The Header

The header contains the various information fields (index, title, rhythm, key, meter, etc.).

> • The first field of a tune is always the X: field
> • Each field in the header occurs on a new line
> • The last field in the header, immediately before the notation of the melody itself, is

always the K: field

> • The X: index, T: title, M: meter, and K: key field are required: the others are optional.
> The header fields occur in the following order:

X:1	
T:Finnish Schottische	Title of Tune
T:Jack in the Green	Alternate Tune Title
M: 4/4	Meter 3/4, 6/8, 2/4, 9/8, C, C|, etc
L:1/8	Default Note Length
[other optional fields]	composer, source, rhythm etc.
K:G	Key D, Cm, Amix

(X:) Index field

This is the first part of the notation of an abc tune, and enables more than one tune to be stored in a file.

(T:) Title

T:Main Title

> T:Alternate Title

(M:) Time signatures

> Time signatures, or meters, like default note lengths, are shown as fractions in the M:
> field,
>> M:6/8
>> M:4/4
>> M:3/4
>> M:C   (Common Time)
>> M:C\| (Cut Time)

(Q:) Tempo

> Q:120 indicates the tempo as 120 notes of the default note length per minute.

> Q:1/8 = 120 can also be used, to specify in this example that the tune goes at the rate of

120 1/8 notes per minute, regardless of the default note length.

(L:) Note Lengths

> Abc allows you to set the 'default note length' for each tune. This is usually the most

frequently occurring note length in a tune and is set in the tune header in the L: field.
L:1/4, L:1/8 L:1/16

(K:) Key signatures

The key signature is specified by the K: field   K:C K:Am K:Bb K:Gmix

Keys and modes

Key Sig	Major Ion	Minor Aeo	Mix	Dor	Phr	Lyd	Loc
7 sharps:	C#	A#m	G#Mix	D#Dor	E#Phr	F#Lyd	B#Loc
6 sharps:	F#	D#m	C#Mix	G#Dor	A#Phr	BLyd	E#Loc
5 sharps:	B	G#m	F#Mix	C#Dor	D#Phr	ELyd	A#Loc
4 sharps:	E	C#m	BMix	F#Dor	G#Phr	ALyd	D#Loc
3 sharps:	A	F#m	EMix	BDor	C#Phr	DLyd	G#Loc
2 sharps:	D	Bm	AMix	EDor	F#Phr	GLyd	C#Loc
1 sharp :	G	Em	Dmix	ADor	BPhr	CLyd	F#Loc
0 sharps:	C	Am	Gmix	DDor	EPhr	FLyd	BLoc
1 flat :	F	Dm	Cmix	GDor	APhr	BbLyd	ELoc
2 flats :	Bb	Gm	Fmix	CDor	DPhr	EbLyd	ALoc
3 flats :	Eb	Cm	BbMix	FDor	GPhr	AbLyd	DLoc
4 flats :	Ab	Fm	EbMix	BbDor	CPhr	DbLyd	GLoc
5 flats :	Db	Bbm	AbMix	EbDor	FPhr	GbLyd	CLoc
6 flats :	Gb	Ebm	DbMix	AbDor	BbPhr	CbLyd	FLoc
7 flats :	Cb	Abm	GbMix	DbDor	EbPhr	FbLyd	BbLoc

The Body
Right after the K: field on the next line is the **body** of the tune.

The Notes

C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C D E F G A B c d e f g a b c' d' e' f' g' a' b'

Writing Note Lengths

Default note length 1/16 note (L:1/16)

A/ A A2   A3   A4   A6   A8   A12   A16

Default note length 1/8 note (L:1/8)

A/2 A/ A   A2   A3   A4   A6   A8

Default note length 1/4 note (L:1/4)

A/8 A/4 A/2 A/ A   A2   A3   A4

Rests
Rests are indicated by the (lower case) letter z. The length of rest is set exactly the same way as the length of note is,   z4 z/

Accidentals: Sharps, flats and naturals

__A2 _A2 =A2 ^A2 ^^A2

Accents and Ornaments

~A ~c .A .c uc vA uA vc

Grace notes

{g}A3   A{g}AA   {g}A{d}A{e}A   {gAGAG}A3

The notes within curly brackets have no fixed time value, so their length cannot be modified.

