

Are You Ready for UIL Contest?

John Benzer

To read all of Mr. Benzer's handout from his recent TBA clinic, go to the TBA website or use this link:
http://apps.texasbandmasters.org/archives/pdfs/clinic/2015_benzer.pdf

After 28 years of teaching at both the public school and college level, I continue to realize how much time and organization it takes to successfully take a band to UIL Contest. Along with my University of Houston responsibilities, I am very fortunate to be working with students and directors in Texas public schools almost every single day. It is those experiences that allow me to offer some advice and suggestions as you begin preparing your ensemble for UIL Contest.

Eligibility

- Depending on your school climate and socioeconomic background, you must always be mindful of eligibility factors that could perhaps prohibit your ensemble from participating. In order to prevent last-minute eligibility issues, distribute a departmental progress report at least two weeks before the end of the 6 (or 9-week) and/or 3-week grading period. It may be necessary to give students--who are consistently ineligible--more than one progress report.....and even one for each week leading up to the end of the grading period.

- Target the students who do not turn in a progress reports AT ALL. These students are most likely failing multiple classes and do not want you or their parents to know.

- Do NOT allow students to EVER turn in progress reports that are incomplete. This usually means that

the student is failing whatever class is "missing."

- Be aware that students will sometimes get their progress report filled out.....except for the one class they are failing.....and will tell their parents there was a substitute... and will get their parents to sign the progress report anyway...and will return to school the next day to obtain the "missing" grade and signature—meaning that the parent has no idea their child is failing a class. Unfortunately, it then becomes your job to inform the parent that their child is actually failing a class.

Mentors, Clinicians and Pre-UIL Judges

- Particularly regarding MS/JH non-varsity directors: seek out advice from your co-workers, as well as your mentors/clinicians, regarding a borderline decision as to whether or not your band should go to UIL. This decision should be based on eligibility, numbers, and the probability of all remaining students having an educationally beneficial experience.

- When selecting music for UIL, reach out to your mentors/clinicians for advice regarding literature you are considering. Be prepared to offer as much information as possible regarding your ensemble's strengths and weaknesses (if they have yet to hear your ensemble), instrumentation, etc.

- Carefully go through and process the information given to you by anyone

who listens and/or works with your ensemble. Make new markings in your score (perhaps in a different color) to ensure that this "new/different" information is communicated to your students.

- Hold students absolutely accountable for any markings that you require them to add to their music. After telling students to mark something, the best use of your time is to walk around the set-up with your score and monitor that students are actually marking.....and that they are making accurate and clear markings. You must discipline yourself to make students mark something every day.... no matter if is a breath mark, an accidental sign, or something. If you do not, then students will never buy into the importance of being required to have and use a pencil.

- If, after going through either written or recorded comments from your Pre-UIL judges, you do not understand something that is communicated, do not hesitate to reach out and contact the judge.

Contest-Related Tasks

Of the many responsibilities you have in regards to things that have to be done prior to UIL, be mindful of a few very highly important things:

- Contact the director of the host school to identify which "end/lead" student will lead the group from the warm-up room to the stage...and also from the stage to the sightreading room (if different).

Are You Ready for UIL Contest?

- Contact the percussion specialist (or other director) to find out what the stage tendencies are in regards to percussion instruments and their balance to the wind instruments.

- A percussion check-list (battery as well as auxiliary instruments; beaters, mallets, etc.) must be created by your percussionists prior to not only UIL, but Pre-UIL. This must be double-checked by either you or your percussion specialist (if you have one).

- Especially when teaching MS/JH bands: it is paramount that, depending on the stage, you bring either furniture blankets/quilts, thick black mats or very thick blankets and/or carpet strips to put underneath your battery percussion instruments. Some sort of felt-covered “surface” or towels—for placement of triangles, various mallets/sticks and other small color instruments—which are to be placed on music stands/trap stands.

- For ALL students using mutes: thick, black towels should be folded in a square and placed on the floor in between students’ feet....not on the side of the chair!

