

Developing Sight-reading Skills Year Round

Asa Burk

Sight-reading can be stressful and intimidating for both students and teachers. Often, we spend too little time on it to see meaningful results. With a plan in place and a mindset dedicated to developing sight-reading skills year-round, you can improve your ensemble's musical literacy and build the confidence of the individual musicians. Here are a few tips and techniques you can use to improve sight-reading year-round, as well as some pointers specific to the day of your UIL Sight-Reading Evaluation.

Long-Term Performance Preparation

Preparing and rehearsing for a music performance is much different than reading a piece of music at sight. We tend to spend most of our time and energy creating a series of musical performances throughout the year. Some of these performances will require weeks and months to prepare. Typically, new performance skills will need to be taught and these skills will require several repetitions for students to acquire. These pieces are generally rehearsed at a much slower tempo to facilitate learning, and the complexity of the music likely necessitates that small chunks of music be learned and pieced together for the entire performance. Finally, these performances will require an overall higher level of polish and refinement.

How Sight-reading Is Different

Reading music is much different. Generally, the musician already has the skills needed for successful performance. The music is easier and less technically demanding and as a result, can be read at performance tempo and performed with minimal explanation and no rehearsal. While sight-reading may not demonstrate the highest level of polish and refinement, there are still some expectations of minimum performance quality.

Benefits of Sight-reading

Why should you take time away from performance preparation to work on sight-reading? Developing student literacy is just one of many reasons. Sight-reading develops a greater sense of ensemble awareness. It allows students to practice and refine their listening skills in the actual musical context that we want them to be fluent in. It fosters musical accountability in that it requires that students be musicians.

Sight-reading requires students to process all the information that is given on the page. Perhaps the biggest benefit is that the students are responsible for processing, evaluating and adjusting their performance in real time. Without spoken instructions they have to aurally agree as an ensemble by asking and responding to questions like: Do I have the melody or am I accompaniment? How loud do I play for balance? What is the style of the piece? What/where is the basic pulse/tempo?

There are also big picture reasons to incorporate sight-reading into your curriculum. Sight-reading easily lends itself to formative assessment. Armed with this information directors can evaluate and refine their curriculum. Students get instant feedback on their performance. Using sight-reading as the basis for a lesson plan helps directors create lessons based on the students' needs and current skill levels.

Plus, sight-reading can be fun. We often lose sight of the fact that many kids sign up for band to play tunes. There is an inherent sense of satisfaction and enjoyment in playing all the way through a piece.

Reading a piece, all the way through, can make your pacing seem faster and can foster enhanced student enjoyment. Time flies when you play a new tune all the way through, and that same feeling rarely occurs when practicing how to start a concert F for 30 minutes.

What Should You Sight-read?

The choice of what to read shouldn't be difficult. You probably already have many resources that you can use as sight-reading material. Start with a rhythm line. Move to any unison line in a method book. Use sight-reading to introduce any exercise that will become a part of your daily drill or warm-up. Sight-read a duet.

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When the students are ready, select an easy piece of music. As they develop, use a contest or festival tune from a previous year. Students always enjoy reading a new pep tune or a pop title where they already have a general familiarity with the music. As you work to take their skills to the next level, always try to meet the students where they are and give them what they need for success.

Guiding Students as They Sight-read

Try to establish a routine for sight-reading. Vary how much information you give the students. Give them more information at the beginning and less as they advance and gain confidence. Always try to bring their attention to the basic elements of the piece—the key signature, time signature, tempo, style, etc. Point out who has the melody as well as who has the accompaniment. Go over any challenging rhythms and the roadmap for the piece—repeats, endings, DS, DC, Coda, etc.

Keep in mind that this is a learning process—go slow so that students can process and react. It's okay if you need to regroup frequently, but try to establish the idea that you have to keep going and that everyone is responsible for their own part. For this to be successful, you should try to provide enough framework that most students can find their way through the piece.

Tips for UIL Sight-reading Evaluation

If sight-reading is part of an annual festival or contest that you participate in, incorporating sight-reading into your curriculum throughout the year will make that

evaluation less stressful. Another way to reduce stress is to make sure that you know the rules and format. Be comfortable in your knowledge of what you can or can't say and can or can't do during the contest. Research the contest website to locate and familiarize yourself with all available

resources. There is an abundance of information on the UIL Sight-reading Evaluation website. There you can find everything from the judging rubric to the instrumentation to the procedural script that you and your students will go through. Once you have done your homework, start to prepare your students for the process. Practice the process so that you will feel comfortable and practice the process so that your students will feel comfortable on the day of the contest. Prepare your students ahead of time for how to enter the room, any seating arrangement modifications from your concert set-up, who will play first/second parts, and assign percussion

instruments. Use any assistant directors to assist with getting students from stage to sight-reading, organizing students in the room, and following up on percussion students. Do your best to be calm and professional to instill confidence in your students. After their performance, thank them for their efforts.

Sight-reading can be a very beneficial part of your music curriculum. It is a great way for students to experience and refine their musical skills and concepts. Best of all, sight-reading often will give students the confidence to incorporate their ensemble skills into your musical performances.

With a plan in place and a mindset dedicated to developing sight-reading skills year-round, you can improve your ensemble's musical literacy and build the confidence of the individual musicians. Perhaps the biggest benefit is that the students are responsible for processing, evaluating and adjusting their performance in real time.

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