A fundamental feature of most pieces of music is a consistent rhythmic pulse. This pulse is called the beat, and a single pulse is called a beat unit.

There are two types of beat units: those containing two divisions, called simple beat units...

...and those containing three divisions, called compound beat units.

In music, beats are organized into patterns of accented and unaccented beat units. In fact, if you listen to a sequence of repeated notes, your brain will probably start to perceive the notes as groups of two, three, or four, even if no accents are present!

These groups are called measures, and they are delineated with barlines.

The organization of beat units and measures in a piece is called meter. Meter is described by two numbers placed at the beginning of the piece: the time signature.

Simple time signatures are easy.

The top number indicates the number of beats in a measure. The bottom number indicates the type of note which serves as the beat unit.

Compound time signatures are stupidly complicated.

The top number indicates the number of divisions in a measure. To get the number of beats, divide it by three. The bottom number indicates the type of note which serves as the division. To get the beat unit, use the note that is equal to three of these notes.

In a compound meter, the beat unit is always a dotted note!

By looking at the top number of the time signature, you can tell two things about the meter: whether it's simple or compound, and how many beats are in a measure.

Notes that have flags can be grouped together by using beams in place of flags.

However, beaming is only used to group notes within beats. For the most part, you shouldn't beam notes between beats, nor should you tie notes within beats.