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Quarter notes ($1/4$ notes) get their name from the fact that it takes 4 of them to make up a bar of $4/4$ time. Hence the bar of $4/4$ is divided into quarters, each $1/4$ note represents 1 quarter of the bar, or one beat.

$4/4$ time (otherwise known as C "common time") is the most common time signature, therefore the numeric names for note values are derived from this time signature. The traditional European name for a $1/4$ note (the American name) is "Crotchet".

Although the numeric names (quarter note, eighth note, sixteenth note etc) may be more popular in contemporary music, in a sense they are an inaccurate description of the note value. Why? Well, if you were to play quarter notes in a bar of $5/4$, which has 5 beats in every bar, it wouldn't be representing $1/4$ of the bar, it would be representing $1/5$ th of the bar, except you wouldn't suddenly call it a $1/5$ th note.

Quarter notes usually represent the pulse of the bar, and other subdivisions like 8ths and 16ths are usually subdivisions of this pulse. Here is a bar with 4 x $1/4$ notes in it..