The Day of UIL

- Depending on the time of your UIL performance—and administrative approval—you are encouraged to have a rehearsal before your school day begins. Is it at this rehearsal that you could perform a significant amount of daily drill exercises and appropriate “chunks” of your literature. You should definitely reserve time to sight-read one final piece. Most of us would agree that, even though it is early in the day, early morning sectionals and/or extra rehearsals can be VERY productive. Therefore, before-school rehearsals ensure that students are mentally engaged at a high level earlier in the day, and will raise the overall sense of urgency. Then—when you are actually in the UIL warm-up room, you will not run the risk of “over” warming-up your ensemble.

- Before leaving your campus, conduct a quick “inspection” of uniforms, instruments and related maintenance items, music binders/folders, mutes, etc. It is imperative that all single and double reed players have their back-up reeds with them. These reeds should be

totally broken in, as well as ones used in recent rehearsals and not simply “out of the box.”

- To calm younger students, it would be an excellent idea to have students silently study their music on the bus when you are halfway to the contest site. This would of course require them having their binders/folders with them on the bus.

Warm-up Room

- As students are getting settled in the warm-up room, give clear reminders for students to set their instrument lengths correctly...especially for brass instruments whose tuning slides have to be pushed in in order for them to fit in the moldings of the cases.

- It is a good idea to allow students to perform instrument-specific exercises (octave slurs, harmonics, lip slurs, scales, etc.) before you perform full-band exercises. If a rehearsal was done at school prior to departing your campus, you should only need to perform 1-2 basic exercises.

- As stated earlier, be cautious not to “over” warm-up your band; with that said, utilize non-playing techniques (positioning/fingering with air, saying note names, fingering without air, etc.) so that you do not have to physically play as much.

- Unless something sounds really “off,” do not spend valuable time tuning individuals.

Contest Stage

- Since the percussionists have been setting up either all or part of the time you were warming up the wind players, percussionists are allowed—and strongly encouraged—to play a few sounds on various instruments to become aware of volume, heights of instruments, etc. These students should be given strict parameters as to what they should play....and for how long...so as not to annoy/upset the judges.

- If chimes are used, they should be placed in a manner where they will be heard from the audience. If your chime players are not using your home campus chimes, they should check the position of the pedal.

Are You Ready for UIL Contest?

• It is our job as band directors to teach students how to correctly and professionally walk with their instruments. Many times, judges notice where bassoon bocals have been placed, how instrument bell and slides are protected, etc. Your entry onto the stage (as well as into the sight-reading room) should capture the judges' attention and be very organized, poised and professional.

• After being seated on stage, students are allowed to play "on their own" momentarily so they can get used to how they sound on the stage. Similar to percussionists, wind players should be given specific parameters.

• No matter whether you choose to perform a block concert F....a short articulation sequence....a chorale.... or an intervallic exercise prior to the announcement of your ensemble, be very careful not to expose things that you know do not sound good. Your warm-up creates the first impressions of the judges!

• Before your first selection (and between each of your selections), you are encouraged to conduct through the first few measures "off the podium" with your students. Their instruments can either be in an upright or lowered position. They are allowed to finger/position and even use air through their instruments, as long as the music is not being reproduced. This process is especially important with MS/JH bands, as it allows students to mentally prepare for a successful "start" to each piece. Percussionists should "air stick" and simulate their instruments with the rest of the ensemble.

• If, for example, a specific color/utility instrument is used on a specific piece, you can allow your band to again play "on their own" for 30 seconds or more before this particular piece. This allows the student to bring this newly added instrument to the correct temperature for performance.

Sight-reading Room

• It is very important that you go through the sight-reading procedures with your ensemble throughout the year—not just right before Pre-UIL and UIL Contest.

• Prior to the actual day of your contest, percussionists should be pre-assigned to specific instrument parts. Part breakdown and requirements can be found on the UIL website. "Extra" percussionists not playing parts need to be trained to "shadow" behind (if not right next to) the actual performer.

