



# How to read mandolin tab

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## Introduction

Welcome to this short instructional pdf booklet on how to read mandolin tab, I hope this is useful for you. This is part of the 'New to the Mandolin' page on [www.mandomike.com](http://www.mandomike.com), once you have worked through this page, you should be ready to start working through the Free Monthly Lessons section of the website.

Reading tab is not as difficult as it may seem at first, it is much quicker to learn and read than music, and in some instances is more useful. I highly suggest to *any* mandolin player that they can read tab, no matter what standard they are.

Tab music tells you two important things about each note on a page: 1) What string and fret number to play and 2) how long to play it for. I shall go through both of those elements, and hopefully, at the end of it, you will combine those two bits of information and be able to read tab!

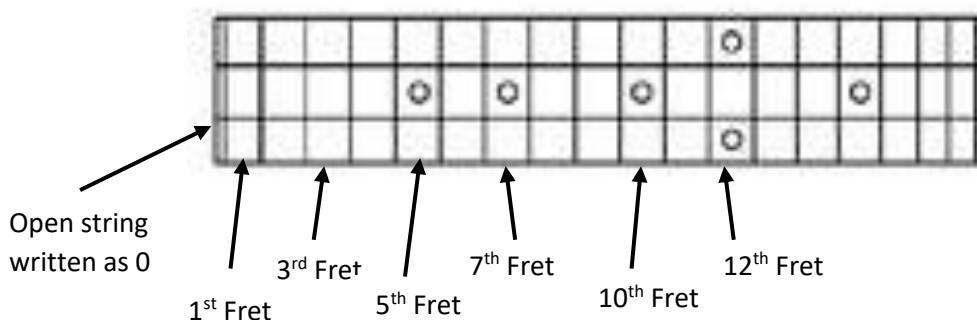
## String & Fret numbers

If you haven't noticed yet, the mandolin (effectively) has 4 strings (8 strings in pairs) tuned G D A E. Tab music has 4 lines, so each line represents one string with the highest string on the page being the E string, down to the lowest string on the line being the low G string.

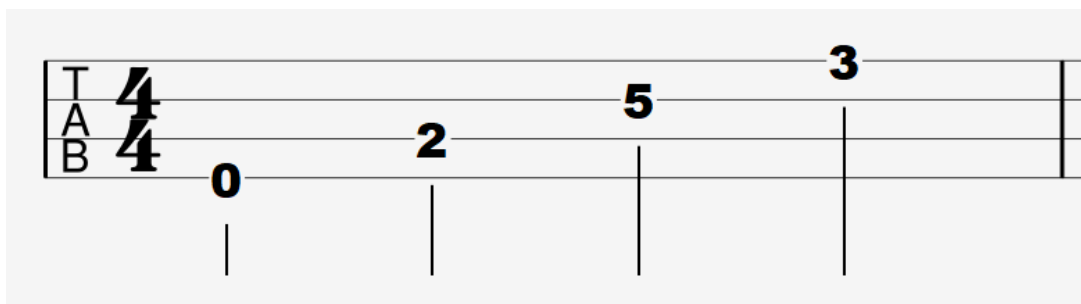


This is the time signature of the music.  
You don't need to worry about this just yet.

Then, on the mandolin, we have Frets. The open string is 0, the first fret is 1 and so on, with the dots on your fretboard meant to be as guides to help you navigate quickly. On the example below, the dots are on frets 5, 7, 10 and 12 (and 15 but no one needs Fret 15)



Now we have a number assigned to each Fret, and a line on a page assigned to each string, we can put those two elements together! Some examples are on the next page



Note 1: This is on the lowest line, so it's on the G string, and the 0 means it's Fret 0 which is the open string. So, this is the open G string

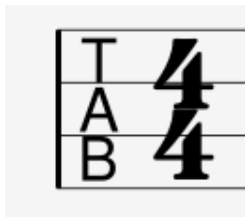
Note 2: This is on the 2<sup>nd</sup> line, so it's on the D string. And the '2' indicates Fret 2. So, this is 2<sup>nd</sup> Fret on the D string

Note 3: This is on the 3<sup>rd</sup> line, so it's on the A string. And the '5' indicates Fret 5. So, this is 5<sup>th</sup> Fret on the A string

