

PIANO

and KEYBOARD Guide

The Beginner's Guide to Learning Piano



Piano And Keyboard Guide

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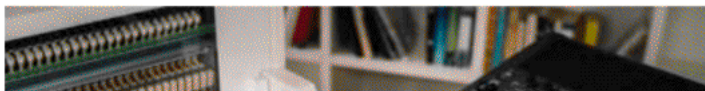
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Chapter 1 - How to Choose a Piano or Keyboard





Deciding to learn piano is the first step on an incredibly rewarding journey. The good news is that you won't be taking that journey alone. You will have an instrument to learn on. It will be a daily source of satisfaction, a comforting presence in your home, a companion with keys.

So let's find you the right instrument. Even a short search can uncover a wide range of terminology and options that can be a little daunting. We're here to help. This chapter gives you all the knowledge you need for choosing a piano or keyboard to choose the right instrument for you. If you don't need all the information, take a look at the quick buyer's guide at the end of this chapter.

Let's start by splitting your options into three categories:

Digital keyboards - The cheapest, most convenient, and most versatile. Sound and feel aren't as good as acoustic pianos, but keyboards work well as a first instrument.

Digital pianos - Larger and more expensive, but nearly as versatile while mimicking the feel of an acoustic piano well. A great alternative if budget and space allows.

Acoustic pianos - The best option for playing experience and sound quality, but by far the largest and can be extremely expensive.

Digital keyboards



A digital keyboard for beginners with 61 keys

A keyboard is the most minimal option, just a casing around the keys and controls. This makes it portable and usually the cheapest option. You may also see it called an “electronic” or “electric” keyboard because the sound is either synthesized or sampled. It comes from an in-built speaker with adjustable volume (or a headphone input if you don't want to disturb).

Digital keyboards don't need maintenance, and you can almost always choose to play with a range of instrument sounds: pianos, organs, or non-keyboard instruments like strings. The sound quality on cheaper, older keyboards isn't great, but modern models are pretty good.

A downside of digital keyboards is that the playing experience can vary from excellent to not-so-good based on two key factors: the number of keys and the type of key action.

Number of keys

A full-size piano keyboard has 88 keys, spanning seven octaves and three extra notes. If you want the most accurate piano experience, go for this. If you're limited by size, then the next largest is fine (76 keys: six octaves, three notes). This will serve you well, but you will find yourself hitting the lower limit on some classical pieces like Beethoven's "Für Elise", the upper limit on much of Chopin (he loved the high notes), and many 20th century composers like Debussy, Ravel, Prokofiev, and Bartok.

Anything less than 76 keys and you will regularly hit the upper or lower limits. Of course, if you simply don't have the space and it would be a choice between 61 keys and nothing at all, then 61 keys it is. Five octaves will limit you, but that's all they had back in the 1700s when Mozart was composing music. And if it was good enough for

Mozart...

Key action

This term refers to the mechanism of a piano that produces sound. Digital keyboards and pianos don't have the same physical parts as a real piano, so they use various techniques to recreate the heavier touch and feel of a real piano's keys. Better instruments do this by including or replicating versions of the moving parts (see Key action guide). Simulating the key responsiveness of an acoustic piano, these are more expensive and heavier than other keyboards, but still smaller, cheaper, and lighter than both digital and acoustic pianos.

Key action guide

Hammer action The highest quality and most expensive. Each key moves a mechanical hammer, giving an almost identical feel to an acoustic piano.

Weighted Weights are built into the keys, similar feel to a real piano.

Semi-weighted Combines spring-loaded action with weights attached to the keys. Some dynamic lost, okay for a first instrument.

Unweighted (aka "synth action") Typically moulded plastic keys

creating resistance with springs. The cheapest option.

Accessories for keyboards

Sustain pedal. Piano pedals are foot-operated levers designed to affect the sound in various ways. On an acoustic piano or digital piano, they come attached, but if you go for an electronic keyboard, then you will need a sustain pedal (aka “damper pedal”).

Sustain pedals vary in price depending on how robust they are. The best option is a heavy “piano-style” lever pedal, made of metal and weighted to feel it is really attached to a piano. But if you are on a budget, there are small, square plastic pedals available that are also fine. Bear in mind that these lighter pedals may slide around a little and work with a simple on/off mechanism, so will not allow for subtle use of the pedal.

Keyboard stand. Unlike an acoustic or digital piano, a keyboard doesn’t come with a casing to raise it up. Don’t settle with putting it on a table; do your posture a favor and use a keyboard stand to ensure it is at the correct height. Sturdy, stable stands will feel better and won’t distract you by rocking back and forth when you play with feeling. For more on setting the keyboard height, see Chapter 3 - Proper Piano Technique.

This is all you need to know for now, but for a detailed explanation

on what the pedals are for and how to use them, see Chapter 9 - Piano Pedals.

Digital pianos



A clavino digital piano with 88 keys

Digital pianos give the convenience and flexibility of a keyboard while recreating the playing experience of an acoustic piano very well, especially as technology keeps improving. They usually have hammer action keys (see Key action guide above) and are made of wood or an imitation material. This gives you the feel of playing a solid instrument, while they don't require tuning or the same physical maintenance as an acoustic piano.

Like a digital keyboard, the sound is either synthetic or sampled, and like a digital keyboard, this gives you a range of piano and other

instrument sounds. Unlike many digital keyboards, they have the full 88 keys, so you won't limit what you can play (see Number of keys above).