Slurs

(AA)   (A(B)c)   ((cc)d)   (c2|e4)

Ties

A-A   A-A-A   A2-|A4

The minus sign - should be used to tie two notes of equal pitch. The round brackets ( ) join two or more notes which are to be slurred, or played legato.

Tuplets

(2AB   (3ABA   (4ABAB   (5ABABA   (6ABABAB

Chords and Unisons

[CEGc]   [C2G2]   [CE][DF]   [D2F2][EG][FA]   [A4d4]

L:1/16

Guitar Chords

A   Bb F#   Gsus4   G/B   'Illegal' use of Chord Command

"A"A2   "Bb"F"F#"A   "Gsus4"Gc   "G/B"GB | "'Illegal' use of Chord Command"cdefgfedc

Order of Symbols
The order of symbols for one note is
<guitar chords>, <accents>(e.g. roll, staccato marker or up/downbow), <accidental>, <note>,
,octave>, <note length>,
i.e. ~^c'3 or even "Gm7"v.=G,2

Barlines
Barlines are denoted by the pipe symbol | .
A double bar is shown by ||, and by using the square bracket symbol as |] (thin-thick) and [|
(thick-thin).

Repeats
Start of repeated section |:
Rend of repeated section :|
Numbered Repeats |1 abc def:| 2 abc cbd||

Line ends and line breaks
The general rule is that one line of abc will generate one line music. Most packages will
however 'wrap' the staff of music onto the next line if your printed page width isn't big enough.

To make two lines of abc notation make one line of music, put a back slash \
at the end of the first line. (This may be over-ridden by the software if you run out of space.)

An exclamation mark ! placed at the end of a line of abc, sometimes will force the start of a
new line.

Parts
In the Body to indicated what part follows
P:A
P:B
Parts can also be indicated in the P: field in the tune header to indicate what order the parts
of the tune are played in for both human and computer players, eg   P:AABCBD or P:2(2A2B)

Song words
The W: field (upper case W) in the header can be used as many times as needed to record the
entire words of the song as a block of text:

W:MOLL-IN-THE-WAD (Mother Goose)
W:Moll-in-the-Wad and I fell out,
W:What do you think it was all about?
W:I gave her a shilling, she swore it was bad,
W:It's an old soldier's button, says Moll-in-the-Wad.

This form of notating the song words will produce the words as a single text block below the
tune, if the abc file is fed into a software package which generates standard Western notation.

The W: or w: field can also be used in the body to put lyrics below each line of music. This is
also handy for making inserting text on transitions etc.   w: will align words with notes

ABC Quick Reference

Header

Field name	Required	header	body	Examples and notes
C:composer		yes		C:Robert Jones, C:Trad.
D:discography		yes		D:Chieftains IV
F:file url		yes		F:http://a.b.c/file.abc
K:key	yes	last	yes	K:G, K:Dm, K:AMix
L:unit note length		yes	yes	Default note length L:1/4, L:1/8
M:meter	yes	third	yes	M:3/4, M:4/4 M:C M:6/8
N:notes (annotation)		yes	yes	N:see also O'Neills - 234
O:origin		yes		O:UK, Yorkshire, Bradford
P:parts		yes	yes	P:A, P:ABAC, P:(A2B)3
Q:tempo		yes	yes	Q:"allegro" 1/4=120
R:rhythm		yes	yes	R:R, R:reel
S:source		yes		S:collected in Brittany
T:title	yes	second	yes	T:Paddy O'Rafferty
W:words		yes	yes	lyrics after tune
w:words			yes	lyrics aligned with tune
X:reference number	yes	first		X:1, X:2
Z:transcriber		yes		Z:John Smith, j.s@aol.com

