

# Sharpen the Axe

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Whether you're a first-year teacher or a veteran band instructor, you will probably agree that one of the greatest challenges you face is achieving a workable balance between all you would like to do and that which you are reasonably able to accomplish with your talent, staff, resources, budget and time constraints. Narrow this down to the marching-band season alone and you still have a formidable mountain to climb.

Should you write your own drill, hire custom arrangers and drill writers or use a pre-designed show? With so many options and variables within each option, it is difficult to discern the best route. What factors need to be considered? How can you be sure you've made the right choice?

Abe Lincoln once said, "If I had eight hours to cut a tree, I'd spend six sharpening the axe."

The same principle applies to planning a successful marching-band season. Before a flag is raised or lines are drawn on the field, it is up to you to determine the schedule, instructional style and regimen, as well as the type of field show that works best for you and the group over which you have charge. Director, "Know thyself!" It is easy to fall into the trap of modeling yourself after

the director who preceded you or the school across town, but such insensitivity to your own strengths and weaknesses is courting disaster. In order to hit the mark of success you envision, you must first ask yourself some hard questions. The following are prime areas to consider:

The size and capabilities of your staff can be a prominent factor in determining the intensity and complexity of your field show production. Can you successfully teach this show to your students with the amount of staff and rehearsal time you have? Are you primarily a one-man operation? Would you be interested in watching/listening to this program? Does your group have the capability to maintain the complexities of this program? Does your group have the sensitivity to handle the amount of finesse required to perform this show well?

To write or not to write? How a field show is created and produced must coincide with what is most appropriate for the staff teaching and the students performing

it. The pros and cons of the many options must be carefully considered. A custom show may be commissioned, or a director may combine published music with self-written drill, buy a pre-designed show or fashion together some combination of these.

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If you feel you have the capability to write your own show, you must weigh the cost advantages against the time it takes to do so. Do you really want to sacrifice your summer vacation writing drill? Do you really have the expertise to express your ideas? Developing your own show ideas and finding

existing resources to showcase them is an inexpensive way to come up with a workable show package.

Perhaps, you have the resources and budget to hire an arranger and drill designer to create a show for your group. This often seems to be the ideal solution, but it, too, carries tripwires that should be considered. Do your arranger and designer understand your groups' capabilities? Will the arranger

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provide the drill writer material in enough time for the drill to be completed by your specified date? Will you be caught without a completed drill at band camp? Will the finished product reflect the concept and image you wish to have the students portray?

Another option for groups unable to hire their own arrangers and drill writers is the pre-designed show. This avenue may be considered a “last resort” by some and yet it offers several distinct advantages. Perhaps you have a limited staff and/or budget, or you would simply like to focus your attention on instruction and raising the level of your performances? A pre-designed show is generally a tested and proven product. It also provides all the tools you need at the outset of your season so you can focus on what is most important to you, teaching!

Many additional tools often accompany a pre-designed show, as well, such as flag choreography and drill videos, your drill on a computer disk which allows you to make size alterations easily. You may even consider a more difficult pre-designed show because of the increased rehearsal time available. Since you don't have to wait until the last minute to receive your drill or flag choreography, you have more time to concentrate on teaching your program.

Once you have determined how your field show will be created, you must prepare for and consider the instructional aspects.

A considerable amount of material is already available which focuses on the development of a good musical performance. Therefore, we will move on to highlight the basics of getting the most out of your visual program.

How do you create a visually stunning presentation? Generally, it helps to create a dramatic moment in at least two places in the show. Something should change in the show every 15 seconds (such as voicing, tempo, meter, color, direction, type of form, character, style, dynamic, equipment). Again, plan ahead and choreograph horn moves, hand moves and foot moves from the beginning of the season. It is often helpful to establish a small repertoire of six to ten moves and utilize them in various situations. Great dramatic effect can also be achieved with simple, yet effective, general effect “tricks” like a scrim, T-poles and backdrops.

Directors and staff can accelerate the learning curve with tools like drill charts for everyone, individual coordinate sheets, showing a videotape of the drill with music, if possible, and using markers or painting the drill on the field. Make use of as many available resources as possible to teach routines and basics, such as *Technique Videos for Band or Flags*. “Sharpening the axe” before your students take the field ensures a stronger product in the end.

Marching-band can be, and often is, the highlight of students' high school experience. Use it as a time to set a standard of conduct that will accompany them throughout their lives. Challenge students and staff to excel by “catching” them doing something right, encouraging and praising often. Follow these guidelines, take the time to “sharpen the axe,” and you'll have a successful marching-band season!

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