

# Let's Take the Nonsense (Syllables) Out of Rhythm Teaching

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What are Nonsense Syllables? These are mnemonic devices used to help students remember a rhythmic pattern. Many systems are in use, such as the "pie" system and using the word "trip-e-let." Although these systems may be useful before students have studied fractions in school, I believe that by continuing to rely on them past that time, music educators are seriously shortchanging their students by failing to provide them with the proper tools to understand and perform rhythm for themselves. In fact, thinking nonsense syllables actually prevents students from thinking the beat numbers in a measure. For this reason, students may be able to perform a tricky rhythm by learning it through nonsense syllables but they may not be able to perform it at the correct moment.

How often have you heard a student say, "I forgot how this goes, can you sing it to me?" Rather than using nonsense syllables to help students simply remember a rhythmic pattern, I recommend that we teach them to count using beat numbers and a system of syllables for beat subdivision. If the students are thoroughly trained to think all of

the beat numbers of each measure all of the time, far fewer errors will occur in counting long notes, rests, extended syncopated passages, and multiple measures of rests when performing in ensembles and while sight reading.

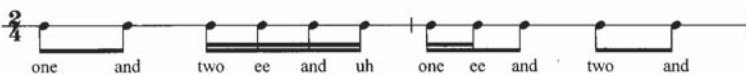
For simple meters such as 2/4 (in which the normal subdivision of the beat is into two or four notes), a commonly used system is that of "one and, two and" for eighth notes, and "one ee and uh, two ee and uh" for sixteenths. Combinations of eighths and sixteenths would include: (Example 1)

When triplets occur in simple meters, I recommend using an entirely different set of syllables in order to avoid confusion in performance with an eighth and two sixteenths. This is the same

subdivision that I suggest using in compound meters such as 6/8 (in which the normal subdivision of the beat is into three notes). In 2/4, eighth note triplets would be "one la lee, two la lee." Likewise, in 6/8 eighth notes would be "one la lee, two la lee" when counting the dotted quarter as the beat. (Example 2)

If sixteenth notes are to be counted, simply insert "ta" after the beat number or the "la" or the "lee" as needed, for example: "one ta la ta lee ta, two ta la lee ta. One of the most inaccurate rhythms in 6/8 is the dotted eighth, sixteenth, eighth pattern. Thinking each sixteenth and placing the sixteenth on the "ta" of "la" helps students to place the sixteenth properly. (Example 3)

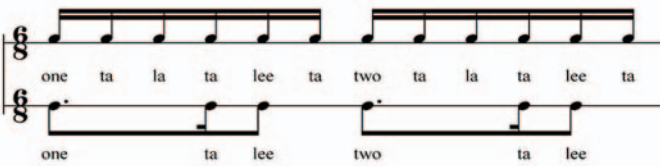
Example 1



Example 2



Example 3



## Let's Take the Nonsense (Syllables) Out of Rhythm Teaching

When counting compound meters such as 6/8 at a slow tempo (in six), the same syllables may be used that are used in simple meters for beat subdivision, “one and two three four five and six” as in this example.

Example 4



An approach that has proven successful with those students who are somewhat weak in rhythm skills is to have them write in counting syllables on rhythm work sheets, tap the beat with their feet and speak and clap the next smaller note value. In 2/4, this would mean tapping the quarter and speaking and clapping the eighths. Once this coordination is mastered, students advance to clapping sixteenths and then triplets against the foot tapping of quarters. Next, combinations of differing note values may be introduced. To represent a note that is being held more than a beat, students may clap on the beginning of the note, holding their hands together and making a short “dive” with them on each held beat. Beat numbers are whispered if rests fall on them. By whispering the beat number rather than speaking the word “rest” as is frequently taught, students do not mentally lose track of the beat number.

Another difficulty in simple meters for many students is mastering the dotted quarter and eighth (“one two and”) and differentiating it from the dotted eighth and sixteenth (“one uh two uh”). This is much easier for the student who is thinking beat numbers and the proper subdivision syllables.

More advanced rhythmic problems include triplets that last for half a beat or for longer than a beat, as well as duplets in compound meters. For sets of triplets that last for half a beat (such as sixteenth note triplets in 2/4), use these syllables: “one la lee and, two and la lee.” (Example 5)

For a triplet that lasts two beats, use the syllables of eighth note triplets: “one la lee, two la lee,” clapping on “one,” the first “lee,” and the second “la.” (Example 6)

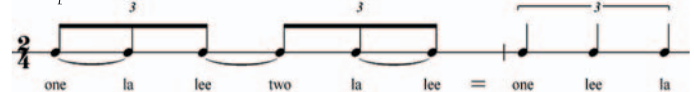
This method results in an evenly divided triplet across two beats, which is one of the more difficult rhythmic problems for ensembles to perform accurately. For duplets in compound meters, use the syllables from simple meters, such as “one and two and” for eighth note duplets in 6/8. (Example 7)

Once students have established the habit of thinking beat numbers and subdivision syllables, they should be able to apply it to their private lesson material and ensemble music. For some, this may require writing in counting syllables in the early stages. Although it may be difficult to change one’s teaching style, I believe that as conductors and private lesson teachers we must resist the temptation to simply sing any difficult rhythms to the students. Instead we should insist that they figure rhythms out for themselves by using counting syllables and clapping to their foot taps. If you feel that you must sing a difficult rhythm, try singing the pitches with the beat numbers and correct subdivision syllables, rather than on “la” or using nonsense syllables. In the short term, using nonsense syllables may make teaching rhythms in a piece faster, but it does not serve to help students become independent in sight reading or in learning new works for themselves.

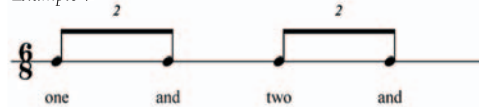
Example 5



Example 6



Example 7



*Dr. Carol McNabb taught for four years as a full-time double reed specialist for Brownsville ISD. She is currently assistant professor at Texas Southmost College/University of Texas Brownsville, where she teaches double reeds, music theory and aural skills.*