SOFTWARE & TECH

How To Read A Eeg

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795582755618333

Introduction: Unlocking the Language of the Brain

An electroencephalogram, or EEG, is a non-invasive test that records the electrical activity of the brain. It is an essential tool in neurology for diagnosing conditions such as epilepsy, sleep disorders, brain tumors, and encephalopathy. However, the raw output of an EEG—a series of wavy lines on a screen or paper—can appear daunting to the uninitiated. Learning **how to read a EEG**is a skill that combines pattern recognition, knowledge of neurophysiology, and an understanding of common artifacts. Whether you are a medical student, a technician, or simply a curious learner, grasping the basics of EEG interpretation opens a window into the functional status of the brain. This article provides a structured, step-by-step approach to reading an EEG, focusing on the fundamental components that every interpreter must master.

The Fundamentals: Understanding EEG Waveforms and Frequency Bands

Before diving into interpretation, it is crucial to understand that EEG signals are generated by the summation of postsynaptic potentials from cortical neurons. These signals are recorded through electrodes placed on the scalp according to the international 10-20 system. The resulting waveforms are classified by their frequency (cycles per second, or Hertz) and amplitude (microvolts). The four primary frequency bands are:

- Delta waves (0.5–4 Hz): High-amplitude, slow waves normally seen in deep sleep (NREM stage 3) and in infants. In an awake adult, delta activity is abnormal and may indicate structural lesions, metabolic encephalopathy, or significant cerebral dysfunction.
- Theta waves (4–8 Hz): Commonly observed in drowsiness and light sleep in adults, and prominent in children. Focal or excessive theta in an awake adult can suggest focal brain injury or encephalopathy.
- Alpha waves (8–13 Hz): The hallmark of a relaxed, awake state with eyes closed. Alpha rhythm is most prominent over the occipital regions. It attenuates (blocks) when the eyes open or with mental concentration. Loss of alpha rhythm can indicate brain dysfunction.
- Beta waves (13–30 Hz): Low-amplitude, fast activity associated with active concentration, alertness, or anxiety. Excessive beta may be drug-induced (e.g., benzodiazepines) or a normal variant.

Additionally, **gamma waves** (30–100 Hz) are sometimes discussed but are less commonly used in routine clinical EEG interpretation due to technical filtering. Understanding these bands is the first step in answering the question of **how to read a EEG**, as the frequency content defines the baseline state and any deviations.

EEG Montages: The Lens Through Which You View the Brain

An EEG recording can be displayed in different montages, which are arrangements of electrode pairs. The choice of montage dramatically influences what you see. The two most common types are:

- Referential montage: Each channel shows the voltage difference between a single electrode and a common reference (e.g., linked ears or vertex). This montage is useful for assessing background activity and

global changes.

- Bipolar montage (longitudinal or transverse): Consecutive electrodes are paired in chains. This montage highlights focal abnormalities and phase reversals, which are critical for localizing epileptiform discharges.

When learning **how to read a EEG**, you should first examine the tracing in the standard longitudinal bipolar montage (often called "double banana") to assess symmetry and focal findings. Then switch to a referential montage to evaluate amplitude and field distribution. Becoming comfortable switching between montages is essential for accurate interpretation.

The Normal Awake EEG: Building Your Baseline

A normal awake adult EEG is characterized by a posterior dominant alpha rhythm that is symmetric, reactive (blocks with eye opening), and has a frequency of 8–13 Hz. The amplitude should be less than 100 µV. In addition to alpha, you will see low-voltage beta activity over the frontal and central regions. The background should be organized, with no excessive slowing or paroxysmal activity. Key elements to note:

- Symmetry: The two hemispheres should appear nearly identical. Asymmetry of amplitude or frequency suggests a structural abnormality.
- Reactivity: Alpha should attenuate when the patient opens their eyes or performs a mental task. Lack of reactivity can indicate encephalopathy.
- Sleep elements: If the patient becomes drowsy, you may see slow eye movements, vertex sharp transients, and sleep spindles (12–14 Hz) during stage 2 sleep. These are normal.

When you ask **how to read a EEG**, you must start by establishing what is normal for the patient's age and state. An EEG recorded during sleep in a young child will look very different from that of an awake adult. Age-dependent norms are an integral part of interpretation.

Recognizing Abnormal Patterns: Slowing, Spikes, and More

Abnormalities can be broadly divided into slow-wave abnormalities and epileptiform abnormalities.

Slow-Wave Abnormalities

Focal slowing (theta or delta) indicates a structural or functional disturbance in a localized region. For example, a brain tumor or stroke may produce persistent focal delta activity. Generalized slowing, on the other hand, suggests a diffuse process such as metabolic encephalopathy, dementia, or drug intoxication. Intermittent rhythmic delta activity (IRDA) can occur in deep midline lesions. The key is to note the distribution (focal vs. generalized), the frequency, and whether the slowing is intermittent or continuous.

