

Music Terminology

The musical terms that follow are just some of what you will see in written guitar music. Of course there are many more, but you need to know these ones. They come from many different languages, some that mean the same thing, and some are confusing I must admit.

A cappella - means an unaccompanied vocal
Accelerando or accel - means to gradually play faster
Adagio - means to play slowly
Ad libitum or ad lib - means to play at your pleasure (in your own way)
Allegro - means to play fast and lively
Allegretto - means to play moderately fast
Andante - means to play at an easy walking pace
Andantino - play slower or faster than a walking pace (slightly confusing)
Animato - means to play with animation
Arco - means to play with the bow
Assai - means "very"
Attacca - means to go on at once
A tempo - means to return to a former speed

Calando - means to get softer and slower
Cantabile - means to play in a singing style
Cantando - means to play in a singing style
Con anima - means to play with animation
Con brio - means to play with brilliance
Con moto - means to play with movement
Con forza - means to play with force
Crescendo or cresc - means to gradually get louder in volume

Da Capo or D.C. - means to repeat from the beginning
Dal segno or DS - means to repeat from the dollar looking sign
Diminuendo or dim - means to gradually get softer in volume
Dolce - means to play sweetly
Dolente - means to play sadly

Fine - means to finish
Forte or f - means to play loud
Forte-piano or fp - means to play loud then immediately soft
Fortissimo or ff - means to play very loud

Giocoso - means to play gaily
Grave - means to play slow and solemn
Grazioso - means to play gracefully

Largo - means to play broadly
Largamente - means to play broadly
Legato - means to play smoothly

Leggiero - means to play lightly
Lento - means to play slowly
Loco - means to return to the former pitch (after an 8va sign)
L'istesso tempo - means to play at the same speed

Maestoso - means to play majestically
Marcato - means to play in a marked style
Meno moso - means to play with less movement
Mezzo forte or mf - means to play moderately loud
Mezzo piano or mp - means to play moderately soft
Mezzo staccato - means to play short and detached
Moderato - means to play at a moderate tempo
Molto - means "very"
Morendo - means to let the music die away

Non troppo - means "not too much"

Perdendosi - means to let the music fade away
Pesante - means to play heavily
Piacevole - means "pleasant"
Piano - means to play softly
Pianissimo - means to play very softly
Piu mosso - means to play with more movement
Pizzicato - means to pluck the string with your fingers
Poco - means "little"
Poco a poco - means "little by little"
Ponti - means to play by or near the bridge
Presto - means to play very fast
Prestissimo - means to play as fast as possible

Quasi - means "almost"

Rallentando or rit - means to gradually become slower
Risoluto - means to play bold and strong
Ritard or rit - means to gradually become slower
Ritenuto or rit – means to immediately play slower or hold back
Rubato - means to play with some freedom in the time or tempo

Scherzando - means to play in a playful manner
Segue - means to play straight on, don't stop
Sempre - means "always"
Senza - means "without"
Sforzando or sf - means play a strong accent
Smorzando - means let the music die away
Sostenuto - means to let the notes sustain
Sotto voce - means to play softly in an undertone
Staccato - means to play the note then stop it
Staccatissimo - means to play very short and detached
Stringendo - means to press on faster
Subito - means "suddenly"

Tenuto or ten - means to play the notes for their full value
Tempo - means the speed of the song
Tempo comodo - means to play at a convenient speed
Tempo giusto - means to play at a consistent speed
Tranquillo - means to play calmly

To have your own music dictionary is a must, as I just can't put everything you need to know on this page because there just isn't enough room. Many people tell me that there is hardly a day where they don't refer to their music dictionary. By doing this you learn a lot.

Kevin Downing is a professional guitarist, teacher, and author.
To study with Kevin in person or over the internet visit www.guitar.co.nz
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