One downside is that while they vary in size and shape, and are smaller than their acoustic counterparts, they are not easily portable. So if you go for one of these, then you may need to experiment with where to place it at home. In general, digital pianos are more expensive than keyboards, but far cheaper than the equivalent acoustic piano.

USB MIDI connections

Digital keyboards and digital pianos will almost always have a USB MIDI connection (Musical Instrument Digital Interface), allowing you to connect a computer or portable device. This allows you to use apps and other programs to access more sounds, record your playing, and access other functionality of piano-learning apps.



MIDI connection of a digital piano

Acoustic pianos

The original sound and playing experience that has shaped Western music for centuries. As you play, you can feel the notes resonate up through your fingers and around the room. This “acoustic” sound is created with entirely physical parts, so no electronics, sampling, or loudspeakers are involved.

The physics of an acoustic piano

Pushing a key sets a hammer in motion that hits a string, creating the familiar piano sound. The hammer mechanism gives the key weight against the finger (“Hammer action” keyboards imitate this touch feeling). The strings’ vibration spreads to the air around them inside the instrument. This causes reverberations that bounce around the

casing and escape through carefully designed holes in the body of the piano.

While this makes it difficult to fully recreate the feel of playing an acoustic piano using samples or synthesizers, technology is advancing fast. Modern digital pianos are excellent at simulating all physical elements of the sound- even the noise of the dampers muting or releasing the strings. A good digital instrument can sound and feel even better than a low-end acoustic piano.



The inside of a grand piano with hammers, strings, and dampers

The downside of acoustic pianos is that they are the most expensive option by far, and the expense is not limited to buying. Moving a piano is costly, and they need maintenance. The parts react to small changes in moisture or temperature, so acoustic pianos need regular tuning. This also means you need to consider where you place an

acoustic piano. They can't be kept in damp conditions or too close to a radiator as they can easily dry out and warp.

High-quality pianos hold their value well, so you might see it as an investment. The flipside is that you should be careful of cheap, used instruments, as a "bargain" is often damaged and expensive to repair. You should always get an opinion from someone with expertise before buying any instrument, but this is especially critical for used pianos. Also, if you're set on an acoustic piano but aren't sure whether you want to learn in the long term, there is a range of options available online for renting a piano or hiring out a practice room with a piano.

Acoustic pianos are available in two forms: grand and upright pianos.

Grand piano



A concert grand piano

This is the iconic, long, low, curved piano you may have seen in concerts or videos of famous classical pianists. The strings lie flat and are wound horizontally, giving the casing its signature shape. This means the hammer needs only gravity to fall back from the string, so the key pushes back on the fingers with an entirely natural feel. The high dynamic range gives a rich tone that rings out whether quiet or loud, in a living room or a large concert hall.

Upright piano



A Yamaha upright piano

This is the tall, rectangular piano that comes to mind when you think of a Wild West saloon or a blues band in a bar. The sound quality is similar, but since the strings are wound vertically, the hammer action requires springs, slightly reducing the dynamic range and feel. While a little less impressive, the smaller floor space and square back makes them more convenient, as they can be placed up against a wall.

What is dynamic range and why is it important?

This is the range of volume available to you when pressing the keys. Low dynamic range forces you to either thump the keys or barely hear the notes. A high dynamic range allows smooth transition between loud, quiet, and anything in between. Good control of your dynamic range allows you to play with real passion and emotion.

Take Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata." When played well, there are subtle differences between delicate and powerful notes throughout the piece. The best players have such good control over their dynamic range, they can even vary dynamic while playing multiple notes at the same time.

Other accessories

Bench/stool

Forget the keyboard players you see standing up. As a pianist, it is best to sit at the piano, and a bench or stool set at the correct height is essential. Larger, heavier stools remain comfortable for longer, but are generally more expensive. Make sure it is adjustable so you can set the height to allow for correct posture and sitting position. For more, see Chapter 3 - Proper Piano Technique.

Metronome (optional)

A metronome provides an audible sound (usually a click or a beep) to keep you in time with the tempo (speed) set by you. You don't necessarily need one, but it can help at the start if you find yourself slowing down or speeding up. Be careful not to get into the habit of always listening for a count, as it often makes it harder to keep time without it. Most keyboards and digital pianos have a built-in metronome, but if you go for an acoustic piano and need one, there are plenty of apps available online, most of them for free.

A quick buyer's guide

There is a lot to consider and the options can be confusing, especially if you are a beginner to all of the terminology. Don't worry, it will all make sense once you get learning. Just ask yourself the following questions and use the table below to help you make a decision:

What are my expectations towards sound, feel, and dynamic range?
(1-3)

What is my budget? (4)

Do I want to play other sounds (e.g. organ, electric pianos, strings)?
(5)

How much space do I have? (6)

Do I want to take my instrument somewhere else other than home to play? (7)

Am I willing to spend \$100-\$300 (€90-€250) yearly to maintain the instrument? (8)

What time of the day do I want to play / will I bother my neighbors?
(9)

1. Sound

Digital Keyboard: Good

Digital Piano: Very Good

Acoustic Piano: Excellent

2. Feel

Digital Keyboard: Basic

Digital Piano: Good

Acoustic Piano: Excellent

3. Dynamic Range

Digital Keyboard: Low - high, depends on key action

Digital Piano: High

Acoustic Piano: Highest

4. Price

Digital Keyboard: Cheapest (> \$100 / €90)

Digital Piano: Mid-range (\$500-\$4000 / €450-€3600)

Acoustic Piano: Expensive (> \$4000 / €3600)