Body

Symbol	Example	How it's used
		Aced | fe	Bar line
||	Ge B2 ||	Thin double bar line
|:		Start of repeated section
:|		End of repeated section
[1 [2	gfe|[1 dfe dBA:|[2 d2e dcB|]	First and second repeats
|]		Thin/Thick end of tune
/	C/ d/	Half the time of the default note length
2 3 4	A2 b3 C4	Multiplier of the default note length
>	A>e	Dotted rhythm - the previous note is dotted, the next note halved
<	C<d	Dotted rhythm - the previous note is halved, the next note dotted
z	z2	rest
x	x	Invisible rest - won't show in printed music
^	^c ^B	Accidental - sharp
_	_B _e	Accidental - flat
=	=G =c	Accidental - natural
-	A2-A4	Tie notes of the same pitch
(2 (3 (4	(3Ace g2f2e2	Tuplets, triplets, quadruplets, etc
( )	(Abcd) (c (def) ga)	Slur (they can also be nested)
{ }	{aba}	Grace notes
" "	"Gm"	Guitar Chord
[ ]	[a2C2E2]	chord
~	~A2	General ornamentation - player's choice
.	.G2 .b.c.e	Staccato
u	uBcA	upbow
v	VGBd vAuBvA	downbow
!	Abcd efga|!	Forces the next measure to a new line in print
\	Abcd efga|\	Keeps the next measure on the same line
%		Causes the remainder of the input line to be ignored

Links to get you started

The abc Homepage Chris Walshaw's http://www.gre.ac.uk/~c.walshaw/abc/

How to interpret abc music notation a tutorial by Steve Mansfield
http://www.lesession.co.uk/abc/abc_notation.htm

The abc standard V1.6 The standard currently in use
http://www.gre.ac.uk/~c.walshaw/abc2mtex/abc.txt

The abc standard V2.0 The draft of the next version. Contains great information for the
advanced user. http://abc.sourceforge.net/standard/abc2-draft.html

abc examples This page contains a whole series of abc examples starting from notes, beams,
etc right through to some fairly complex tunes.
http://www.gre.ac.uk/~c.walshaw/abc/examples/

Barfly The fabulous Macintosh abc notation software from Phil Taylor. Worth every penny to
upgrade from the free version to the registered version. http://www.barfly.dial.pipex.com/

iabc a Windows graphical application for editing music using the ABC music notation language. Not as
developed as Barfly, but still useful. http://abc.sourceforge.net/iabc/index.html

ABC Format Music Sites page o' links http://www.freesheetmusic.net/abc.html

John Chamber's **ABC Tune Finder** is an index of all abc tunes on the web - my second home.
http://trillian.mit.edu/~jc/music/abc/findtune.html

Tune collections on the Internet a big ol' list o' links of tunes in gif, jpg, pdf, tif and abc format
 http://www.library.yale.edu/~mkoth/webtunes.htm

Can't find what you're looking for? Email me : Ladysmyth@rcn.com

Down the Brae

X:1
T:Down the Brae
M:C
R:March
L:1/4
K:Am
E|"Am"A>GAB|c>Bcd|"C"e2a2|ge2d|"Am"c>Bce|"G"dBGA|"Em"B2A2|GE2E|
"Am"A>GAB|c>Bcd|"C"e2a2|ge2d|"Am"c>Bce|"G"dBGA|"Em"B2A2|"Am"A2ag||
"Am"e2a2|a2ga|"Em"b2a2|ge2e|"G"d>cde|g>^fga|gede|g2ed|
"Am"e2a2|a2ga|"Em"b2a2|ge2e|"Am"cBce|"G"dBGA|"Em"B2A2|"Am"A4|]

Coleraine

X: 1
T: Coleraine
R: jig
M: 6/8
L: 1/8
K: Am
E | "Am"EAA ABc | "E"Bee e2d | "Am"cAA ABc | "E"B^GE E2E |
"Am"EAA ABc | "E"Bee e2d | "Am"cBA "E"B^GE | "Am"A3 A2 :|
|:B | "C"c2c cdc | "G"Bdg g2^g | "Am"aed cBA | "E"^GBG E^FG |
"Am"A^GA "G"BAB | "F"cde "Dm"fed | "E7"cBA B^GE | "Am"A3 A2 :|

Southwind

Ireland

X: 1
T:Southwind
C:Ireland
M:3/4
R:waltz
L:1/8
K:G
c2|"G"B3A G2|B2 c2 d2|"D7"A4 A2|A4 c2|
"G"B3A G2|"C"E2 D2 E2|"G"(G6|G4) c2|
"G"B3A G2|B2 c2 d2|"D7"A4 A2|A4 c2|
"G"B3A G2|"C"E2 D2 E2|"G"(G6|G4) d2||
"G"g4 g2|"C"g3f e2|"G"d4 d2|d4 c2|
"G"B3A G2|B2 c2 d2|"D7"(A6|A4) dd|
"C"g4 g2|g3f e2|"G"d4 d2|d4 cc|
"G"B3A G2|"D7"A3c A2|"G"(G6|G6)|]

