Tissimo

LISTEN
Scan to hear every example
tissimo.co/worksheets/swing-eighths
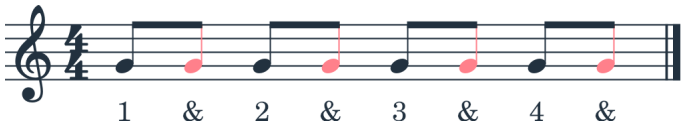
Swing Eighths

In jazz and blues, eighth notes are **written even but played long–short**. The first note of each pair leans and lingers, the second one hops in late. Nobody writes that out — it would be far too messy to read. Instead, one word at the top of the music tells you: **Swing**.

WRITTEN EVEN, PLAYED LONG–SHORT

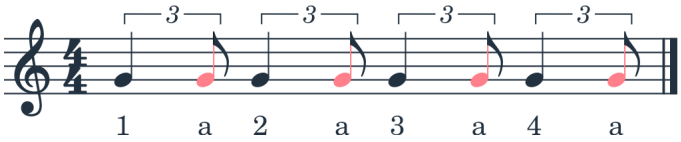
What you see

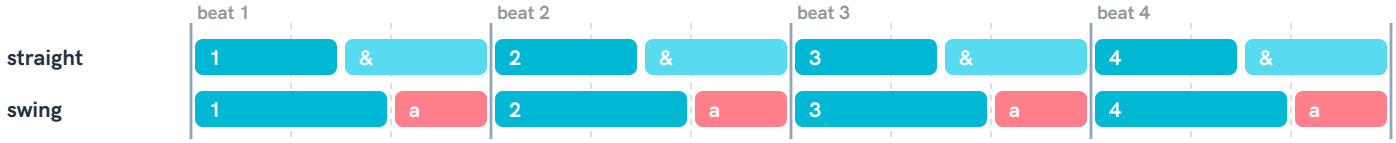
plain eighths, **two equal halves** of each beat



What you play

each beat split in **three**: long (2) + short (1)
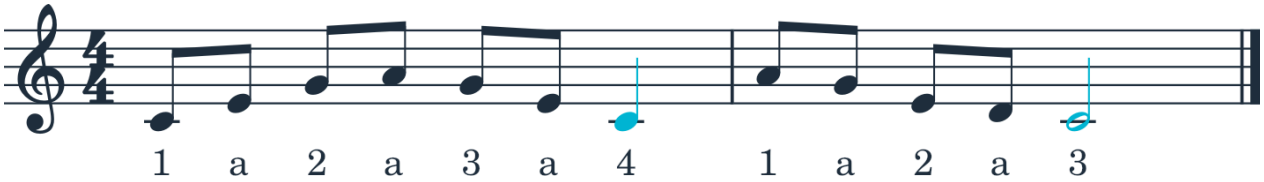




Each beat sliced into three triplet parts (Handout 46). Straight: the "&" lands halfway. Swing: it waits for the **last third**.

THE SWING MARKING — AND HOW TO COUNT IT



You will find this at the top of a jazz or blues piece, next to the tempo. Read it as **"every pair of eighths you see, play like a triplet quarter + eighth."** Often just the word **Swing** (or **Swung**, **Shuffle**) is printed — same meaning.

Count with **1 – a – 2 – a**: say "tri-pl-et" in your head and play only on "**tri**" and "**et**". Or sing **doo-bah, doo-bah**.



A two-bar riff on the C major pentatonic (Handout 73), written in plain eighths. Swing it: long on the numbers, short on every "a". Quarters and halves stay as they are.

SWING OR STRAIGHT?

Swing it

- **Jazz** — standards, big band, bebop
- **Blues** — the 12-bar blues (Handout 53), boogie-woogie
- **Shuffles** — some rock 'n' roll, pop and country songs
- Any piece marked **Swing** or with the marking above

Keep it straight (even)

- **Classical** — Bach, Mozart, Chopin, Clementi
- **Ragtime** — The Entertainer (Handout 208) is syncopated (Handout 69) but not swung
- **Latin** styles like bossa nova, and most rock and pop
- Anything marked **Straight**, **Even 8ths** or with no swing sign

The 2:1 triplet is the starting point, not a law. Real players swing harder at slow tempos and almost even at very fast ones. Let your ears and good recordings be the guide.

Try it Set a metronome to 80. Play the riff **straight** twice, then **swung** twice, saying "1-a 2-a" out loud. Then play a C major scale up and down in eighths, first straight, then swung — same notes, a whole new style. Next stop: improvise your own swung riffs with the pentatonic (Handout 339) over the 12-bar blues (Handout 53). Practice by ear: Exercise 88.

© 2026 Tissimo. All rights reserved.