5. Other Sounds

Digital Keyboard: A range of instruments

Digital Piano: Some keyboard options

Acoustic Piano: None

6. Size

Digital Keyboard: Smallest

Digital Piano: Smaller

Acoustic Piano: Large

7. Portability

Digital Keyboard: Easy

Digital Piano: Hard

Acoustic Piano: Very Hard

8. Maintenance

Digital Keyboard: Practically none

Digital Piano: Practically none

Acoustic Piano: Regular required

9. Noise disruption

Digital Keyboard: Silent (w/headphones)

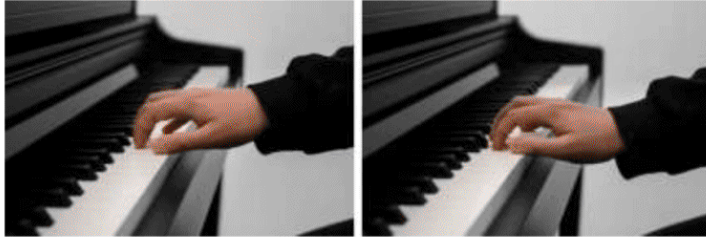
Digital Piano: Silent (w/headphones)

Acoustic Piano: Loud

Other instrument types

There is such a great variety of instruments that not all of them fit entirely into one of the above categories. For example, silent pianos are acoustic pianos that can be set to mute and then be played like digital pianos with — they are somewhere in between keyboards and digital pianos, combining a small casing with a good hammer action and playing feel.

So make sure to consider all options and get an expert's opinion before making your choice. There most likely is an instrument out there that is perfect for you.



Experiment. Play the key hard and hold it. Raise your finger slowly and listen to the soft sound of the hammer pulling away. Play hard again but pull away quickly and pay attention to the difference in the sound. Play soft and long, then soft but bouncing back gently.

Getting to know the instrument is a matter of seeing how it reacts in different situations. Just like people. It's not hard to understand why lifelong pianists see the piano as a friend. Move on to the next chapter to start playing your first melodies.

Chapter 2 - Piano Learning Methods



The best route is a piano learning method that suits you, and everybody is different. The “perfect” choice for your best friend may be totally wrong for you.

Think about your lifestyle. An unpredictable schedule needs a flexible method. Or if you never stick to things without a specific time and place, then you might suit something more rigid. Maybe you can’t travel to lessons, or you want to learn a style local teachers don’t offer, like blues or baroque. A tight budget can rule out the cost of weekly lessons, which adds up fast.

To simplify things we break down the three options based on:

Cost - Can you afford it? Is it worth the expense?

Expertise - Can it teach the techniques and styles you want to learn?

Flexibility - Can you learn when you want to?

Teaching approach - Does it suit your learning style?

Time - Will you have to travel? How long will it take to set up lessons?

Traditional lessons

This is probably your mental picture of a piano lesson, student and teacher sat side-by-side at a piano. The student is guided through lessons and receives instant feedback. The best teachers keep students motivated, tackling problem areas from different angles. This personal touch and adaptability are the biggest advantages of traditional lessons.



Traditional piano lesson with a teacher

The major difficulty comes in finding the right teacher to suit the student. It can take time and expense, but will be totally worth it if

you find the right combination. On the other hand, the wrong teacher can put off even the most motivated student.

Cost. A good, experienced piano teacher can be expensive - up to \$30-50 (€25-45) per lesson - but can be absolutely worth the money.

Expertise. Proper instruction through music you love will spark motivation, so choose your teacher wisely. Do they know the classical, jazz, rock, or the Phil Collins songs you're dying to learn? If they lack expertise in this area, then you run the risk of being pushed towards styles you dislike. If they know it well, learning can become a rewarding experience. If you want to become a classical concert pianist, then you will definitely need a concert pianist as your teacher.

Flexibility. Teachers usually set a time each week. This is great if you are busy and know that rigid timing will stop you skipping lessons. Unfortunately, the best are often the busiest and you may have to fit their schedule. If you are late, or can't make a lesson, rearranging can be tough and many still charge for missed lessons. The same goes if you want to go over your lesson time, as it can mean organizing (and paying for) another lesson in advance.

Teaching approach. Teachers often combine elements from established methodologies like Bastien Piano Basics, The Music Tree, or the Suzuki, and Faber & Faber methods. They are all tried-and-

tested, some of them designed only for children, and there are detailed explanations online. Good teachers always look out for new, better methods, and adapt to the student.

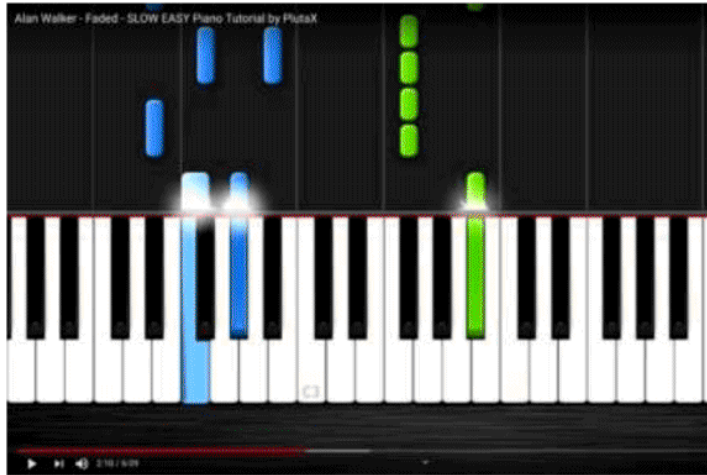
But the best teachers combine patient, clear instructions and adapt their style to you. They give you the most detailed feedback possible on your playing, help you overcome any difficulties, and have a long-term plan for developing your abilities as a piano player.