• As part of the many techniques you should teach your students, it is a very good idea for students to physically "touch" certain aspects of the piece as you are calling attention to something specific.

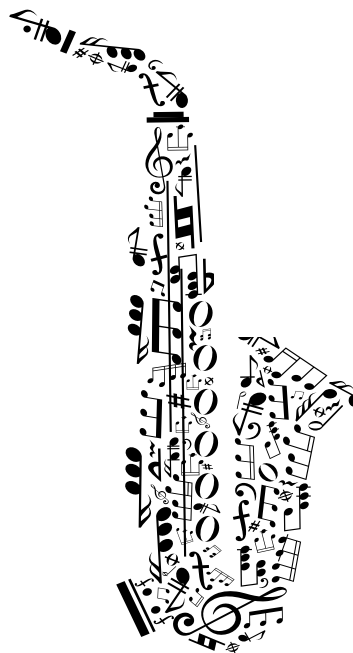
• Students at all levels should be very familiar with the "critical notes" in the various keys they will encounter:

- For concert Bb, the 7th scale degree is the critical note.
- For concert Eb, Ab and Db, the 4th scale degree is the critical note.
- For concert C and G, the 3rd and 7th scale degrees are the critical notes.

• Students should be trained to "freeze" on critical notes when you practice sight-reading; you can "show" the fingerings around the room....or they can show you (or their neighbors) the fingerings. Any or all of these techniques can be used in the actual sight-reading room.

• Judges really like it when you make references/connections to your stage music (i.e. legato style, key, unique markings, etc.).

• During both the general explanation and summary period, do not call out every measure number and beat number. There are SO MANY other things you should be reminding students about!



Are You Ready for UIL Contest?

- Be cautious—during your general explanation period—not to speak or count off in subdivision, as this is not allowed and could result in a warning from a judge.

- When 30 seconds has been called, you MUST review the OPENING key signature (and related critical notes), time signature, tempo, etc. Even if you have not gone over the very ending of the piece, it is paramount that you force yourself to return to the beginning. The LAST thing students should hear you say—before time is called—is information regarding the BEGINNING of the piece. This information needs to be very fresh in their minds....and yours!

- During these 30 seconds, double reed players should discreetly place their performance reed into their water containers. When time is called, the reeds can be removed. Double reed

players should never leave their performance reed in their water containers during the entire time they are in the sight-reading room.

- After a short and smartly planned out warm-up, allow students to blow air carefully through their instruments, empty French horn water slides, empty brass spit valves, etc. After this warm-up, there should be NO MORE TALKING from the director!

As you start to begin preparations for your respective UIL Contests next semester, always strive to be as organized and detailed as possible. Your students will remain successful as long as you have a structured, goal-oriented focus to every aspect of these preparations. I wish you the best of luck!

John Benzer is on the music education faculty at the University of Houston's Moores School of Music, where he teaches undergraduate instrument pedagogy classes and band director methods classes. Through the band department, Mr. Benzer assists the Wind Ensembles and assists with the administration of student teacher placements and observations. Prior to this, he taught for twelve years at Griffin Middle School in The Colony, which is part of the Lewisville Independent School District. During his ten years as Director of Bands, the Griffin Middle School Symphonic Band was twice named the Texas Class CC Middle School Honor Band, in 1993 and 1997. In 1997, the Griffin Middle School Band Program was awarded the Sudler Silver Cup, the most prestigious international award to recognize junior high and middle school band programs of outstanding musical excellence.

At the 1995 Texas Bandmasters Association Convention in San Antonio, Mr. Benzer was named the 1995 "Texas Young Bandmaster of the Year," and in 2012 was honored as the Distinguished Alumnus in Music Education through the UH Moores School of Music. He is also the co-author of Essential Musicianship-Ensemble Concepts, a published band method textbook, as well as a Hal Leonard Textbook Consultant. Mr. Benzer is an active clinician and adjudicator throughout Texas, and has presented band director in-services and workshops in several school districts, as well as various clinics at The Midwest Clinic, TBA and TMEA.