

READING GUITAR TABLATURE*

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Abstract

Tablature is an alternative form of music notation that some guitar players find useful.

A **tablature** is a form of music notation that is designed for a particular musical instrument, for example by specifically indicating keys or fingerings. Obviously, tablatures aren't as generally useful as standard notation¹, since they can only be easily read by players of one particular kind of instrument. Also, tablatures contain different information, and may not have as much information, as standard notation. But some players find tablature easier to read and therefore useful as a practice guide or memorization reminder. In particular, tablature is available to modern non-classical guitar players. Here is a guide to reading modern guitar tablature. Tablature for other fretted, stringed instruments will be very similar.

On a regular staff², the lines represent particular pitches³. For example, on a particular staff, the bottom line might stand for the E above middle C; any note on that line (except an accidental⁴) will be an E above middle C. The spaces in between the lines also represent particular pitches.

In guitar tablature, each line represents a particular a string, and the spaces between the lines are not used. For example, the bottom line of a guitar tablature represents the sixth, or lowest-sounding, string of the guitar. All notes on that line will occur on that string.

Notes are represented by numbers on the lines. The number tells you where (which fret) to hold down that string (with the left hand) for that note. "0" means to pluck the open string.

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¹"The Staff" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10880/latest/>>

²"The Staff" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10880/latest/>>

³"Pitch: Sharp, Flat, and Natural Notes" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10943/latest/>>

⁴"Pitch: Sharp, Flat, and Natural Notes" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10943/latest/#p0e>>

Reading Guitar Tablature

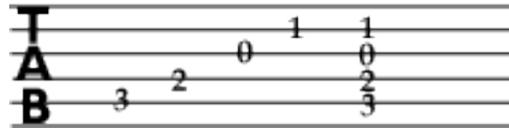


Figure 1: The six lines represent the six strings of the guitar, from lowest-sounding (bottom line) to highest-sounding (top line). The numbers tell where (which fret) to hold the string down. So this line of tablature means: play the fifth string third fret, then fourth string second fret, then third string open, then second string first fret, then all four at the same time.

Modern guitar tablature does not require the player to know the names of the notes or be able to read music. It also usually does not include information such as the length of the note, which finger to hold the string down with, or which finger to pluck with. All this makes it easier for some guitarists to read.

But this also means that tablature may be missing important information; particularly information about rhythm⁵. So tablature is usually published alongside regular notation and is most useful when the guitarist already knows what the music should sound like. If you learn to read tablature but not standard notation, you will need some way to find out the rhythms of the music. You can learn them from recordings, or from other musicians. You may want to learn enough standard notation to be able to read the rhythms only (in Connexions, see Duration: Note Length⁶, Duration: Rest Length⁷, and Time Signature⁸ for the basics). Or you may want to learn standard notation well enough to read it slowly, for study purposes, even if you can't read it fast enough to read and play at the same time.

⁵"Rhythm" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11646/latest/>>

⁶"Duration: Note Lengths in Written Music" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10945/latest/>>

⁷"Duration: Rest Length" <<http://cnx.org/content/m11887/latest/>>

⁸"Time Signature" <<http://cnx.org/content/m10956/latest/>>

Comparing Tablature and Standard Notation

Figure 2: Guitar music written in standard notation often has useful information like which left-hand fingers to use (the small letters next to the notes) and which right-hand fingers to use (the small numbers). But the most important information left out of most tablature is the note lengths, or rhythms.