Get recommendations for a teacher, but bear in mind that a style that suits a friend may be wrong for you. Age, enthusiasm, humor and countless other factors define the experience. The best way to decide on a methodology, and a teacher, is to try a few lessons with multiple teachers.

Time. Take into account the time (and cost) to get to lessons (and back), to ensure you don't waste precious lesson time. Some teachers travel to you, but they often charge a little more. Also consider any delays from getting in touch to organizing and setting up lessons.

Video tutorials

YouTube made it possible to give online tutorials in practically anything. You can find an ever-increasing number of video lessons, but quality varies wildly. More professional options often provide supporting workbooks to guide you through a structured course.



Tutorial video on YouTube

Cost. There is a huge number of free tutorials available, while others charge a fee for the accompanying course materials. The free options range from talented tutors to amateurs giving questionable advice. It is often safer to stick with more established paid tutorials.

Expertise. The wealth of video tutorials available makes it easy to find one in almost any playing style, whether that is Ed Sheeran or Shostakovich. If you have found an online tutor you like, then branching out from their area of expertise can be difficult. If you find someone else for each different playing style, then be ready to experience a different teaching style.

Flexibility. Tutorials require nothing more than a laptop, phone or tablet, meaning that you can choose when (and where) you take lessons. Once you've found a video tutor you like, you can binge on

as many as you want as long as they are all available online at once. If you choose to learn using an ongoing series from an online source, then consider how regularly they upload tutorials. Long gaps between lessons can be frustrating and demotivating.

Teaching approach. Videos are one-way and rely heavily on instructions, so find a tutor whose style you like. A major downside is that the pace of a video rarely matches your own. If they are too fast or too slow, you will find yourself rewinding to find the correct spot, taking time away from playing. Pausing and rewinding is also necessary when you want to repeat parts, an essential part of practicing that you may find yourself doing over and over again.

Videos also lack any feedback. When you play along it is hard as a beginner to tell if you are going wrong, and players often fall into bad habits. Studies have shown that learning without feedback is slower and less effective. Also, without the motivational boost from knowing if you got it right, many video learners lose interest when things get difficult.

Time. Setting up a lesson is as quick as turning on your laptop, phone or tablet and clicking a link. But before you set your mind on a single tutor, again bear in mind how often they upload tutorials. Consider if they are worth the wait, especially if you are keen to progress fast.

App learning

We learn best when the learning method is designed for that specific purpose. So while YouTube videos are great as one-way communication, instrument learning apps have been designed to fit your needs as you learn that specific instrument.

There are various options available for learning piano, combining video tutorials with technology to provide adaptive feedback. Some apps “gamify” learning, while others take a more structured approach to learning through tutorials. Students stay motivated through consistent feedback and the ability to learn by playing their favorite music.



Learning with an App

Cost. Apps come in free or paid options, allowing students to try and

see if it suits them before choosing whether to pay a subscription cost - usually around \$80-150 (€70-130) per year. The subscription gives the student a wider variety of lessons, styles, songs and functionality to keep their lessons and practice varied and motivating.

Expertise. Apps, like video tutorials, can teach a range of styles and techniques from chords, reading music and playing techniques to music theory or improvisation. An app designed for young children will be heavy on children's music, while a niche app appealing to older players may be limited to classical pieces. The best apps have a large and ever-growing repertoire making it easy to find your style and to play the songs and pieces you love.

Flexibility. Like tutorials, you need nothing more than a laptop, phone or tablet, and you can choose when (and where) to take your lessons. This type of flexible, self-regulated learning suits many people better than an imposed time and place.

Teaching approach. Technology can never fully mimic the experience of human interaction. If you absolutely need a human teacher sitting next to you, then an app won't cut it. Apps do, however, solve the problem that video tutorials face by providing the feedback students need. Technology like interactive note detection keeps students motivated and on track, while a structured "learning path" guides students through the basics and monitors progress.

Time. Just like video tutorials, setting up and starting to learn on an app is fast and simple. Unlike videos, a well-designed app will improve on usability by including features like looping and interactive note detection. These take away the need to constantly pause and rewind a video, allowing you to focus on playing and practicing.

Cost

Traditional Lessons: Expensive

Video Tutorial: Low cost or free

App Learning: Low cost or free

Expertise

Traditional Lessons: Specialised knowledge of a few areas (usually)

Video Tutorial: Extensive range

App Learning: Extensive range

Teaching approach

Traditional Lessons: Highly adapted (if the teacher is good)

Video Tutorial: Instant, some waiting time for new content

App Learning: Instant

Time

Traditional Lessons: High travel/waiting time

Video Tutorial: Instant, some waiting time for new content

App Learning: Instant

Adult learning vs Child learning

If you are returning to the piano after learning as a child, you will probably have strong feelings about how you learned. Before you let these affect your decision, bear in mind that a range of research shows how different adult learning (andragogy) is from child learning (pedagogy).

As a child, you are entirely dependent on the teacher, often in combination with parents or other adults, to define the nature of learning. The motivation to take lessons and practice is usually external, especially at the start. In the worst cases they are motivated by avoiding punishment, but more often by the hope of a reward.

As an adult, your learning is self-regulated. You have nobody to answer to but yourself, so you need to draw motivation from internal factors like your own enjoyment and personal goals. You also have experience of how you learn best, with the freedom to choose your learning approach to make it as fun and rewarding as possible.