Epileptiform Abnormalities

Epileptiform discharges include spikes (duration

- Look for phase reversals in bipolar montage—this helps localize the source.
- Note the frequency and pattern: isolated spikes, polyspikes, spike-and-wave complexes (e.g., 3 Hz spike-wave in absence epilepsy).
- Distinguish spike from artifact (e.g., eye blinks, muscle activity, electrode pops).

Seizure patterns—rhythmic, evolving discharges lasting seconds to minutes—require urgent recognition. They may start as focal spikes and evolve into generalized activity. Knowing **how to read a EEG**for seizures involves identifying the evolution in frequency, amplitude, and spatial distribution over time.

Artifacts: The Imposters That Mimic Brain Waves

No EEG reading is complete without a careful evaluation of artifacts. These are signals that originate from

sources other than the brain. Common types include:

- Eye movement artifacts: Large, slow potentials from the retina. Eye blinks create frontally dominant, high-amplitude slow waves. Lateral eye movements produce asymmetrical activity over the frontal leads.
- Muscle (EMG) artifact: High-frequency, low-amplitude "fuzzy" activity from contraction of scalp or facial muscles, often seen in the temporal and frontal regions.
- Sweat artifact: Slowly undulating baseline from electrolyte changes on the skin.
- Electrode pops or movement: Sudden, high-amplitude deflections that are not physiologic.
- External electrical interference: 50 or 60 Hz line noise that appears as a rhythmic, fixed-frequency artifact.

Misinterpreting an artifact as a brain signal is a common pitfall. The key to mastering **how to read a EEG**is to always ask: "Could this be an artifact?" Check the electrode montage, look for field distribution that does not follow neuroanatomy, and review concurrent video if available.

Step-by-Step Systematic Approach to EEG Interpretation

To ensure consistency, develop a routine you follow every time you view an EEG. The following steps are adapted from standard clinical practice:

1. Patient and technical data: Confirm patient age, state (awake, drowsy, asleep), medications, and clinical history. Check the recording duration, montages, and filter settings.
2. Assessment of background: Evaluate the posterior dominant rhythm. Is it present? Symmetric? Reactive?
3. Symmetry and synchrony: Compare left and right hemispheres. Look for asymmetry in amplitude, frequency, or the presence of activity.
4. Slow wave analysis: Scan for focal or generalized slowing. Note the frequency, persistence, and reactivity.
5. Epileptiform activity: Search for spikes, sharp waves, or paroxysmal patterns. Mark their location, morphology, and any clinical correlation.
6. Sleep features: If the patient slept, note sleep stages, spindles, K-complexes, and any arousal-related patterns.
7. Artifact review: Go through each artifact and confirm it is not cerebral.
8. Final impression: Summarize findings as normal, abnormal if specified, and correlate with clinical context.

By following this systematic approach, even a novice can build confidence in **how to read a EEG** reliably.

Special Considerations: Pediatric EEG and Continuous Monitoring

Reading an EEG in children requires knowledge of age-dependent maturation. Newborns have a discontinuous background (trace alternant) that gradually becomes continuous. The posterior dominant rhythm appears around 3–4 months and accelerates with age. Excessive delta or asymmetric patterns in children warrant concern for developmental abnormalities or seizures. In neonatal EEG, specific patterns such as burst suppression are associated with severe encephalopathy.

For continuous EEG monitoring (cEEG) in intensive care units, readers must be able to recognize patterns like rhythmic delta activity (RDA), periodic discharges, and seizure patterns. The ACNS standardized terminology (e.g., LPD, GPD, BIPD) is essential for reporting. Learning **how to read a EEG**in the ICU is a sub-specialty that builds on the same fundamentals but requires additional training in pattern evolution and clinical correlation.

Conclusion: Mastering the Skill Through Practice

Reading an EEG is both a science and an art. The science lies in understanding the neurophysiology, frequency bands, montages, and pattern recognition. The art develops with experience—learning to distinguish subtle asymmetry from normal variation, and authentic epileptiform activity from artifact. The systematic approach outlined in this guide provides a framework that will serve you well whether you are interpreting a

routine 20-minute EEG or a multi-day intensive care recording. Remember that every EEG tells a story about the brain's electrical activity. By learning how to read an EEG critically, you gain the ability to diagnose neurological disorders, guide treatment decisions, and ultimately improve patient outcomes. Continue to review sample EEGs, use reference atlases, and seek mentorship. With each tracing you read, your confidence and skill will grow.

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