FREE RESOURCE • COUNTING, BOOK THREE

Compound Meter

THE BEAT THAT SPLITS IN THREE · 6/8 · 9/8 · 12/8



“In 6/8 there are not six beats. There are two.”

START HERE

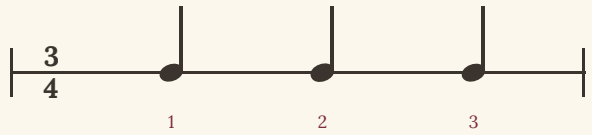
What You Already Know

♫

One page to check against. Most of it comes from Book One; ties and pickups come from Book Two, which Game Six draws on. Everything past this page is new.

Reading a time signature

Top number — how many beats in a measure.
Bottom number — which note is worth one beat. This is the one thing from Books One and Two that is about to change.



Three quarter-note beats, counted 1 2 3.

The dotted note

A dot adds half the note again. This one matters more than anything else in this book: in compound meter the *beat itself* is a dotted note.



worth 1½



three eighths

And beaming

A beam joins fast notes into groups. It never changes what a note is worth — it shows where the beats are. That is the single most useful fact in this whole book.



If the dotted quarter is unfamiliar, stop here. Book One covers the note values. Everything on the next page depends on knowing that a dotted quarter is three eighth notes long.

START HERE

The Beat That Splits in Three

♫

The most important page in the series, and the one place where the rule about the bottom number stops being true.

The rule changes here

Everything so far has had a beat that splits in two. Now meet the other kind. In a **compound** meter the beat splits into **three** — and the bottom number stops naming the beat.

In 6/8 there are not six beats. There are two. The six counts the eighth notes, and eighth notes are the *division*. Three of them make one beat, and a note worth three eighths is a dotted quarter. That is the beat.

One honest footnote: in a very slow 6/8 — a lullaby, an adagio — players often do count all six, because two beats that far apart are hard to hold on to. The meter still has two beats; counting the divisions is a way of subdividing them, not a different time signature.

Six eighths, two beats



Say it: **1 la li 2 la li**. The numbers are the two real beats; *la* and *li* are the second and third of each group of three.

The arithmetic, spelled out

6 eighth notes in the measure ÷ **3** eighths make one beat = **2** beats in the measure

 = one beat in 6/8

How to spot one

	SIMPLE	COMPOUND
Top number	not a multiple of three greater than three — so 2, 3, 4, 5 …	a multiple of three greater than three — 6, 9, 12 …
The beat splits into	two	three
The beat is	the note the bottom names	a *dotted* note, three divisions long
Beats per measure	the top number	the top number divided by three

3/8 is not compound. The top number has to be a multiple of three *greater* than three. 3/8 has three eighth-note beats and splits in two, like any simple meter.

START HERE

Counting Compound Meters

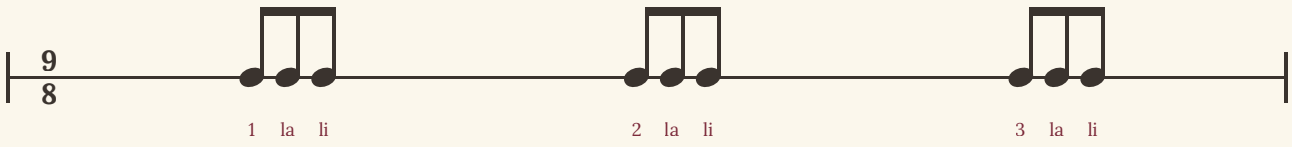
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Three compound meters, counted with the same three words. Say **1 la li** for every beat and the rest is just adding up.

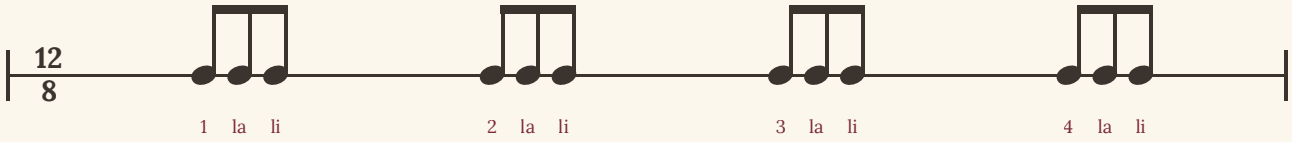
6/8 2 dotted quarter-note beats in a measure, each splitting into 3 eighth notes



9/8 3 dotted quarter-note beats in a measure, each splitting into 3 eighth notes



12/8 4 dotted quarter-note beats in a measure, each splitting into 3 eighth notes



Dividing by three

Take the top number and divide it by three; that is how many beats you have. The beat is always a dotted note, because only a dotted note is three divisions long.