Whatever method you choose you can always change your mind or combine a few methods. For example, you could combine practicing songs from an app at home with traditional lessons to get detailed feedback. That said, try to stick to it for a little while before shifting approach. This guide sets you up with everything you need to start

learning, but the learning itself takes time and patience. In the next chapter we go over proper technique, to get you sitting at the keys, ready to go.

Chapter 3 - Proper Piano Technique



Playing with proper piano technique is not just about pushing the right keys. Everything from the way you sit to how you drop your fingers onto the keyboard will affect the sound of the piano. Correct sitting position and posture will allow you to translate energy from your entire body to the fingertips. Get it right and you can play with expression and a vast dynamic range.

It's not just about making good playing better. Incorrect technique makes playing more difficult, tiring, and it can put unnecessary strain on your body. Bad seat positioning or posture can cause pain or discomfort in the shoulders, neck and back. Improper hand technique can give you stiff fingers and limit your dexterity even away from the keyboard. If you have ever suffered after writing or typing all day, you will know what this feels like.

Fixing bad physical technique can be tricky, so it's important to develop good habits from the start. This chapter covers all elements of proper piano technique, from setting up your playing environment, to how your fingers interact with the keys. As you progress, it is a good idea to return to this chapter to continually adjust and correct your technique.

Bench and lower body position

It doesn't matter what you sit on as long as it is comfortable, solid and at the correct height for you. The best option is an adjustable bench or stool, designed for playing piano. If you are lucky enough to have a chair in the perfect position then this is fine, but it's very unlikely.

Place your bench/stool parallel to the centre of the keyboard, adjusting the distance from the piano so you can reach all of the keys with a comfortable hand position (see below). If you are using a grand piano bench, don't use the whole seat. Instead, sit or perch on the front half, allowing you the leverage to move your feet up and down on the pedals.



How to sit on the piano bench

Sit with your elbows aligned parallel to the keyboard, or a little higher if you want more leverage. This means adjusting the height. If you are using a keyboard and stand you can adjust the keyboard itself, but acoustic or electric pianos are fixed so you will have to adjust the bench/stool. If this is still too low, then you can add height with a mat or piece of carpet. It doesn't matter what you use, as long as it is comfortable but firm (no pillows).

Great pianists with bad habits

There are always exceptions...

Classical pianist Glenn Gould sat so low that he brought a tiny chair to concerts and recordings. Jazz legend Keith Jarrett played standing

up twisting his entire body.



Jazz pianist Keith Jarrett

However, this didn't stop them from becoming outstanding artists. But these are unusual cases. Make it easy for yourself, and your body, by doing it properly from the start.

Place your feet flat on the ground below your knees, not under the bench or off to the sides. Later, it will be important to move your feet freely from this resting position to use the pedals. Certain pieces use a lot of pedal work, so bear that in mind when getting comfortable.

If your feet aren't flat on the floor with your arms in the correct position, you can add height to the ground using a mat or carpet.

Again, make sure you use something comfortable but firm. A good angle for your knees is roughly ninety degrees, but it doesn't have to be exact.

Now your lower body is fixed, with firm feet and hips, it won't move much. Don't shift along the seat, but keep your position strong and reach out for the higher and lower keys. If a piece concentrates on one part of the piano, then it's fine to shift so you don't end up leaning over to one side. You might have to try a few combinations to get it right, but it'll be worth it.

Correct posture and upper body position

It is true that only the fingertips make contact with the keys, but your fingers should never do all the work alone. Your entire body is involved in playing the piano. Concert pianists who seem to make elaborate motions are playing with utter control. They are simply transferring energy from their entire body into the keys, so here we guide you on how to do the same.

Sit upright, back straight. Imagine a line all the way along your spine from your seat to the top of your head. Sitting like this may be tiring at first, especially if you are used to sitting on chairs that support your back. Don't worry, your core will get stronger very quickly, and the position will soon feel natural.

Relax your shoulders. Fight the urge to hunch or curve your spine. Your head is heavy, so avoid craning to look down at the keys. This puts pressure on your back and shoulders. If you hold tension in your shoulders as most people do, roll them over and back a few times, then let your arms hang loose by your sides.

Once you're comfortable, lay your hands either side of the center of the keyboard. Your fingers should be parallel to the keys, hovering somewhere above the middle of the white keys, close to the where the black keys begin (not on the edge).

Your elbows should be at a comfortable distance from your body, bent outward.

As you move up and down the keyboard with your fingers, your elbows should move along in a smooth, fluid motion. As your hands move apart and reach for the ends of the keyboard, your arms open up to a comfortable playing position. When you reach inwards, keep the wrists soft and let the hands turn in towards each other to avoid strain.

Relaxed and flexible wrists allow you to translate the weight of your arm into energy to play. Gravity is your friend here, so rather than keeping your wrist locked, keep it loose. It creates a more natural movement that will make your playing smoother, with greater

dynamic range.

Common mistake: stiff wrist and forearms

It's worth mentioning twice how important it is to allowing energy to flow along your forearms and wrist to your fingers. Stiff wrists and forearms take away your control over the sound and cause pain or even lead to injuries if it develops into a habit. Relax the wrist, use gravity to your advantage and imagine how your hands and arms would fall down through the keyboard if it wasn't there.

