Chapter 1: Counting Beats

The object of this lesson is to tap your foot in time with the metronome as you count aloud, then add some picking. I suggest working on this chapter for only ten minutes (but a seriously-focused ten minutes) per practice day, until you meet the standard listed at the end.

Set your recorder down near your foot, start it up, then turn on your metronome set at 60 beats per minute. Keep your heel down and tap the end of your foot on the floor along with each click. If you are a right-handed player, tap your right foot. Use your left foot if you pick left-handed. Tap loudly enough to be heard on the recording.

Tap your foot with the click for at least a full minute, then stop and listen closely to the recording. Notice the foot tap and the click are almost never exactly together. The click is perfectly steady; humans stay in time with it by slightly accelerating or decelerating. This is normal, and the more you practice, the less frequent and obvious your corrections will become.

Now tap the foot along with the metronome as before, and simultaneously count aloud: “one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four,” and so on. You are counting beats in a meter indicated by the time signature. The top part of the time signature may be any number and shows how many beats you are counting in each measure (also called a bar). The bottom number is usually 4, 2, or 8; it tells the type of note you are counting as a beat.

We’ve got two things going at once now: tapping and counting. Record a bit of this on your own and listen back to make sure you’re not skipping any beats in your counting, your foot doesn’t drop out, and you’re staying in time with the metronome.

Two Kinds of Beats

We use two meanings for the word beat. First, each click of the metronome represents a beat as a precise moment in time that has no theoretical duration, just as a point in geometry has a location but covers no area. With this meaning we can say a note begins (attacks) or ends (cuts off) directly on a beat or at some other time in relation to it.

Another meaning of beat is the amount of time from one metronome click to the next. With this meaning we can say a note is one beat long, half a beat long, two beats long, and so on. If the metronome is set at a slower tempo, the beats are longer.
Quarter Notes

The CD track starts with a two-measure countoff, given by a drummer or bandleader so everyone can start together. The traditional countoff for 4/4 time is “one,” (rest) “two,” (rest) “one, two, three, four.” Listen to the countoff and the click before you start tapping your foot in time with it.

While tapping your foot, count beats aloud, and play C notes on the 5th string, 3rd fret, right along with the metronome. The notation staff now has a treble clef added that determines the pitch of the notes. The 3rd-fret C is on a ledger line below the staff in guitar music. There is a repeat sign added to the end of the line, telling you to play it two times.

The rectangular marks over the notes are picking directions telling you to play downstrokes only. You’re now counting, tapping, and playing the same beats.

CD Track 1

Record yourself playing this exercise and check out how well you stay in time. Especially if you are a beginner, sometimes the only way to get back in sync with the click is to stop playing completely and just listen to it for a bit. That’s okay. Dropping out is better than continuing to play out of time. When you hear and feel the beat, start tapping your foot again, then add the counting, and finally the playing.

If you are a little more advanced in your playing, notice that often the first bar or two of playing are not quite locked in with the click, after which your groove settles down. You need to really feel the tempo (the speed of the beats) in your body before you start playing.

Breathing While Counting

These exercises are meant to be easy enough to let you think about what your body is doing besides playing: tapping the foot, counting, and also breathing. The tendency to hold the breath when playing can mess with your timing and ability to concentrate. It’s better to take frequent small breaths and let some air out along with the words as you count aloud. For this chapter’s exercises, try inhaling a small breath after beats 2 and 4 in each measure.

Half Notes

The half note looks like a quarter note, except its head is hollow. Half notes are always two beats long and can start on beat 1, 2, or 3. Let the note ring while your foot taps the next beat. Keep counting during long notes, so that any following note falls at the right time. You’re always counting the beats in the time signature, not the notes themselves.
Now that we have quarter and half notes, we’ll use them to start training your sense of phrasing. A phrase is usually two, four, or eight measures. You need to develop a sense of phrase length and play without overlapping it at first. Here we have one and a half measures of quarter notes, then a half note on beat 3 of the second measure. The usual resolution point is about 3/4 of the way through a phrase.

Phrases vs. Motifs

A phrase is a complete statement in music, like a sentence or a clause in English. At the end of a phrase there is a sense of finishing an idea and (usually) taking a breath. To find the phrase length in music we look for a chord progression, a figure (or bass riff), or a melody—in that order.

In everyday use the word phrasing also refers to how small melodic pieces are arranged over a larger musical context. Technically the phrase is a complete statement defined by the chords, but phrasing—and phrase—also commonly refer to the smaller licks played over the chords.

A motif (or motive) is the smallest unit of musical meaning, usually only a few notes. Instead of motif we may use the term lick, melodic phrase or even just phrase to refer to each solo statement, separate from the phrase provided by the underlying parts.

Whole Notes

A whole note is a hollow head with no stem; it’s four beats long and always starts on beat 1 of a measure in 4/4 time. Play the example below while counting aloud. The whole note in measure 4 represents a good resolution point for a four-bar phrase.
The whole note in measure 4 may seem like a long stretch of doing nothing, and in the future you may be playing things here. We’re learning to feel this as a natural resolution point in the four-measure phrase length. I won’t lecture any more now than to say that waiting for the full count of four beats will help you start the next phrase smoothly. This is not the only possible resolution, but it is one to learn early on as a strong alternative to the first beat of the next measure (not shown).

While we have learned three new note durations: quarter notes, half notes, and whole notes, the focus here is on tapping your foot and counting. If you are only playing, there will be problems. Stay with this chapter until you can tap and count quarter-note beats while playing the examples strictly in time with the metronome at slow tempos (50-70 bpm). Record yourself to be sure, especially if you are working without a teacher.