The bottom number can be anything. 6/4 is compound too — two beats of a dotted half — and so is 9/4. Only the top number decides.

6 ÷ 3 = **2** beats **9** ÷ 3 = **3** beats **12** ÷ 3 = **4** beats

12/8 feels like 4/4 with a swing. Four beats to the measure in both — but in 12/8 each beat has three parts instead of two, which is where the lilt comes from.

START HERE

Inside the Compound Beat

♫

A compound beat does not have to be three even eighths. Anything that adds up to a dotted quarter will do — and the numbers still land in exactly the same places.

Four ways to fill a 6/8 measure

Each measure below is 6/8: two beats, each a dotted quarter. Only the inside of the beats changes.



A quarter note inside a compound beat takes the first two-thirds of it, so the note after it lands on *li*. That long-then-short lilt is one of the characteristic sounds of 6/8. The other is the first row above: three even eighths, running.

The two you will meet most

A whole beat on one note



The dotted quarter takes the number, the *la* and the *li* by itself.

Long, then short



Quarter then eighth, twice. Count **1 li 2 li**.

Count the beat, not the notes. However a beat is filled, you still say one number for it. If you are saying more numbers than there are dotted quarters in the measure, you have slipped back into counting the divisions.

START HERE

6/8 Against 3/4

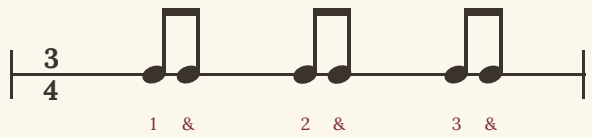
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The comparison that makes compound meter click. Same six notes, same total length, two completely different pieces of music.

Six eighth notes, two different pieces

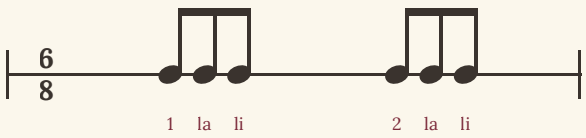
A 6/8 measure and a 3/4 measure hold exactly the same amount of music: six eighth notes. They are the same *length*. They are not the same *meter*, and they do not sound alike at all.

3/4 Three beats, each splitting in two



Beamed in **twos**. Count **1 & 2 & 3 &**.

6/8 Two beats, each splitting in three



Beamed in **threes**. Count **1 la li 2 la li**.

The beaming is the clue

Since both measures hold six eighth notes, length alone can never tell them apart. What tells you is how the notes are **beamed**. Composers beam within the beat — in twos or fours for a simple meter, in threes for a compound one. So beams in threes are the giveaway.

Try it: which meter is this?

Both measures below hold six eighth notes and neither shows a time signature. Only the beaming can tell you. Write 3/4 or 6/8 under each.



this is .....



this is .....

Say them both out loud, back to back. Clap six even eighth notes while counting 1 & 2 & 3 &, then clap the identical six while counting 1 *la li* 2 *la li*. The notes do not change. The music does.

GAME ONE

Count It Out

♫

Say **1 la li** for every beat and write the syllable under each note. The numbers are the dotted-note beats, never the eighth notes.

NAME _____ DATE _____

METER MAP · THE NOTE THAT GETS ONE BEAT, AND HOW MANY FIT

6/8 dotted quarter ×2 9/8 dotted quarter ×3 12/8 dotted quarter ×4

#1



#2



#3



#4



#5



#6



#7



#8



#9



#10



#11



#12



A dotted quarter fills a whole beat on its own. When you meet one it takes the number and the *la* and the *li* all by itself — so it gets just the number written underneath. If you find yourself counting to six, you have slipped back into simple meter.

GAME TWO

Simple or Compound?

♫

Sort each time signature into the right column, then say how many beats are in one of its measures.