Look closely at your fingers. Imagine you are holding a small ball in each hand. Curl your fingers downward so that your fingertips tap on the keys. Your hand should be domed with rounded fingers like your knuckles are curling around the imaginary ball. If you are finding this hard to imagine, try cupping your hand over your knee, then lifting it onto the keyboard while keeping it in the same position.



Correct position of fingers and wrist

Your little finger (your “pinky” finger) is the smallest and weakest, so it is common bad habit to keep it flat. This will collapse your hand and stop you from building strength in the little finger. Instead, curve it like the others. As it’s shorter, you won’t be able to bend it as much, but that’s fine. Find a comfortable position with only the tip touching the key.

Your thumb is the exception to the “keep it curved” rule. Keep your thumb straight but relaxed, letting it drop down on the key with the side edge, near the tip.

Common mistake: buckling your fingertips

When playing, your fingers should remain rounded and firm. But

since it is not entirely natural to push down in this way, it is common for beginners to let their fingers bend back at the first joint. This “buckling” or “collapsing” will make your playing slower and clumsy, and it can do damage to the joint.

You can avoid this by strengthening your fingers using putty or grip strengthening tools, but mostly it is a matter of watching out for it as you play. Take care to push down the key using your fingertips, like you are tapping at a computer keyboard, and the finger strength will come with a little time.



Collapsed finger joints

Perfect key technique

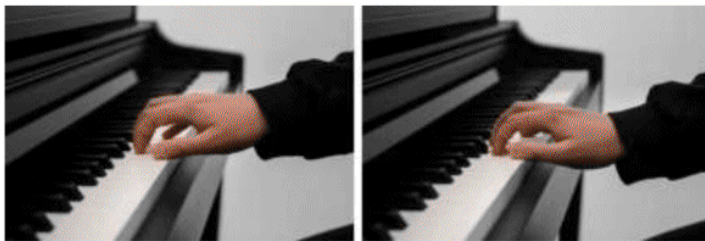
If you have seen players hammering the keyboard, every note the same volume and intensity, then you know what can happen if you

get it wrong. Imagine a world-class concert pianist, or watch a video. They have total control over the energy they transfer to the notes. Even if they move in exaggerated gestures, they can quickly move between soft and aggressive notes.

The technique

Pick a key. We will go over correct starting position in the next chapter, but for now, any white key around the centre of the keyboard will do. If you want to be precise, then find Middle C by following the instructions in Chapter 4 - Starting to Play Piano.

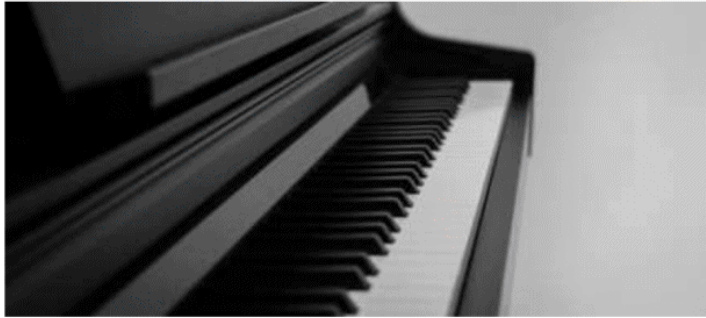
Remember your hand position. The left side of the thumb, near the tip, is touching the key while the rest of your fingers curl around an imaginary ball. Your little finger, wrist and elbow should make a relatively straight line. Now drop your finger to the key, don't hit it. When your finger drops, keep your wrist loose and let it fall a little. When you pull back up from the key, let your wrist move back to the starting position. This natural movement will make your playing smoother, less stiff, and allow for greater dynamic range.



Experiment. Play the key hard and hold it. Raise your finger slowly and listen to the soft sound of the hammer pulling away. Play hard again but pull away quickly and pay attention to the difference in the sound. Play soft and long, then soft but bouncing back gently.

Getting to know the instrument is a matter of seeing how it reacts in different situations. Just like people. It's not hard to understand why lifelong pianists see the piano as a friend. Move on to the next chapter to start playing your first melodies.

Chapter 4 - Starting to Play Piano



Starting position and orientation

Look down at the keys. Each of them represents a different note, moving from low to high as you move from far left to far right of the keyboard. To help you find your starting point, look at the black keys. You will notice an alternating pattern: groups of two and three black keys.

The keys are named after letters of the alphabet. Every white key immediately to the left of a group of two black keys is a C. Find the middle of the keyboard, and the C to the left of the group of two black keys. This is middle C, and will be your center point for orientation.

Once you have found middle C, place your right thumb on it. Remember the hand position above. The left side of the thumb, near the tip, should be touching middle C, while the rest of your fingers curl around the imaginary ball (or knee).

Now spread the rest of your fingers on the keys following middle C, assigning one finger to each of the next four white keys, which are D, E, F, and G. This is called the C position. It'll be your starting position for playing your first melodies. Ignore the black keys for now, we will come to them later.