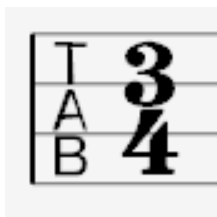
Note 4: This is on the highest line, so it's on the high E string. And the '3' indicates Fret 3. So, this is the 3<sup>rd</sup> Fret on the E string

## Time Signatures & Note Lengths

Once you know which fret and string to play, the next bit of information you need to know is how long to hold it for. Before you know how long to hold a note for, you need a reference to know what you're actually counting ... this 'reference' is commonly known as the 'Time Signature' of a piece of music. The time signature is indicated (as in the example above) by two numbers on top of each other at the very start of a piece of music. If you're completely new to reading music, there's only two Time Signatures you need to worry about for now, 4/4 and 3/4:



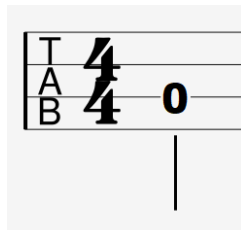
4/4 is the most commonly used time signature in western music. In simple terms, there are 4 beats in every bar counted as '1, 2, 3, 4; 1, 2, 3, 4; 1, 2, 3, 4 ...'



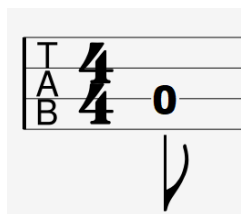
3/4 is what we would all recognise as 'Waltz Time'. In simple terms, there are 3 beats in every bar counted as '1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3 ...'

There are many other time signatures that you will come across in the future, but for now, just worry about these two as 90% of music you'll come across will be in 4/4 or 3/4.

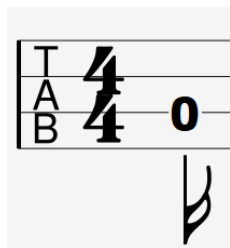
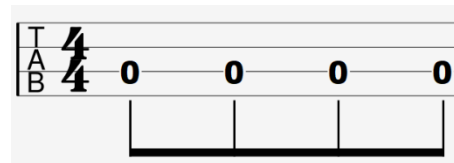
Now we know 'how' we're counting beats, we can start to discuss how long individual notes are. For the rest of this sheet, I shall be talking as though we are in 4/4 but the note lengths apply to 3/4 as well. Here are the different note lengths and how they are shown on a piece of TAB:



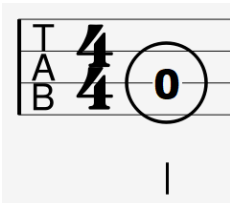
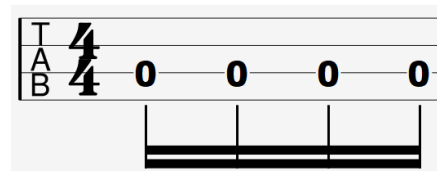
A note with a solid line underneath (or sometimes above) the staff is equal to **one beat**. This is called a crotchet or quarter ( $\frac{1}{4}$ ) note. In 4/4, there are 4 of these in each bar.



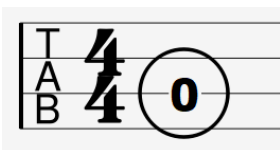
A note with a line and a 'flick' is worth **half a beat**. This is called a quaver or 8<sup>th</sup> note as there are 8 of these per bar. When you get one or more next to each other, they are often joined up.



A note with a line and then two small flicks is worth a **quarter of a beat**. This is called a semi-quaver or 16<sup>th</sup> note. There are 16 of these in a bar. Like the quaver, they are joined together when more than one is next to each other.

