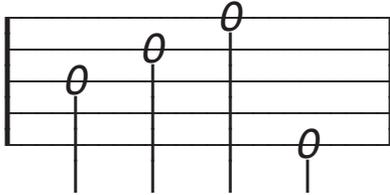


# HOW TO READ "TABLATURE"

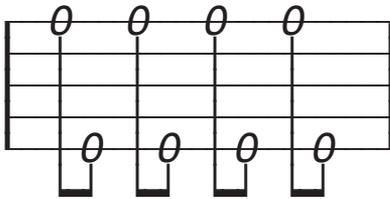
By Bradley Laird [www.bradleylaird.com/claw](http://www.bradleylaird.com/claw)

Tablature is the most common method used to write music for clawhammer banjo. The tablature tells you which strings to strike with your right hand and it tells you when to pick the notes. It also tells you where the left hand fingers are used on the fingerboard. Read through this but don't worry too much about being able to play what is written. We will get to playing the banjo shortly. For now I just want to explain the basics of reading tablature.

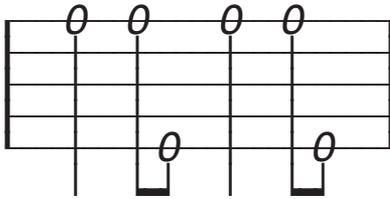
Tablature (Tab for short) is written on a staff of five horizontal lines. Each line represents a string on the banjo. The top line represents the 1st string (the string closest to the floor) and the bottom line represents the short 5th string.



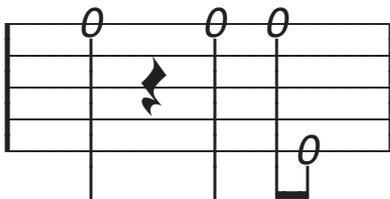
The zeros indicate that a string is played "open" or not fretted by the left hand. We can see in this example that there are 4 notes and we will play them from left to right which is the direction of time passage in tablature. You can see that the tab is telling you to pick the 3rd string, then the 2nd string, then the 1st string, then the 5th string. In clawhammer style you'll use the nail of your index (or middle) finger to pluck strings 1, 2, 3, and 4. You'll always pick the short 5th string with your right thumb. We'll talk more about how to pick notes later. This first example shows four quarter notes.



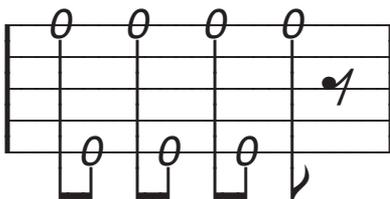
There are vertical lines which divide the staff into "measures" (sometimes called "bars") and you should remember that all measures are the same length of time. In most cases every measure will be four quarter notes in length. This measure contains eight notes. 8th notes are half the time length of a quarter note. 8th notes can be recognized because they are connected together.



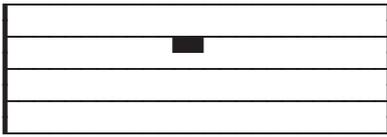
In this example we see a combination of quarter notes and 8th notes. Remember that a quarter note lasts twice as long as an 8th note so this measure fills the same length of time as the other two measures. You will encounter various combinations of quarter and 8th notes as you learn the tunes. Remember that the right index (or middle) finger plays all the notes, except the 5th string which is always played by the thumb.



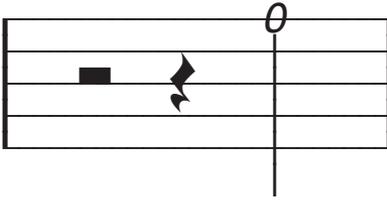
The quarter note and the 8th note are the two most common length notes you will play on the banjo. Sometimes, however, we want silence for a moment. Each time-value note has a corresponding "rest" symbol. Here we see a combination of quarter notes, a quarter rest, and an 8th note. This still adds up to the same length of time as the other examples. The rests are simply silent notes.



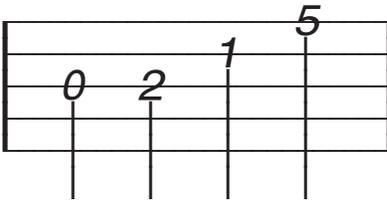
Here we see a group of 8th notes with an "8th rest". An 8th rest is simply a silent 8th note. Notice that the 7th note in the measure has a little flag attached to it's stem. This is what a "stand-alone" 8th note looks like. 8th notes can be connected to their neighboring 8th notes or, if standing alone, be identified by the little flag.



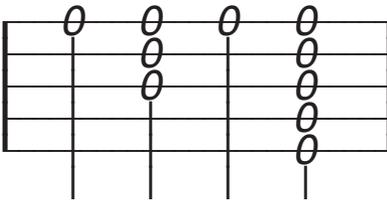
In this example we see a "whole rest" which is a completely silent measure. It is equal in time to 4 quarter notes. You will not see these very often. But, if you do, you just count time and play nothing for one measure.



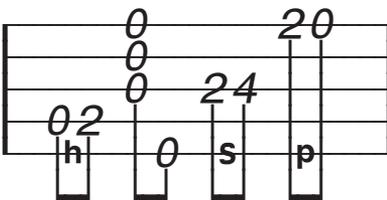
This example shows a "half rest" which is a half-measure of silence. (Two quarter notes worth of time.) It is followed by a quarter rest and a lone quarter note. This means that the first three "notes" are silent quarter notes followed by one quarter note played on the 1st string.



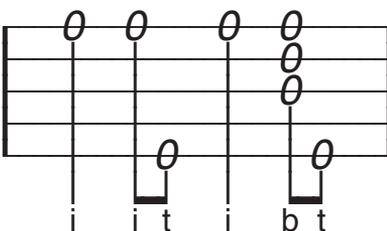
Up to this point we have seen only "zeroes" which mean the string is played "open". When you see other numbers, such as 1, 2, 3, etc. it means you will hold the string down at that fret while you pick the string. This example shows an open 3rd string, the 3rd string played at the 2nd fret, the 2nd string played at the 1st fret, and the 1st string played at the 5th fret.



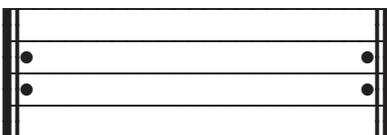
Since time passes from left to right in tablature whenever you see notes stacked up vertically it means that they are played at the same instant. This could be two, three, or more notes all played simultaneously. Sometimes you will see the letter "b" under a group of notes which means "brush". A brush is done by stroking all strings quickly with a downstroke of the right index (or middle) fingernail.



Here are three symbols for special techniques that we will discuss in more detail later. The "h" is for a hammer-on, the "s" is a slide and the "p" is a pull-off. Again, don't worry about trying to play these examples. We'll learn to play these techniques later in the book.



This measure shows the letters "i", "t" and "b" under each note indicating which right hand finger strikes the string. Very quickly you will learn that the 5th string is always played by the thumb ("t") and the index ("i") plays all of the other strings, therefore, you will soon be ignoring these markings altogether. Be aware that some players choose to use their middle finger to play instead of the index. That is completely up to you. I actually switch from time to time in mid-stride. The letter "b" indicates that you "brush" or "strum" the indicated strings with the nail of your chosen striking finger.



The last symbol you need to be aware of are called repeat signs. All measures enclosed by these double-dotted, double measure lines are played twice.