C position with keys and letters

The other notes

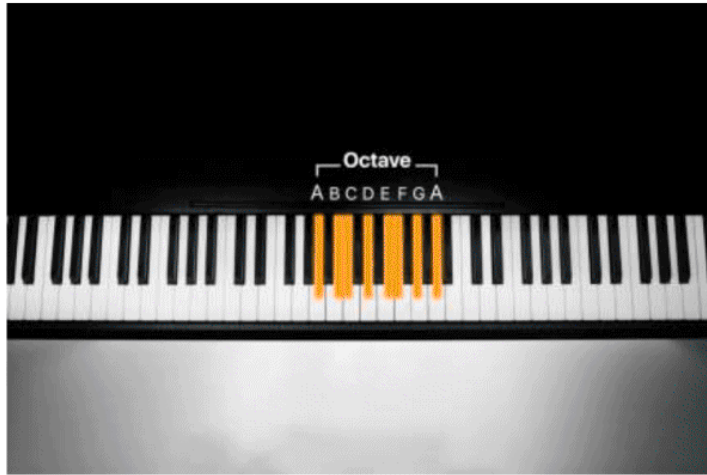
You will have noticed that the notes follow the structure of the alphabet. The same goes for the two notes below C (A and B). Since there are only seven different white keys, we only use the first seven letters in the alphabet: A to G. In other words, the white key that comes after G is an A, then the next is a B, the one after is again a C, and so on. Learning piano, we initially start on C and not on A because many easy songs for beginners can be played in the C

position with only white keys.

Correct fingering

In the C position, it is clear which fingers to use for which note. As you start playing the other notes, you might wonder about the correct fingering. In fact, there is no single correct fingering and it depends on many factors. But there are some best practices. If you're worried you might do it wrong, see Chapter 10 - Piano Myths and Common Concerns for a little more on this topic.

The eight notes from A to the next A make up one octave (from the Latin "octo"). If you experiment with playing the same note in different octaves, you will notice that they sound the same, only higher or lower.



Note names of the white keys

If you look up and down the keyboard you can see that each of the C notes is located to the left of the next group of two black keys. Similarly, each of the F notes is located to the left of a group of three black keys. Once you identify the pattern, or simply count up from the C notes, you can name every white key on the piano. The lowest note on most pianos is an A or C, but always use the middle C position to orient yourself as you will use that area the most.

Note on notation in other languages

The system described above is called English notation. It is by far the most widespread in modern day piano learning. However, if you are returning to piano after learning as a child in a non English-speaking country, it may be possible that you learned an entirely different notation. If this is you, see below for an explanation of how they

differ. If it is not you, then go ahead and skip this section.

Fixed Do notation

Students come across this method around the world, but it is especially common in ex-commonwealth countries and some performing arts schools in English-speaking countries. Instead of C, D, E, F, G, A, B, this notation uses Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Si. If you know the song “Do Re Mi” from “The Sound of Music”, this may sound somewhat familiar although it is not exactly the same.

German notation

This will make more sense when sharps and flats (black notes) are introduced later, and is mentioned here in case you learned with this method. In German notation the note B is referred to by the letter H. Also, the note that would be B \flat in English (the black note to the left of the B) is referred to as B.

Starting to play

Practice playing all five keys of the C position in order, one at a time, from low to high. Play each key firmly so the note rings out, then release before you play the next. Remember the technique we covered in Chapter 3. Try playing the notes backwards, or skipping

notes, see how it feels and sounds.

Experiment again with dynamic, playing these five notes harder or softer, holding them for longer or shorter periods. In the C position, your arm shouldn't move more than the slight drop of the wrist described in Chapter 3, so remember to keep it relaxed.

Playing your first melodies

We will cover the basics of written music later, but for now we will get you playing your first melodies using a basic form of notation. Start in C position, assign a finger to the notes from C to G, and play the notes written below, raising your finger from the key as you play the next. Hold each note for the same length of time, but when the gap is longer hold the note for longer. Don't worry if it sounds rough, this is more than enough to get you started.

The following song is a traditional piece called Aura Lee, which you may recognise as the melody for Love Me Tender by Elvis Presley.

C F E F G D G - F E D E F - - - C F E F G D G - F E D E F - - -

Congratulations. You just played your first song!

Want more? Try this simplified version of Beethoven's Ode To Joy.

EEFGGFEDCCDEE-DD-

EEFGGFEDCCDED-CC-

Congratulations again. You just played your second song and your first classical melody.

Chapter 5 - Reading Sheet Music (the Basics)



What is musical notation?

Music is a language. Like any language, music has a written form. It's about communication. Notation gives musicians around the world a medium to communicate. A composer notes down a piece of music with specific symbols, and if you can read music, you can understand it. They may never meet, separated by continents and centuries, but communication still takes place.

Humans have been writing music since we have been writing at all. Before notation, music was only passed on first hand, through performance, but examples of early notation have been found on tablets dating back as far as 2000 BC. Modern “staff notation”, the form we use now, was created by Catholic monks to standardise church music.



Piece for piano in staff notation

Communicating music has changed. Audio and video recording has progressed to the point where we can document a performance precisely. This adds depth and understanding, but does not take away the need for notation, since every performance is unique. In other words, the musical notation written by the composer is the only “perfect” record of exactly what they intended. The moment it is played, the music takes on a life of its own.

Why should you learn to read music?

People may tell you that learning to read music takes time and effort when you don't need to. Some incredible musicians never learned, and there are methods that teach you to play by ear, or using only chord patterns (more on this later).

Let's be clear: If you don't learn to read music, you limit yourself.

We challenge you to find a pianist who learned to read music and regretted it. But there are plenty who wish they had learned earlier. Like any language, you can get by without taking the time to read or

write, especially in the beginning. In the long term, however, being able to read music holds a range of benefits, and you limit yourself without them.

It's quicker than you think. This isn't strictly a "good thing". But if the only downside to learning is time and effort, it's worth stressing that it doesn't take that long. Notation may look like lines and dots on a page right now, but you will be reading and playing your first piece of music in no time. Work systematically, gradually build up knowledge of new notation, and you will be surprised how quickly you understand literally everything.

