Half steps & whole steps

A **half step** is the smallest move on the piano: to the very next key, black or white. Two half steps make a **whole step**.

LISTEN
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THE HALF STEP: THE VERY NEXT KEY

Count every key, black and white. A **half step** goes from one key to its nearest neighbor. Most half steps join a white key and a black key, but **E–F and B–C** are two white keys with no black key between them.

C → C♯ white to black



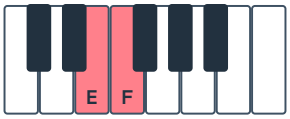
C, C♯ (1) = 1 half step

C♯ → D black to white



C♯, D (1) = 1 half step

E → F white to white



E, F (1) = 1 half step

B → C white to white



B, C (1) = 1 half step

This is the move a sharp or flat makes: **♯ raises a note a half step**, **♭ lowers it a half step**, and **♮ undoes either** (Handouts 06, 07 and 08). The key between C and D is both C♯ and D♭: one key, two names.

THE WHOLE STEP: SKIP ONE KEY

A **whole step** skips exactly one key, so it is two half steps. The key you skip can be black (C–D) or white (E–F♯). A half step is also called a minor 2nd, a whole step a major 2nd (Handout 05).

C → D white to white



C, C♯ (1), D (2) = 2 half steps

E → F♯ white to black



E, F (1), F♯ (2) = 2 half steps

C♯ → D♯ black to black



C♯, D (1), D♯ (2) = 2 half steps

B♭ → C black to white



B♭, B (1), C (2) = 2 half steps

Look-alikes: C–D and E–F both look like next-door white keys. A black key hides between C and D, so C–D is a whole step; nothing sits between E and F, so E–F is only a half step. Count keys, not white keys.

C W D W E H F W G W A W B H C

The major scale (Handout 09) is a recipe of these two steps: **W W H W W W H**. From C, its two half steps land exactly on E–F and B–C, the white keys with nothing between them.

ON THE STAFF: NEXT LETTER OR SAME LETTER

On the staff a step moves to the **next letter**: line to space, or space to line. A whole step always does (C–D, E–F♯). A half step usually does too (E–F), but it can also keep the **same letter** and add a sharp, flat or natural (F–F♯).

C → D whole step



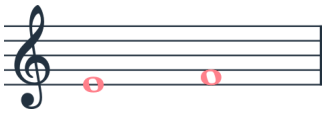
next letter

E → F♯ whole step



next letter

E → F half step



next letter

F → F♯ half step



same letter, plus a sharp

Try it Play every key from C up to the next C, black and white: **12 half steps**, the chromatic scale (Handout 49). Then climb from C in **whole steps** (skip one key each time): you reach C again in six moves. Practice: **Exercise 52**.

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