NAME _____ DATE _____

	TIME SIGNATURE	SIMPLE	COMPOUND	HOW MANY BEATS?
#1	$\frac{2}{4}$	☐	☐	.....
#2	$\frac{6}{8}$	☐	☐	.....
#3	$\frac{3}{4}$	☐	☐	.....
#4	$\frac{9}{8}$	☐	☐	.....
#5	$\frac{4}{4}$	☐	☐	.....
#6	$\frac{12}{8}$	☐	☐	.....
#7	$\frac{2}{2}$	☐	☐	.....
#8	$\frac{3}{8}$	☐	☐	.....
#9	$\frac{6}{4}$	☐	☐	.....
#10	$\frac{4}{8}$	☐	☐	.....
#11	$\frac{9}{4}$	☐	☐	.....
#12	$\frac{3}{2}$	☐	☐	.....

The test, in one line

Is the top number 6, 9 or 12? Then it is compound: divide the top by three to get the number of beats. Anything else is simple: the top number *is* the number of beats.

Careful with the eighth-note ones: 3/8 and 4/8 look compound because of the 8 on the bottom, and neither is. And 6/4 and 9/4 are compound even though the bottom number is a 4.

Check one box per row, then write the beat count. The beat count is the part that proves you understand it: getting 6/8 into the compound column is easy, but writing **2** next to it is the real answer.

GAME THREE

Name That Meter

♫

Each measure is complete but its time signature is missing. Add the measure up in quarter notes, then find the one time signature that wants exactly that.

NAME _____ DATE _____

#1



2/4 · 6/8 · 9/8

#2



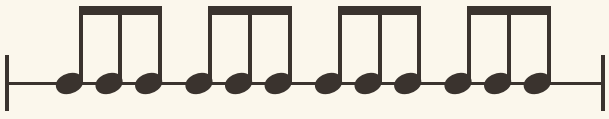
6/8 · 9/8 · 12/8

#3



6/4 · 3/4 · 4/4

#4



6/8 · 9/8 · 12/8

#5



2/4 · 6/8 · 4/4

#6



6/8 · 9/8 · 12/8

#7



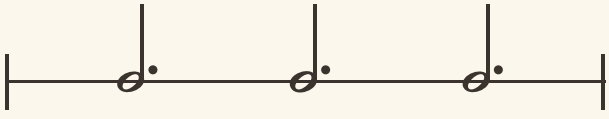
3/4 · 6/4 · 4/4

#8



2/4 · 3/4 · 6/8

#9



6/4 · 9/4 · 4/4

#10



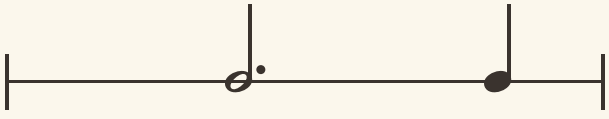
2/4 · 6/8 · 9/8

#11



6/8 · 9/8 · 12/8

#12



3/4 · 4/4 · 6/8

Work in quarter notes. 6/8 wants three quarter notes' worth, 9/8 four and a half, 12/8 and 6/4 six, 9/4 nine. Exactly one choice per card matches.

GAME FOUR

Fill the Measure

♫

Every measure is one note short. Draw the single note that completes it. In compound meter the answer is very often a dotted note.

NAME _____ DATE _____

METER MAP · THE NOTE THAT GETS ONE BEAT, AND HOW MANY FIT

6/8 ♩. ×2 9/8 ♩. ×3 12/8 ♩. ×4 6/4 𝅗𝅥. ×2

#1



missing note: .....

#2



missing note: .....

#3



missing note: .....

#4



missing note: .....

#5



missing note: .....

#6



missing note: .....

#7



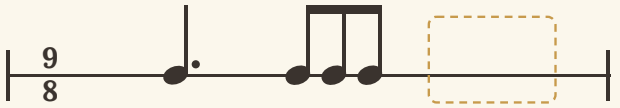
missing note: .....

#8



missing note: .....

#9



missing note: .....

#10



missing note: .....

Subtract, do not guess. Take what the measure already holds away from what the time signature asks for. If the gap does not match any plain note value, try adding a dot to the next one down.

GAME FIVE

Spot the Broken Measure

♫

Some of these measures do not add up to what their time signature asks for. For every card, write what the measure holds and what it needs, then tick whichever box is true.

