

Sight-Reading Contest Procedures to Guarantee Success at U. I. L. or any other Band Festival

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Description:

How does U.I.L. sight-reading work?

Rules regarding this are found in the Constitution and Contest Rules, published yearly by U.I.L. It is the director's responsibility to stay current, as certain rules have been known to change over the years! The U.I.L. web site (<http://www.uil.utexas.edu/mus/index.html>) also has good tips. There are also some good habits that have grown up as the "urban legends" of sight-reading. These are things everyone does, although they are not rules. Hopefully, this set of guidelines can help you develop some of the good habits that result in successful reading of a piece of music, for any reason!

Foundations

Before you go to contest...

1. Practicing sight-reading should take place in some form throughout the year. Each time a new piece is introduced, read all or part of it as if you were at the sight-reading contest. This is not enough, however. A good band director must secure a few foundations that aid the process of sight-reading at UIL and make the students better musicians in the process.
2. Teach scales thoroughly. UIL sight-reading is most likely to be in the keys of Bb and Eb, but also may use F and Ab. Remember that the piece you read may actually be in a minor key or a mode! If you can find a piece with no key signature to read, you advance the skills of your readers!

Scales must be **memorized** early in the year and reviewed consistently in daily routines.

Teach students to identify "**danger notes**" in each key:

Key of Bb: A-natural	Key of Eb: A-flat
Key of F: E-natural	Key of Ab: D-flat

3. Lip slurs help brass players learn muscle memory and improves ear-training, resulting in placement of pitches in correct partials.
4. There are many fine books which drill rhythms and rests in short exercises. Most of these books start easy and get more complex. When you teach rhythm, use a system (I prefer Eastman) and have the students count all exercises in syllables, while fingering the notes on their instruments, before playing.
5. There are also books that address sight-reading in sequential fashion, going from easy exercises to harder.
6. If you use a book of chorales, reading those is a great way to teach the band to play in a phrasal fashion, and to follow the conductor, in case you have ritardando or accelerando in your music.
7. As the contest nears, go through the routine exactly as it occurs at U.I.L. It is advantageous to have a colleague act as "timer" and have the students turn the music face down until you are ready to start. Be sure to read pieces that change key and meter, and pieces that have at least one fermata (other than on the last note).
8. In the month that precedes U.I.L., read one or two pieces where the game was "no explanation at all!" Simply begin, and see how much they get right on their own, and how well they follow any changes in time, meter, style, and dynamic level. This can be followed by a discussion—"what did we miss?"

Preparation

Two weeks before contest...

Be sure the students know the following before getting on the bus!

1. Traditionally, judges expect students to be quiet and focused as they enter the room.
2. Be sure percussion know which student will play which of the major parts. In younger bands, the snare will likely be the most important part and there may not be a timpani part. There is almost always at least one mallet part, though it is often a part that can be left out if you do not have enough players to cover the parts.

In more complex levels of music, plan for: Timpanist (someone with independent security in tuning the drums); Snare; Mallets; Cymbals (both crash and suspended); Accessories such as triangle, woodblock, tambourine and gong; and Bass.

3. By the same token, be sure your students know how to divide into parts: Clarinets in 2 or 3 parts; Alto Saxophones in 2 parts; Trumpets in 2 or 3 parts; Horns in 2 parts; and Trombones in 2 or 3 parts.

Then you only have to say "trumpets in 2 parts, clarinets in 2 parts" and they know which part to get.

4. Teach your students a very specific way to phrase questions to you about music.

Waste of Time:

“Uh, our part has this natural sign, does that go for the tie across to the next bar in measure 38?” Read that and time it. Note how many seconds go by while you are waiting on the student to say which measure is in question!

Efficient Way:

“Measure 38—does the natural sign go for the tie across to the next bar?” The director begins turning to measure 38 while the rest of the question is being spoken.

If there are no measure numbers for each individual measure, teach them this system: begin the question with “In front of measure...” or “After measure....”

Examples:

“In front of measure 38, nine measures, (this gives you time to find 38 first, your starting place, then you can count back nine bars) are all of the eighth notes staccato?”

“After measure 55, six measures, how does our rhythm go?”

This saves time in regular band rehearsal, too!

5. Decide when you want your warnings from the timekeeper. At least ask for a one minute warning before the general explanation time is finished, and one minute before the summary (final) explanation is finished. Remind the timekeeper to speak loudly! This is not a time for politeness—if they do not speak strongly, you may not hear the warnings.

Sight-reading Contest

In the sight-reading room...

1. When the students enter the room, have them orient their chairs just like your normal set-up. Hopefully, there will be a set-up crew that sets the chairs to your chart. If not, have students align to the center (leaving empty chairs on the outside of rows) and be sure they see you from the same angle they see you from each day in your band room.

2. When students turn the music over, the timing begins. Many good bands give the students the first thirty seconds to look through the piece themselves, while the director does the same thing.

3. Students should finger along as the director goes through the piece. Most good bands have the students “pop” the keys/valves loud enough for them to hear each other’s rhythm. Percussionists should “air stick” their parts. Mallet players can use their fingers to touch the notes in rhythm.

4. Use the “touch” method. Have them touch all symbols and events. Though I recommend that each player uses his/her own stand in band rehearsal, for younger bands, it is good to have instruments playing the same part sharing two to a stand in sight-reading contest, so you double your chances a student will point at the correct item.

“There is a fermata in measure 80. Touch it.”

“There is a dynamic change from p to f in measure 10, Touch it. We will play louder there.”

5. When you identify the key, have them finger through the scale: “We are in the key of Eb. Ready, go: (students finger up and down in rhythm). You can hear the keys/valves moving in time. “Finger the fourth note of that scale, concert Ab. That is your danger note in that key. Find the first three places that note occurs in your part, and touch them.”

6. Accidentals! I cringe when I am judging and hear a director emphasize accidentals, without realizing this: students are much more likely to miss re-occurrences of that pitch in the same measure or the change back to the key following the bar line than they are the accidental itself. After all, when they see the accidental, what’s the problem? It’s right there in front of the note! They will get that, what they will miss is the re-occurrence or the change back.

“I see several accidentals between measures 5 and 8. Look for re-occurrences within the measure and find the next place that note returns to the key after the bar line. Touch that and show your neighbor the fingering.”

Obviously, this is something you have to practice doing before the day of contest!

7. When your time is finished, ask brass to empty their water and reed players moisten their reeds.

8. Play concert “F” and hold it long enough so that reeds are vibrating again. The rules say you may play a note, a scale or the first phrase of a chorale. Any of these is fine, but be sure you have practiced your process many times in band rehearsal before going to contest.

9. Read, make music and enjoy!

Fred. J Allen was appointed Director of Bands at Stephen F. Austin State University in June 1994. In addition to his work with the bands, he also teaches conducting and music education classes. Allen has also taught at Abilene Christian University (1987-94) and in Texas public schools at North Richland Hills (1979-87) and Dimmitt (1976-79). Allen is a product of Music Education in the state of Texas. Before playing in the Longview High School Band of John C. “Pete” Kunkel, he was in the bands of Verna Covington and David Pennington in Austin and Don Turner, Paul Stroud and Jimmy Yancey in Longview. His undergraduate studies with Dr. Charles Trayler, then at Abilene Christian University, furthered his training in Music Education. Allen is a frequent clinician and adjudicator in Texas and the Southwest. Working as a clinician with bands from every age level keeps him current in trends in public school bands.

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