

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO SIGHT-READING ON A KEYBOARD INSTRUMENT

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From my personal and teaching experience, keyboard or mallet percussion reading can be a huge hurdle to overcome. This article provides teachers with information needed to increase the reading ability of their mallet percussionists. Sight-reading is a skill, and like any other skill, needs to be developed over time. I have broken down a simple sight-reading guide to help get your students on the right track to success.

Compared to their other instrumental counterparts, a severe lack of reading skill is frequently common with percussionists. There are several reasons why this may occur, which may include a lack of tactile response while playing, inherent instrument specific techniques, availability and accessibility to instruments, variety of instruments to gain expertise, the need to memorize versus read, bar size differences between instruments, and the list may go on and on. The reasons can be expounded upon with another entire article by itself.

The 5 S's of sight-reading:

- Setup – the environment
- Sight – the visual
- Scales – the kinesthetic
- Study – the “science”
- Success – the final product (putting it all together)

Setup:

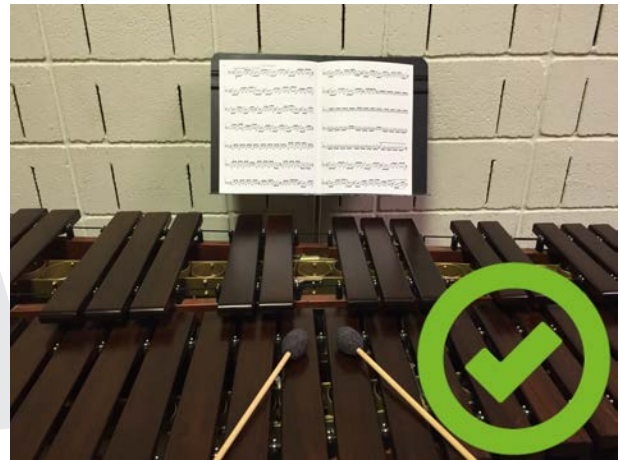
To ensure success you will need to make sure everything is in place before your students play a note for efficiency and ease. If the keyboard instrument height can be adjusted, place the height of the instrument where it is comfortable for the wrist and arms to move while playing. This spot is usually higher than the hips and lower than the waist or belly button area of the student. Just as you would tell a wind player to move the instrument to their body to play instead of bringing their body to the instrument, it is crucial to bring the keyboard instrument to the proper height. Take time and check the keyboard height to so that it is in proper playing position for each student.

For most percussion instruments having the music stand high and in the sight line of the conductor is beneficial. However, for keyboard instruments, it may be more beneficial to have the music low and near the keyboard instead up high (Example 1). Having the music near the notes you will be hitting will make it easier to see the music and bars at the same time (Example 2). The main reason for the low music stand will be discussed in more detail in the next section on sight.

Example 1



Example 2



Once the music stand is at the proper height center the stand and body so that the entire range of the musical passage can be accessed easily. Find the lowest note in the piece and place your left mallet on the bar and find the highest note and place your right mallet on that bar. Position the music and body in the middle of this area between your highest note (right hand) and lowest note (left hand). Do not default to the middle of the keyboard but spend some time quickly analyzing the music and finding the range needed on the sheet music. If the music uses a wide range or even the entire instrument it may be beneficial to set up the music where most of the notes are located. This will reduce the strain to see the music and reach to strike the notes on the instrument.

Sight:

Part of the equation for sight-reading is sight. Getting your students to trust their peripheral vision is a major component to sight-reading success. Here are some ways to check out the scope of peripheral vision:

- 1) Have the students stretch out their arms in front of them and with their index fingers pointed next to one another. While staring straight ahead and keeping your arms straight, slowly move your hands and arms in opposite directions to the left and right. Keep moving them until you can no longer see them and then bring them back into the field of vision.

2) To check peripheral vision on the Y-axis, place the index fingers pointed toward one another and slowly move one hand up and the other down while staring straight forward. Again, keep moving the fingers until they are no longer seen and then bring them back into view. This should be a nice range of peripheral vision that is needed when playing.

In application to keyboard playing have the students stare at the music, and move their mallets to the left and right. They should be able to see both the music, and the mallets and bars at the same time. (Example 2). As discussed in the previous section on setup, it is more beneficial to have the stand near the keyboard and not high away from the bars.

Remember to have the students look up while playing. They will feel very insecure about hitting the right notes without looking and they will want to look back and forth as much as possible. Think of the keyboard being the shining bright light of the sun. They can glance at the sun but be careful not to get caught looking too long or it will burn.

Next, get the students used to the layout and location of notes on the keyboard. Have them find and recognize the pattern of the two and three accidental bar groupings. This will serve as landmarks to find all the notes on the instrument. Some beginning keyboard method books start with the C scale (all white notes) while others use accidentals as the first notes to learn. Beginning method books also start with larger notation and note heads to make things easier to see then gradually move to smaller notation.