NAME _____ DATE _____

#1



holds _____ needs _____

☐ correct ☐ broken

#2



holds _____ needs _____

☐ correct ☐ broken

#3



holds _____ needs _____

☐ correct ☐ broken

#4



holds _____ needs _____

☐ correct ☐ broken

#5



holds _____ needs _____

☐ correct ☐ broken

#6



holds _____ needs _____

☐ correct ☐ broken

#7



holds _____ needs _____

☐ correct ☐ broken

Measure in quarter notes. A 6/8 measure needs six eighth notes, which is three quarter notes' worth; a 9/8 measure needs four and a half; a 12/8 measure needs six.

GAME SIX

Ties and Pickups in Compound Meter

♫

Everything from Book Two still works here — the only change is that you count **1 la li** underneath instead of **1 & 2 &**.

NAME _____ DATE _____

How long is the tied note held?

Add the two tied notes together, then ask how many *dotted-note beats* of this meter that makes. The trap is answering in eighth notes instead: in 12/8, a sound six eighths long lasts **two** of the four beats, not six.

#1



held for _____ beats of 6/8

#2



held for _____ beats of 9/8

Where does the pickup start?

Measure it backwards from the end of a measure, exactly as before. In 6/8 the last eighth of a measure is the *li* of beat two.

#1



starts on _____

#2



starts on _____

Re-barring across the divide. Rewriting a compound measure in a simple meter (or the other way round) changes more than the barlines: the beams have to be regrouped too, because the beats are a different size. That is the one case where the notes keep their values but the page really does look different.

WRITE IT DOWN

In Your Own Words

♫

No notes to draw on this page — just sentences. If you can explain compound meter in writing, you have it.

NAME _____ DATE _____

Explain it

#1 A friend says "6/8 means six beats in a measure." Write what you would tell them, and why.

#2 Why is the beat in a compound meter always a **dotted** note?

#3 A 3/4 measure and a 6/8 measure can hold exactly the same six eighth notes. Explain how you can tell which is which by looking.

Finish the sentence

#1 In a compound meter the beat splits into _____ parts; in a simple meter it splits into _____.

#2 In 9/8 there are _____ beats in a measure, and each one is worth a _____ note.

#3 To find the number of beats in a compound meter, divide the top number by _____.

#4 In 6/8 the bottom number names the _____, not the beat.

Spot the mistake

#1 Jo is counting a piece in 6/8 and writes this under the first measure. Write what has gone wrong.

> "1 2 3 4 5 6"

#2 Amara is sorting time signatures and puts 3/8 in the compound column. Write what you would tell her.

> *"The top number divides by three, so it must be compound."*

FOR THE TEACHER

Answer Key

♫

Game One · Count It Out

#1 6/8 1 la li 2 la li
#2 6/8 1 2 la li
#3 6/8 1 la li 2
#4 9/8 1 la li 2 3 la li
#5 6/8 1 li 2 la li
#6 12/8 1 2 la li 3 4
#7 9/8 1 la li 2 li 3
#8 9/8 1 2 3
#9 6/8 1 2 li
#10 12/8 1 la li 2 la li 3 4
#11 6/8 1 la li 2 li
#12 9/8 1 li 2 3 la li

A dotted quarter fills a whole beat, so it carries only the number.

Game Two · Simple or Compound?

#1 2/4 — simple, 2 beats (quarter note)
#2 6/8 — compound, 2 beats (dotted quarter note)
#3 3/4 — simple, 3 beats (quarter note)
#4 9/8 — compound, 3 beats (dotted quarter note)
#5 4/4 — simple, 4 beats (quarter note)
#6 12/8 — compound, 4 beats (dotted quarter note)
#7 2/2 — simple, 2 beats (half note)
#8 3/8 — simple, 3 beats (eighth note)
#9 6/4 — compound, 2 beats (dotted half note)
#10 4/8 — simple, 4 beats (eighth note)
#11 9/4 — compound, 3 beats (dotted half note)
#12 3/2 — simple, 3 beats (half note)

Game Three · Name That Meter

#1 6/8 — measure holds 3
#2 9/8 — measure holds 4½
#3 6/4 — measure holds 6
#4 12/8 — measure holds 6
#5 6/8 — measure holds 3
#6 9/8 — measure holds 4½
#7 6/4 — measure holds 6
#8 2/4 — measure holds 2
#9 9/4 — measure holds 9
#10 6/8 — measure holds 3
#11 9/8 — measure holds 4½
#12 4/4 — measure holds 4

Game Four · Fill the Measure

#1 dotted quarter note (6/8)
#2 eighth note (6/8)
#3 dotted quarter note (9/8)
#4 dotted quarter note (12/8)
#5 quarter note (6/4)
#6 dotted half note (6/4)
#7 dotted quarter note (6/8)
#8 eighth note (6/8)
#9 dotted quarter note (9/8)
#10 dotted quarter note (12/8)

Game Five · Spot the Broken Measure

Lengths are in quarter notes; + means the measure is over, − that it is short.