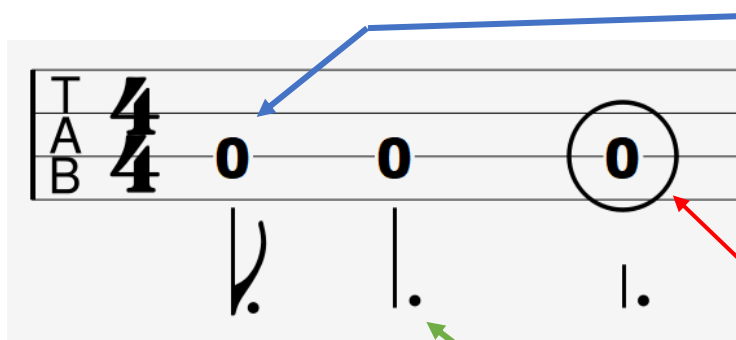


A note with a circle around it and a line underneath is worth **2 beats**. This is known as a minim, or a half note. There are two of these in a bar.



A note with just a circle around it is worth **4 beats**. This is known as a semibreve, or a whole note. There would just be 1 of these per bar.

When a dot is placed next to a note, the note is lengthened by half the original value. So:

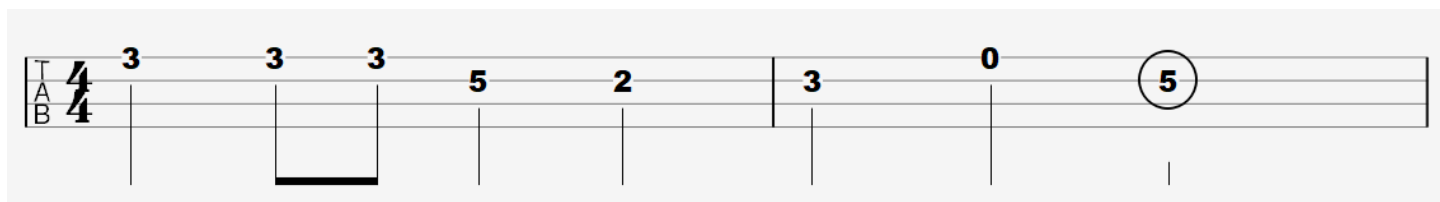


A quaver with a dot is worth 1 quaver +  $\frac{1}{2}$  a quaver

A whole beat with a dot is worth 1 beat + half of 1 beat =  $1\frac{1}{2}$  beats.

A minim with a dot is worth 2 beats + half of two beats = 3 beats

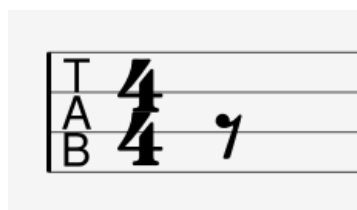
Hopefully you will now be able to work out what fret to play and how long to play it for. It will take a while at first, but very quickly you will start to find reading tab quite easy. Here is a two-bar example from the standard tune 'Cripple Creek':



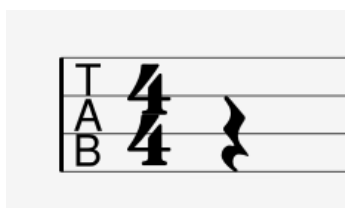
The opening note is worth 1 beat and is on the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret of the E string. Then, it's followed by two notes worth half a beat (so half as long as the first note), but on the same fret. Then, the next 4 notes are all worth 1 beat again but all on different frets. Finally, the phrase finishes on the 5<sup>th</sup> Fret of the A string and, as it has a circle and a line underneath, it's worth two beats.

### Rests

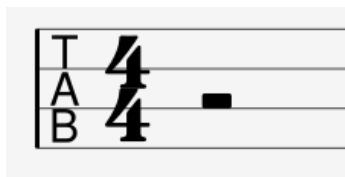
The final element of reading tab you need to know are rest notes (when no notes are played), here's what they look like and how long they last for:



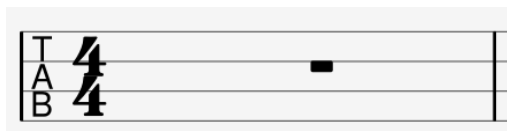
= ½ a beat (same length as a quaver)



= 1 beat (same length as a crotchet)



= 2 beats (same length as a minim)



= 4 beats (same length as a semibreve)

That's all of the elements you need to read TAB! It might take a bit of time at first, but I promise that it will get easier and being able to read tab is so useful on the mandolin so please persevere and get in touch via the website if you have any questions. I recommend you now start working through the Free Monthly Lessons, they all include TAB music.