Key Steps — Reading an ECG — part 1: the waveforms

The first part of a classic ECG course: before interpreting anything, learn to name every wave and complex correctly. This checklist follows the lesson.

- [ ] 1. Start with the P wave: the first wave of each cycle, representing depolarisation and contraction of the atria.
- [ ] 2. Next identify the QRS complex, which represents depolarisation and contraction of the ventricles.
- [ ] 3. Within the QRS, name each deflection: Q is the initial downward deflection (it may be absent), R is the first upward deflection, and S is the downward deflection that follows an R.
- [ ] 4. A second upward deflection after an R is written R-prime, and a downward deflection after that is S-prime; prominent waves take capital letters, small waves lower-case.
- [ ] 5. Find the T wave after the QRS: it represents repolarisation (recovery) of the ventricles. Atrial repolarisation is not visible on a routine ECG.
- [ ] 6. Look for a U wave: a small upright wave that sometimes follows the T wave.
- [ ] 7. Practise recognising patterns — a small R with a deep S, a tall R with no Q or S, a complex that is entirely downward — until naming is automatic.
- [ ] 8. Master these basics before moving on: the later parts of the course build abnormality recognition on exactly this terminology.

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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.