

# Sight Reading = Time Leverage for Ensembles

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Have you ever wondered what our ensembles would sound like if we had 20% more time to rehearse? One way to find out is to improve our ensembles' sight reading skills. A 5% improvement in sight reading skills will translate into a 25% increase in rehearsal time. The following suggestions will help us develop great sight reading ensembles.

***Make sight reading a regular part of musical learning.*** Sight reading should be part of every rehearsal. Many directors include a Sight reading activity as part of the warm-up routine each day.

***Divide and Conquer***—just as the warrior Attila the Hun split his enemies into two groups before engaging in battle, directors should focus first on rhythm then on pitch. In isolating these aspects of music, ensembles will develop confidence when encountering new music.

***“Own” a variety of rhythms.*** While teaching the concept of counting is helpful to students in reading music, advanced sight reading skill requires instant recognition of rhythms. Develop rhythm reading as a muscle-memory reflex by repeating the study of a given set of rhythms.

Many method books now have a specific rhythm sheet at the end of the book. Students should perfect these rhythms and “own” them so they can be played in any context. Just as multiplication tables are committed to long term memory, so must a basic set of rhythms be internalized for instant recognition.

***Learn melodic minor scales in appropriate key signatures.*** Pitch mistakes are most often the result of over reliance on the study of major scales. Regular practice of the chromatic scale can also help develop ensembles that read in a variety of key signatures.

***Practice “forward” thinking.*** As ensemble directors, we spend a lot of time analyzing what went wrong in previous measures. Some time should be spent encouraging students to apply all their musical energy to the notes that are about to occur. This practice of focusing 100% of our musical energy to the next measure or next phrase instead of using 25% of our mental energy to analyze and critique what has happened in previous measures is important to creating great performances as well as developing ensembles that can sight read well.

***Sight read difficult literature “caboose” style.*** Begin sight reading at the final section of a challenging work and read it to the end; then, back up to the last two sections of the work and read it to the end. Continue this pattern until the entire composition has been covered. I find this style of reading new material comforting to the players because the musicians are moving from the least familiar material to the most familiar material throughout the rehearsal.

In the sight reading adjudication room, ensembles generally do better than they think they will. At Festival of Music, it is rare for a sight reading ensemble to fall below the 85-point mark. I would encourage more bands to sight read because it is a real test of the music education of an ensemble. When sight reading for adjudication, remember to be confident. I prepare my ensembles for the sight reading experience using the acronym **“NO FEAR”** below.

**N**otice the details of stage deportment in the sight reading room. Details of entering, seating, tuning, and exiting are all part of the challenge. Try not to let

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the ensemble let down completely after the concert performance.

**O**rient students to the task at hand. Phrases like “Now we really get to test our musicality” or “I love a challenge” help focus the students on the excitement of the sight reading.

**F**orward thinking—get students ready to focus only on the measure ahead. Forget any mistakes that occur in the sight reading room in favor of keeping the musicians’ eyes and ears focused on upcoming opportunities for correct notes.

**E**ntitize the group. By challenging the group to work together, ensembles become more than the sum of their parts. In the sight reading room, the strongest link in the chain can often carry the entire ensemble through a challenging passage.

**A**ctivate students during music study time. It is important that students participate in studying the music during the preparation for sight reading. Have students sing, clap, or finger their notes in order to keep them involved in the preparation activity. A few comments by the director will suffice to orient the students to highlights of the composition being read, but getting the students involved in studying the piece is paramount to success in sight reading.

**R**egard the sight reading activity as a performance. I encourage ensembles to think of the sight reading experience as they would a concert. By focusing on the details of tone, pitch, articulation, dynamics, phrasing, etc., better sight reading experiences will result.

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