

MUSC 110: Introduction to Music Reading and Notation

Fall 2026

Professor David Smey
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Miguel Hall - Room 207
Tues and Fri 11:00-12:15

If you would like to get into the technical nuts and bolts of music but find sheet music intimidating, this class is for you. We will focus on a variety of activities that will help you read notes on the staff, execute rhythms, transcribe music by ear, sing, and play piano. We will also become acquainted with the world of music theory, learning about chords and scales. By the end of the semester you will ideally emerge with strong fundamental skills and be well prepared for further study and exploration!

Music 110 vs. 220

Our department also offers Music 220: Fundamentals of Music Theory, which is similar to this course but faster-paced. 220 is designed for students who do have experience with reading sheet music, and you are allowed to start with it if you like. (110 is not a prerequisite.)

Sound Studies majors are required to complete a total of two music theory courses. They can start with 110 and continue on to 220, or they can start with 220 and take Music 320: Advanced Theory. If you really enjoy this subject you can of course take all three.

Textbooks + Daily Class Requirements

I'll provide free materials at the beginning of the semester, and I'll probably add to them as we go along. Our official textbook will be in a hard binder which you can leave at home, if you want.

I'll also give you a soft binder full of materials that we will use in class. Please bring this one to each session, as well as a pencil and eraser. Music paper will be provided as needed, but it may help to have your own supply.

Depending on circumstances you may be allowed to bring your own instrument to class, though I cannot guarantee that we will use it every time.

Class Website

We will have a dedicated blog on davesmey.com where we will archive all of our documents, keep track of class activities, and keep up-to-the-minute grade information. All students should visit the site within the first week of classes and register a personal account.

Grading

We have a lot of small items that will combine to make the final grade:

Homework (20%)

Homework will be one or two short worksheets per week. These will be graded on a check / check-plus / check-minus basis (where a check plus is worth 100 points, a check is 92, and a check minus is 60.) A check minus may be redone once for a possible upgrade. I usually accept late work up to four weeks after the due date, though I may be a little stingy in grading it.

Performance quizzes (7.5% each, 15% total)

We'll have two short oral exams. These are one-on-one appointments in which you will be asked to do basic musical tasks. These may include naming the notes on a musical staff, executing rhythms, singing melodies, or playing an instrument (piano and/or your personal instrument of choice.) These will occur in the week or so before midterms and finals, and each is worth 7.5% of your final grade.

Dictation Grades (5% each, 10% total)

We will do some sessions in class where you listen to recorded clips and transcribe them in music notation. Grades on each item will be collected together into one overall average at the midterm point and final. I usually average together a certain number of your best scores and discard the rest.

Notation Projects (5% each, 10% total)

We will do two special projects in which you are asked to compose a very short passage of music, notate it accurately, and perform it for the class.

Two Written Tests + Final (15% each, 45% total)

Finally we will have a total of three written tests which will assess your ability to count rhythms, make scales, spell your major and minor chords, and so on. The final will be cumulative, drawing on the things we learn all semester.

Topics

We will try to progress through a variety of subjects that gradually increase in difficulty. Since the goal is to cater to the needs of individual students and improve skill levels the pacing of these topics is flexible.

- Reading pitches in treble and bass clef

- Finding notes on the piano

- Reading, writing and executing simple rhythms

- Conducting in 4/4 and 3/4

- Singing simple melodies in solfège

- Executing melodies on piano and/or your instrument

- Transcribing melodies by ear

- Working with Digital Audio Workstation grid notation

- Notation in Musescore

- Performing ensemble music from notation

Theory Topics:

- Whole Steps and half steps

- Constructing major scales

- Key signatures and the circle of fifths

- Minor scales

- Triads

Attendance + Participation

Class is your opportunity to practice your skills along with your peers, so is it important that you be present for most of our sessions. There will be a slight bonus to your overall grade for good attendance and a penalty for more than five absences.

0-2 absences	3 point bonus
3 absences	1.5 point bonus
4-5 absences	no bonus, no penalty
5+ absences	3 point penalty for each absence over 5

Note that this is a “no excuses” or “everything counts” policy. All of the typical causes of absence (such as illness, work conflicts, or extracurricular activities) are counted in your total. It is my hope that students can meet our attendance goals regardless of what happens. However, if something truly extreme or traumatic occurs we can talk about alternate arrangements that will allow you to complete the course without a penalty.

Rude, disruptive or inattentive behavior may also result in you being marked absent.

Skipping a test without a good reason can be a form of cheating! It is not fair to the students who show up as they are supposed to and it creates extra, unpaid work for your instructor. If you cannot make it to a scheduled test please contact me ASAP. I reserve the right to give you a zero if I think you are evading a test or being otherwise irresponsible.

Schedule

Week 1 (Aug 25 and 28):

Week 2 (Sept 1 and 4):

Week 3 (Sept 8 and 11):

Week 4 (Sept 15 and 18):

Week 5 (Sept 22 and 25):

Written Test #1

Week 6 (Sept 29 and Oct 2):

Week 7 (Oct 6 and 9):

Performance Test #1

Presentation of midterm compositions begin

Week 8 (Oct 13 and 16):

More midterm compositions

Week 9 (Oct 20 and 23):

Week 10 (Oct 27 and 30):

Week 11 (Nov 6):

Tuesday, November 3 will follow a Wednesday schedule, so we will not meet.

Week 12 (Nov 10 and 13):

Written Test #2

Week 13 (Nov 17 and 20):

Performance Test #2

Week 14 (Nov 24):

Friday Nov 27 is off for Thanksgiving

Week 14 (Dec 1 and 4):

Presentation of final composition projects

Final Exam (Dec 11):

Our Final Exam is currently scheduled for Fri, Dec 11 at 11:00am