MusicReason RESOURCE

# Reading and Writing Musical Pitch

https://musicreason.com/resources/reading-and-writing-musical-pitch/ · Last updated 2026-09-06

A MIDI number or a piano-key position tells you which key to press. Standard notation tells you more: which letter name, which octave, whether an accidental applies, and how that note relates to its neighbors on the page. That extra information is not decoration; it is what lets a reader infer key, function, and voice leading at a glance.

## The same note, four different staff positions

Middle C (C4) sits on the first ledger line below the treble staff, in the middle of the grand staff (between the two staves), and on the first ledger line above the bass staff.
C4, "middle C," is a single, fixed pitch, but where it sits visually depends entirely on which clef is reading it. Clef Transposition Explorer and Staff Note Reader both work from this same staff-position mapping, one to translate between clefs and one to read a fixed position back to a note name.

## An accidental's reach is one measure, not forever

A sharp or flat written before a note applies to every occurrence of that pitch, in that octave, for the rest of the measure it appears in. It resets at the next barline unless the key signature already implies it. This measure-scoped convention is exactly the kind of rule a piano-key number carries no information about.

## Written pitch and sounding pitch can legitimately differ

A B-flat trumpet reads a C on the page and sounds a B-flat. This is not an error or a quirk; it is a deliberate convention that keeps fingering patterns consistent across an entire instrument family. Instrument Transposition Converter tracks written and sounding pitch as two distinct, related values rather than assuming they always match.

## Notation, described in text, not only drawn

Every notation-based engine on this site pairs its visual staff with an accessible text description of the same position (line, space, or ledger-line count), so the same information reaches a screen-reader user as reaches a sighted one, rather than treating the visual rendering as the only representation. Keyboard Note Explorer, Sight Reading Drill Generator, and Note Naming Speed Drill all build their drills on top of this same shared mapping.

## Frequently asked questions

**Does middle C sit in the same visual spot on every clef?**

No. The same pitch, C4, sits on the first ledger line below the treble staff, in the middle of the grand staff, and on the first ledger line above the bass staff, exactly the kind of clef-dependent mapping Clef Transposition Explorer and Staff Note Reader make explicit rather than assuming one clef.

**Why do transposing instruments read a different note than they sound?**

A transposing instrument's written part is deliberately offset from its sounding pitch by a fixed interval (a B-flat trumpet sounds a major 2nd lower than written), a convention that keeps fingerings consistent across an instrument family. Instrument Transposition Converter tracks written versus sounding pitch as two separate, related values.

**Why does an accidental only apply for the rest of its own measure?**

That is standard notation convention: an accidental affects every occurrence of that pitch in the same octave for the remainder of the measure it appears in, then resets at the next barline unless the key signature restates it.

## Where this shows up

SCALES KEYS AND INTERVALS
**Staff Note Reader**

SCALES KEYS AND INTERVALS
**Clef Transposition Explorer**

EAR TRAINING
**Keyboard Note Explorer**

EAR TRAINING
**Sight Reading Drill Generator**

EAR TRAINING
**Note Naming Speed Drill**

PROGRESSION AND ARRANGING
**Instrument Transposition Converter**