As your students improve in finding the notes on the instrument, they need to develop their skills in locating the notes on the musical staff. Do not allow your students to write the note names in their music. It may be a quick fix but will be a bigger problem down the road. It will only serve as a crutch where they will be reading their handwriting instead of reading and relating the note head to the keyboard bar. Instead, you can have them say the note names aloud while pointing to or touching the notes on the keyboard. Some method books come with the note names written in beforehand. If possible, I recommend blacking out the note names.

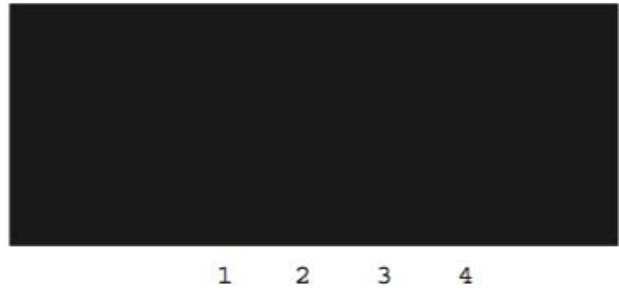
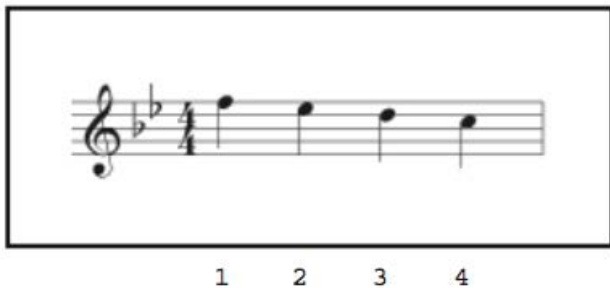
The next step is to start looking at bigger chunks of music, similar to the way you read words. You do not read each individual letter to say the word. You are able to take in entire words and even look ahead while reading. The same can be true when reading music. You do not need to read each individual note head or beat. Instead, take in the general line and shape of the music by taking a quick snapshot and moving your eyes

ahead of the actual music you are playing (Example 3). Think of sight-reading as short term memorizing. Taken from a clinic by J.B Smith, you can test this by having the student look at one measure of music then play it while covering up the music (Example 4). During lessons I sometimes follow along with an index card and cover up the music my students are playing. This keeps them looking ahead and moving forward with the music.

Example 3



Example 4



Other approaches to sight-reading:

- **Note by note** – most common and rudimentary way that we read
- **Phrases** – take in more than a note or a count but look for the overall length and direction of a phrase
- **Intervals** – notice the direction of the line but also whether it is stepwise or with leaps. Instead of saying the note names (A, D, E) look at the intervallic relationship between the notes (Perfect 4th up, Major 2nd up). This may be notes from line to line, space to space, line to space, or space to line. Look for common patterns that make up different intervals. An easy way to practice is to take simple melodies or etudes and transpose them to different keys. Also, try reading in other clefs (alto and tenor) to test if you are really reading by intervals.
- **Harmonically (analytically)** – Western tonal music works best for this approach but knowing your music theory will help recognize chords, scales, and musical motifs that will make reading easier. Finding chord progressions and harmonic motion will determine what notes will be used.

Scales (arpeggios, and stickings):

Just like using your sight or peripheral vision to hit the correct notes you will need to use your kinesthetic sense as well. Scales are great to build up muscle memory and are paramount in gaining facility around the instrument. Most pieces are written in a key that will serve as a guide to play certain notes and stay away from others. For example, if the music is written in the key of C you know that your mallet should not wander to any accidentals or black notes.

When practicing scales, it is beneficial to find many different variations to practice instead of the usual all-state patterns. Experiment with different groupings, intervals, patterns, Green scales (Example 5), and even use improvisation over the scale.

Example 5

The image displays five musical staves, each representing a different variation of a scale exercise. The first staff, titled "All-State Pattern", shows a standard ascending and descending scale in C major. The second staff, "Groupings (in 4's Hanon)", features a scale with notes grouped in fours. The third staff, "Intervals (in 3rds)", shows a scale where notes are grouped in thirds. The fourth staff, "Green Scales", shows a scale with notes grouped in a way that suggests a specific rhythmic pattern. The fifth staff shows a descending scale with notes grouped in a way that suggests a specific rhythmic pattern.

Example 6 is an exercise recommended by Dr. John Lane to gain kinesthetic awareness on the keyboard. The end goal is to make moving to any note in the scale feel natural and unforced. Arpeggios are also very useful for bigger leaps and help outline a scale that is being used. It will be very beneficial to learn various scales and modes to learn the shape of the line on the keyboard but can also work out some music theory. Again, play these scales and arpeggios while not looking at the keyboard. Look up or find something for your students to stare at on the music stand.