Sight reading. This is the ability to read a piece of music for the first time and play as you go, as easy as reading this sentence out loud. It takes time and practice, but eventually if you have the written music, you can play it. Since written music is widely available online, learning to sight read music gives you the ability to immediately play practically anything.

Reading removes doubt. Your "musical ear" develops naturally over time. But learning by ear alone requires training to identify notes, intervals and chords at an advanced level. This is a powerful skill, but even pianists who spent years developing their ear will have difficulty sometimes. It is especially tough to identify one note among many, or a rapid succession.

Say you hear a piece of music and you want to learn how to play it. If you can't read music, you need to slow it down, play over and over, and still be unsure if you have heard it correctly. If you read the music, you will know instantly what the notes are and how they are supposed to be played, ready to get on with it.

A permanent memory aid. Playing by ear means remembering everything you ever decided to learn. Written music offers a record of anything you have ever learned, or plan to learn. If you don't have a perfect memory, you can develop your own notation. But when there is a universal language already in place, why bother?

No boundaries. Just because you know how the composer intended it to be played, it doesn't limit you to playing it in this way. You need to know the rules before you can break the rules. Duke Ellington created jazz masterpieces based on Grieg's Peer Gynt and Tchaikovsky's Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy. But first he was note-perfect on the originals, which meant studying and building upon the composer's written music.

An alternative approach - Chord notation

Genres like pop or jazz are often less specific about what the backing instruments play, so full staff notation offers unnecessary detail. Instead, musicians just need to follow a sequence of chords. A chord is a set of notes that creates a specific harmony, with a naming system that tells you which notes to include.

Chord notation usually appears in chord charts, which give chord changes and sometimes add rhythmic notation. This is useful if you plan to play in bands, jazz or otherwise. If you go this route, we recommend that you still learn staff notation. Understanding both gives you flexibility, and allows you to use variations like lead sheets. These give the lyrics and melody in staff notation, but also gives the chord changes for a lead performer to follow.

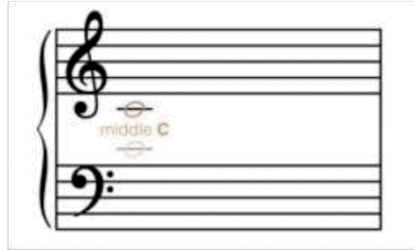
The image displays a chord chart and a lead sheet for the song "Greensleeves". The chord chart on the left is organized into three systems. The first system contains the chords C⁶, A⁷, D⁷, G⁷, C⁶, C⁷, F⁶, and F^{#4}. The second system contains C⁶, A⁷, D⁷, G⁷, E⁷, A⁷, D⁷, and G⁷. The third system contains C⁶, F^{#4}, C⁶, and E⁷. The lead sheet on the right shows the melody in staff notation with lyrics written above it.

Chord chart and lead sheet

Notation Basics

The Staff

Staff notation is structured around the grand staff: two staves of 5 lines and 4 spaces, connected by a brace on the left. The top staff is usually marked with a treble clef and typically played with the right hand while the bottom staff is usually marked with a bass clef and typically played with the left hand. Middle C lies in the gap between the staves, on an imaginary line. Just as it is the centre point for orientation on the keyboard, so it is on the staff.

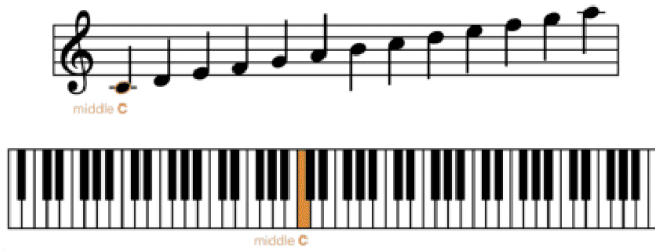


Middle C on the grand piano staff

The lines and spaces of the staves are home to various musical symbols, including notes. Notes can sit on a line or in a space. The height of the note determines the pitch. A higher line means a higher pitch, so moving up the staff represents moving right along the keyboard. We add ledger lines above or below the staff if a note is higher or lower than the 5 staff lines.

The notes

We'll focus on the top staff for now, the treble clef. Find middle C (see Chapter 4) on the keyboard and on the staff below. From here, follow the sequence of the musical alphabet (A to G) to name all the notes found on the treble staff. On the staff, the head of the note shows the pitch.



Notes on the treble staff

To avoid counting up from middle C every time, we can use memory aids to identify the notes.

The four spaces of the treble staff spell out “FACE”



Notes in the spaces

The five lines of the treble staff are EGBDF. We’ve heard “Every Good Boy Does Fine” or “Every Girl Boss Does Fine.” Use either of these, or feel free to make up your own.



Notes on the lines

Now that you can identify and locate notes of the treble staff, let's look at the C position on paper.



The C position in staff notation

The first five notes we played with our right hand are found in the bottom half of the treble staff. Our C is on the middle C ledger line, D is just below the first line of the staff, E is on the first line, F is in the first space, and G rests on the second line. Try playing them.

Note lengths

Moving from left to right represents moving forward through the music. Just as the position of the note tells you which key to play, the shape of the note tells you how long to play it. We will cover time

signatures, subdivisions and timing symbols in Chapter 8, but to get you started:

A whole note is an empty circle and lasts four counts.

A half note adds a stem and lasts two counts.

A quarter note fills in the circle and lasts one count.



Whole, half, and quarter notes

That's all you need (for now)

Now would be a great time to start practicing your reading skills by learning some of your favorite music. This is all you need to know to begin.