#1 correct (6/8, holds 3)
#2 broken (6/8: holds 3½, needs 3 — +½)
#3 correct (9/8, holds 4½)
#4 broken (12/8: holds 4½, needs 6 — −1½)
#5 correct (6/8, holds 3)
#6 correct (6/8, holds 3)
#7 broken (9/8: holds 3, needs 4½ — −1½)

Game Six · Ties

#1 2 beats of 6/8
#2 2 beats of 9/8

Game Six · Pickups

#1 the li of beat 2
#2 the li of beat 4

FOR THE TEACHER

Answer Key — The Writing Page

♫

The writing page

Finish the sentence

#1 three; two
#2 3; dotted quarter
#3 three
#4 division

The 6/8 Against 3/4 page, "Try it" — the left measure is beamed in twos, so it is **3/4**; the right is beamed in threes, so it is **6/8**.

Explain it and Spot the mistake: answers vary. **#1** 6/8 has two beats, each a dotted quarter; the six counts eighth notes, which are the division. **#2** Because a beat in a compound meter has to be three divisions long, and only a dotted note is that long. **#3** by the beaming — twos mean 3/4, threes mean 6/8. **Spot the mistake #1** Jo has counted the divisions, not the beats. The meter has two beats, so the counting that shows the meter is 1 la li 2 la li. (If Jo is playing a very slow 6/8 and counting six to keep steady, say so — that is subdividing, and the answer is then that the six are divisions, not beats.) **#2** the top number must be a multiple of three *greater than* three, so 3/8 is simple.

REFERENCE

Everything on One Page

♫

The meters you will meet most

TIME	KIND	BEATS	BEAT	WHICH IS A	COUNTED
2/4	simple	2	♩	quarter note	1 e & a 2 e & a
3/4	simple	3	♩	quarter note	1 e & a 2 e & a 3 e & a
4/4	simple	4	♩	quarter note	1 e & a 2 e & a 3 e & a 4 e & a
3/8	simple	3	♪	eighth note	1 & 2 & 3 &
6/8	compound	2	♩.	dotted quarter note	1 la li 2 la li
9/8	compound	3	♩.	dotted quarter note	1 la li 2 la li 3 la li
12/8	compound	4	♩.	dotted quarter note	1 la li 2 la li 3 la li 4 la li
6/4	compound	2	𝅗𝅥.	dotted half note	1 la li 2 la li
9/4	compound	3	𝅗𝅥.	dotted half note	1 la li 2 la li 3 la li

The two questions

1. Is the top number 6, 9 or 12?
Yes → compound. Divide the top by three for the number of beats; the beat is a dotted note.
No → simple. The top number is the number of beats; the bottom number names the beat.

2. How is it beamed?
Groups of two or four → simple. Groups of three → compound. This is the quickest clue when no time signature is showing.

The counting words

Simple — 1 e & a, 2 e & a …

Compound — 1 la li, 2 la li … the numbers are beats; *la* and *li* are the second and third of each group of three.

And one trap: 3/8 is simple. The top number must be a multiple of three greater than three.

For the teacher

The START HERE pages are reference, not homework. The 6/8 against 3/4 page is the one that makes it land; spend the longest there.

The mistake to expect is counting six in 6/8. It happens because the student is reading the top number as a beat count, which is correct everywhere except here. Clap both meters back to back while counting aloud and it resolves quickly.

Sequence. The reference pages and Count It Out make a first session; Simple or Compound and Name That Meter a second; Fill the Measure and Spot the Broken a third. Ties and Pickups in Compound Meter comes last of the games, and assumes Book Two — skip it if that book has not been done. Do the writing page after that — it is the one that shows whether the idea has really landed.



In 6/8 there are not six beats. There are two.

Find a jig, a slow blues, or a lullaby that rocks in threes, and count it in two or four rather than six or twelve. Once you feel the dotted beat underneath, compound meter stops being arithmetic and starts being a lilt.