Excerpted from The ABC Music standard 2.0 (draft IV, 14/8/2003)

11.4. Formatting directives

Typesetting programs should accept the set of directives in the next sections. The parameter of a directive can be an ABC string, a logical value '1' (true) or '0' (false), an integer number, a number with decimals (just 'number' in the following), or a unit of length. Units can be expressed in cm, in, and pt (points, 1/72 inch). The following directives should be self-explanatory

11.4.1. Page Format

```
%%pageheight        <length>
%%pagewidth         <length>
%%topmargin         <length>
%%botmargin         <length>
%%leftmargin        <length>
%%rightmargin       <length>
%%indent            <length>
%%landscape         <logical>
```

11.4.2. Font Settings

PostScript and PDF are the standard file formats for distributing printable material. For portability reasons, typesetters will use the PostScript font names. The size parameter should be an integer, but is optional.

```
%%titlefont       <font name> <size>
%%subtitlefont    <font name> <size>
%%composerfont    <font name> <size>
%%partsfont       <font name> <size>
%%tempofont       <font name> <size>
%%gchordfont      <font name> <size>  for chords symbols
%%annotationfont  <font name> <size>  for "^..." annotations
%%infofont        <font name> <size>
%%textfont        <font name> <size>
%%vocalfont       <font name> <size>  for w:
%%wordsfont       <font name> <size>  for W:
```
The specifiers $1, $2, $3 and $4 can be used to change the font within an [ABC string](). The font to be used can be specified with the %%setfont-n directives. $0 resets the font to its default value. $$ gives an actual dollar sign.

```
%%setfont-1       <font name> <size>
%%setfont-2       <font name> <size>
%%setfont-3       <font name> <size>
%%setfont-4       <font name> <size>
```

11.4.3. Spaces

```
%%topspace        <length>
%%titlespace      <length>
%%subtitlespace   <length>
%%composerspace   <length>
%%musicspace      <length>  between composer and 1st staff
%%partsspace      <length>
%%vocalspace      <length>
%%wordsspace      <length>
%%textspace       <length>
%%infospace       <length>
%%staffsep        <length>  between systems
%%sysstaffsep     <length>  between staves in the same system
%%barsperstaff    <integer>
%%parskipfac      <number> space between parts
%%lineskipfac     <number> space between lines of text
%%stretchstaff    <logical>
%%stretchlast     <logical>
%%maxshrink       <number>  shrinking notes
%%scale           <number>
```

11.4.4. Measures

```
%%measurefirst    <integer> % number of first measure
%%barnumbers      <integer> % bar numbers every "n" measures
%%measurenb       <integer> % same as %%barnumbers
%%measurebox      <logical>
%%setbarnb        <integer> % set measure number
```

11.4.5. Text

```
%%text          <ABC String>
%%center        <ABC String>
%%begintext
%%...
%%endtext
%%sep
%%sep           <number 1> <number 2> <number 3>
%%vskip
%%vskip         <number>
%%newpage
```
Notes:
- %%text is followed by text that will be printed verbatim.
- %%center prints the following text centered.
- %%begintext and %%endtext mark a section of lines that start in %%, followed by text. It's an alternative to several %%text lines.
- %%sep draws a separator, e.g. a horizontal line. If followed by three parameters, the line has *number 1* space above, *number 2* space below, and is long *number 3*.
- %%vskip adds *number* space.
- %%newpage starts a new page.

11.4.6. Misc

```
%%continueall    <logical> % ignore line breaks
%%exprabove      <logical>
%%exprbelow      <logical>
%%graceslurs     <logical> % grace notes slur to main note
%%infoline       <logical> % rhythm and origin on the same line
%%musiconly      <logical> % don't output lyrics
%%oneperpage     <logical>
%%vocalabove     <logical>
%%withxrefs      <logical> % print X: index in title
%%writehistory   <logical>
%%freegchord     <logical> % print '#', 'b' and '=' as they are
%%printtempo     <logical>
```