Example 6

Kinesthetic Exercise (John Lane)

Another fundamental area of concern is sticking. Sticking can be tricky on the keyboard percussion due to the tempo, direction of the line, intervals, etc. I highly recommend being able to play stick control and timing exercises using different stickings to help gain a better understanding of rhythm and implement facility (Example 7).

Example 7

Natural Sticking:

Alternating (RH Lead):

Alternating (LH Lead):

Double Sticking:

Success

You helped prepare your student with the other S's in the outline and now you are ready to tackle sight-reading. Here are some quick reminders as they read:

- Slow and steady wins the race
- Pick a tempo that works for the toughest or trickiest part
- Use a metronome
- Focus on the rhythm
- If the notes go up the staff go to right, if the notes go down go to the left (direction of line)
- Always look ahead
- Take in and look at bigger chunks of music (phrases)
- Continue through your mistakes. Do not stop until you reach the end.

Supplemental Resources:

Here is a short list of keyboard method books that focus on reading. Most are focused toward the beginner but some have a bigger scope for progress.

- Kite, Rebecca – *Reading Mallet Percussion Music*
- Eyles, Randall – *Mallet Percussion for Young Beginners: A Peripheral Vision Primer*
- Goldenberg, Morris – *Modern School for Xylophone, Marimba, and Vibraphone*
- Green, George Hamilton – *Instruction Course for Xylophone*
- Hickman, David – *Music Speed Reading*
- Peters, Mitchell – *Fundamentals Method for Mallets Book 1*
- Wessels, Mark – *Fresh Approach to Mallet Percussion*
- Whaley, Garwood – *Fundamental Studies for Mallets*
- Wylie, Kennan – *Simple Steps to Successful Mallets and More Percussion*

Below are some excellent resources to further develop sight-reading skills.

Speed Note Reading Tutor (<http://www.vicfirth.com/education/keyboard/speednotereading.html>) is an interactive online resource from Vic Firth. The web-based game goes through a methodical progression of learning and recognizing the notes on the staff and keyboard. The game has 10 different levels of difficulty that includes 100 different practice examples in each round. Students can challenge themselves at the rookie, pro, and all-star speeds. This is a fun resource to play and can be used with your students at home when they may not be in behind an instrument.

Music Theory Exercises (<http://www.musictheory.net/exercises>) is another web-based application that hits several areas of music. The website has games that test you over note identification, key signature, intervals, chords, and many more. You can fully customize what you would like to be tested over so you can target a particular skill or concept.

Sight-reading Factory (<https://www.sightreadingfactory.com>) is etude generator that is available online or through an app for your phone or tablet. This program is fully customizable with varying levels of difficulty of rhythm and range. The app creates etudes for the common band and orchestra instruments and is great for creating playing tests. The app is subscription based but has a free trial period.

Sight-reading Machine (<http://www.sightreadingmachine.com>) is another app that provides short etudes to read daily. Each customizable etude is very manageable and short to fit all on your phone or tablet screen. Although the app does not have percussion specific instrument options you can select other instruments in different clefs. A unique feature the app has is a built-in metronome with audio playback of the etude. The app counts the student in to keep the student going and working through their mistakes.

Practice Instruments

Access to instruments can be problematic for percussionists. Other instrumentalists often have personal or rented instruments they can take home and use. Percussionists, on the other hand, usually do not own all the instruments they will play, especially the bigger concert instruments. If the band room or practice areas are not available outside of class time it may be difficult for students to practice. Although the beginner bell kits or playing with your index fingers on a piano or electronic keyboard may suffice, there are other instrument options for your students to practice at home.

Several instrument manufacturers such as Adams, Adventure, Bergerault, Coe, Majestic, Musser, Premier, and Yamaha have created student practice model versions of various keyboard instruments that are worth investigating. Prices range from under a grand to about half the price of a professional concert instrument. Adventure and Coe Percussion make a full size practice marimba without resonators at a significantly lower price.

Conclusion:

Use this outline of the S's of sight-reading to make huge strides in your students' musical ability. Getting better at sight-reading is a journey not a destination. The more you get your students to invest into sight-reading the better they will become at it. Raid your music library and put anything and everything in front of them to read. Get their hands on other instrument method books (flute, trumpet, violin, etc.) and any percussion ensemble music. Guitar etudes make great four-mallet reading and beginner piano music can work as duet pieces. Sight-read as a class. Be creative with using class time to practice sight-reading. Show your students the importance of sight-reading by dedicating time weekly or even daily to this important skill.

For more information and ideas on mallet sight-reading please check out the list of articles and resources below. I also recommend visiting the FUNdamentals page on PAS.org. There are a wide variety of percussion topics that can help you teach and prepare lesson plans. •

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