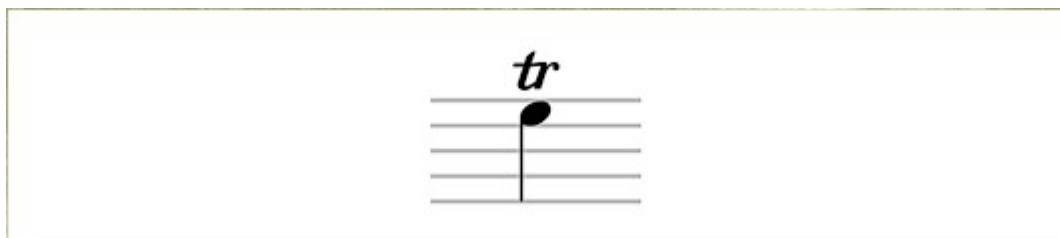
While not necessarily all that common, you'll inevitably see at least a few of these in your sheet music too - so it makes sense to know what they mean!

Staccato



A dot ABOVE a note means it is to be played in a "staccato" fashion. Basically, don't let it ring. As soon as you hit it, kill it. Staccato notes are short, spiky notes that stop as soon as you hear them.

Trill



To play a "trill", you hit the note on the sheet music with the "tr" sign above it, and rapidly hammer-on and pull-off the next note above it in the key you're playing in.



This symbol above the notation is telling you to play it an octave higher than it is written. Should this symbol appear, for example, an open top E string will now have to be played at 12th fret on the top string, and so on. Likewise, if you see a '15va' symbol, you are to play the piece TWO octaves higher than written. Can't say you see that very often though.



This is referred to as an "accent" - whenever you see this, you're basically supposed to play that particular note more obviously than the rest of them - make it sound out.



Start quietly, and increase your volume as you go on. This is called a "crescendo".



Exactly the opposite - start loudly, and gradually get quieter. This is called a "diminuendo".



This is referred to as "forte" (fore-tay) and means "play it loud". The more Fs you see, the louder you are to play it.



Referred to as "piano", it's the opposite of "forte" - play it quietly. Two Ps would be referred to as "pianissimo", and would be quieter again. Three Ps would be quieter still, and so on.

Which brings us to an end for now! Is your brain hurting? Be glad we only mentioned the guitar-specific stuff - there are some crazy instruments floating about that have an entirely new world of confusing musical symbols lurking on sheet music for them - sesquiflat symbols, neutral clefs and sharp-and-a-half symbols are definitely best left for another day!