

Reading the Staff and the Four Clefs

A complete, ear-to-page lesson that helps students understand what clefs do instead of memorizing disconnected mnemonics.

Find the Note

TEACHER PLAN + STUDENT WORKSHEET

At a glance

Grade band	Grouping	Prior knowledge	Materials
Grades 5–12; adaptable	Whole class, pairs, individual	Higher/lower; musical alphabet	Projector, staff paper, markers, instruments or voices, Find the Note

Big idea: A staff shows relative height. A clef turns that visual map into named pitches.

Students will know they have succeeded when they can:

- Count lines and spaces from the bottom of a staff.
- Explain—in their own words—why a staff needs a clef.
- Locate the reference pitch named by treble, bass, alto, and tenor clefs.
- Predict what changes, and what stays the same, when one sounding pitch is displayed in different clefs.

Teacher preparation

Open the detector on a projected computer and confirm the microphone works. Select a concert-pitch instrument or voice. Prepare four blank staves. Do not label them with note names yet.

Launch: a map with no labels (7 minutes)

Draw two note heads: one low on a blank staff and one high. Ask:

“What can we say with certainty? What can’t we know yet?”

Accept “one is higher” immediately. If students name the notes, challenge them: “How do you know which clef I intended?” Reveal that the staff is a **map of pitch height**, but it needs a clef to establish named locations.

Listen first

Play or sing two pitches. Students trace an imaginary line up or down with one finger. Repeat with three-pitch patterns. This establishes that vertical movement represents audible pitch movement before notation enters the lesson.

Teach: four clefs, one system (12 minutes)

Number staff lines and spaces from bottom to top. Introduce each clef through its **reference pitch**, not a mnemonic:

Clef	Landmark	Where students commonly meet it
Treble (G clef)	The curl circles G4	Flute, oboe, clarinet, trumpet, violin, right-hand keyboard
Bass (F clef)	The dots surround F3	Bassoon, trombone, euphonium, tuba, cello, bass, left-hand keyboard
Alto (C clef)	The center points to C4	Viola
Tenor (C clef)	The center points to C4	Upper cello, bassoon, trombone

Model a reliable reading process:

- 1 Find the clef's landmark pitch.
- 2 Move one line or space at a time.
- 3 Say the musical alphabet forward when moving up and backward when moving down.
- 4 Check whether the answer makes musical sense for the instrument's range.

Avoid teaching mnemonics as the main strategy. They are slow, clef-specific, and do not transfer to ledger lines. Landmark-plus-interval reading does.

Guided investigation: same sound, different page (15 minutes)

- 1 Ask a student to sustain a comfortable note.
- 2 Let the class identify whether the pitch is stable before looking at the display.
- 3 Show the detected note in treble clef. Students sketch its position.
- 4 Change to bass, alto, and tenor clef without changing the sounding pitch.
- 5 After each change, students sketch first and then check.

Use these questions:

- Did the frequency change?
- Did the note name change?
- Did its vertical position change?
- What does that prove about the job of a clef?

Expected conclusion: The sound and pitch name remain constant. The written position changes because each clef assigns names to different staff locations.

Collaborative practice: clef detectives (12 minutes)

Give each pair four mini-staves, one per clef. Call a concert pitch such as C4, G4, or F3. One student places the note; the other explains the route from the clef landmark. Partners switch roles for every pitch.

Award a point only when the explanation includes both the landmark and the counted steps. Accuracy without reasoning does not earn the point.

Support

- Mark the clef's reference line in blue.
- Provide an A–G alphabet strip that can be read in either direction.
- Limit the first round to notes within a third of the landmark.

Extend

- Ask students to choose the most readable clef for a given high or low phrase.
- Have advanced students rewrite a four-note melody in another clef without changing its sounding pitches.

Misconceptions to catch

- **“The bottom line is always E.”** Only in treble clef.
- **“Changing clef changes the sound.”** It changes the notation's reference system, not the sound.
- **“Alto and tenor clef are different symbols.”** Both are C clefs; their centers sit on different lines.
- **Counting from the top.** Staff lines and spaces are conventionally counted from the bottom.

Formative assessment

Ask students to respond without notes:

- 1 What information does a clef add to a staff?
- 2 Point to the reference line of each clef.
- 3 If the same concert C is written in treble and bass clef, which musical property changes: frequency, note name, or staff position?

Mastery: 3/3 correct with a verbal explanation for question 3.

Printable student page

Part A — Explain

- 1 A staff can show whether one note is higher or lower, but it needs a _____ to assign pitch names.
- 2 Staff lines and spaces are counted from the _____.
- 3 The treble clef identifies the pitch _____; the bass clef identifies _____.
- 4 Alto and tenor are both _____ clefs, centered on middle C.

Part B — Investigate

Choose one stable note and record it in each clef.

Sounding pitch	Frequency	Treble position	Bass position	Alto position	Tenor position
----------------	-----------	-----------------	---------------	---------------	----------------

5. What stayed the same?
6. What changed?
7. Write one sentence that begins: "A clef is necessary because..."

Exit ticket

A classmate says, "That note moved when we changed clefs." Respond in two sentences: one about what happened on the page and one about what happened in the air.

Answer key and teacher look-fors

1. clef; 2. bottom; 3. G4, F3; 4. C.

Part B depends on the selected pitch. Frequency and sounding pitch should remain constant; staff position should change. Strong exit responses distinguish **notation** from **sound** and mention that the clef reassigns staff locations.