

# TEACHING STUDENTS TO SIGHT-READ

by  
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I would be willing to bet that few teachers work on sight-reading with their students. In fact, some students may never have received a lesson on how to sight-read. Teachers often give this technique a back seat to such things as tone, vibrato, technical, and musicality development, but why? As many musicians know, this ability often separates the “haves” from the “have-nots” in performance opportunities. A teacher must give specific strategies for sight-reading development to help students progress in this important area.

## The Sacred Rules

The three sacred rules of sight-reading are: 1) *Total concentration*, 2) *Looking ahead* and, 3) *No stopping*. Students must be reminded about these items constantly.

Sight-reading requires total concentration. Musicians cannot be daydreaming, but must be focused on the task at hand. The mind must be clear before even looking at the piece to give it full attention.

Students who sight-read poorly often fail to look ahead. Many look at each note as they play it, thus making it difficult to prepare for upcoming problems. To help students experience looking ahead, try this. Select a relatively simple example for sight-reading. Take a note card and cover each passage a split second before the student plays it. Students quickly learn that they can only succeed if they look ahead of where they are playing. Remind students that wrong notes or rhythms cannot be fix once they have been missed, but looking ahead can help prevent future errors.

Sight-reading is *reading* at sight, not *practicing* at sight. Students must understand that they cannot stop for anything, but must perform the music, to the best of their ability, during the first attempt. Those who are encouraged to perform in lessons, with no stops, will find it much easier to sight-read without stops. Remember that one stop is equal to ten wrong notes. Stopping cannot erase an error, so keep moving forward and go on to the next challenge.

## The Seven Checkpoints

Players must know what to observe before they begin to play or the results can be disastrous. Here are seven things to check before starting. It should take only about 20-30 seconds to scan the music for these items.

1. *Tempo and style*-What is the tempo indication, metronome marking, and style indication? Do any of these change as the piece progresses?
2. *Meter*-What meter does the selection begin in? What type of notes gets the beat and how does this beat relate to the tempo indication and metronome marking? Are there any other meters used later in the work? How do these different meters relate to the original one?
3. *Key*-What is the key signature and what note is tonic? Is the key major, relative minor, some modal form, or atonal? Does the key remain the same or does it change? (Mentally finger the scale and hear it in your head.)

4. *Rhythm*-What are the basic rhythms used? How do these rhythms relate to the tempo and meter? Can you perform all of these rhythms or should you count some out first? (Any awkward subdivision changes, as from four sixteenths to three triplets, should be mentally tried before you begin.)
5. *Technique*-Where are the busiest technical sections, the blackest parts of the page? Are they made up of scales, chords, wide leaps, or unfamiliar patterns? (Quickly analyze them to make the performance easier and mentally or physically finger through any difficult passages.)
6. *Accidentals*-Are there any sharp or flat signs present? Do these indicate a change of key or tonality?
7. *Special items*-What other items are present that need your attention? (For instance, check for repeats and find out where they go.) Are there any instructive terms used? Does anything else in the music draw your eyes or are there any subtle, hidden items that might trip you up?

### **Practicing Sight-Reading**

Sight-reading must be practiced frequently to make improvements. Sight-reading should be included in daily practice sessions using medium-level etude books and pieces. Have students record sight-reading performances and listen to them to evaluate the results. Be sure they practice the *sacred rules* and review *the seven checkpoints*. A teacher can test students periodically by having them sight-read in a lesson and discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the performance afterwards.

Duets are another great way to practice sight-reading. The teacher must always keep going and make the student find the correct entrance spot after stopping for an error. Increased demands can be made by changing parts each line. Once the student gains confidence, change lines every bar. This really gets the student looking ahead. Of course, this same approach can be used by two students to push each other along in developing better sight-reading skills.

Sight-reading does not get better without practice. Try these suggestions to help your students improve their skills.