Key Steps — Reading an ECG in 11 steps

A systematic read-through prevents missed findings: work through the same eleven checks, in the same order, on every tracing.

- [ ] 1. Step 1 — Check the details: patient identity, date and time, and the machine's calibration and paper speed.
- [ ] 2. Step 2 — Heart rate: calculate it from the R-R interval or the machine's readout, and confirm it yourself.
- [ ] 3. Step 3 — Rhythm: is each QRS preceded by a P wave, and is the rhythm regular?
- [ ] 4. Step 4 — Cardiac axis: work out the direction of the QRS forces from the limb leads.
- [ ] 5. Step 5 — P waves: present before every QRS, and of normal shape and size?
- [ ] 6. Step 6 — PR interval: measure it and check it is neither short nor prolonged.
- [ ] 7. Step 7 — QRS complex: check its width and shape for bundle branch patterns or abnormal Q waves.
- [ ] 8. Step 8 — ST segment: look for elevation or depression against the baseline.
- [ ] 9. Step 9 — T waves: check they are upright where expected and of normal shape.
- [ ] 10. Step 10 — QT interval: measure it and correct it for the heart rate.
- [ ] 11. Step 11 — Compare and conclude: set this tracing beside any previous ECG, then summarise the findings and escalate anything concerning under local protocol.

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Steps summarise this demonstration for education and do not replace your institution's protocol, which always governs. Content reviewed by Dr. Mohamed Ibrahim, MD, PhD — physician-scientist. October 2026.