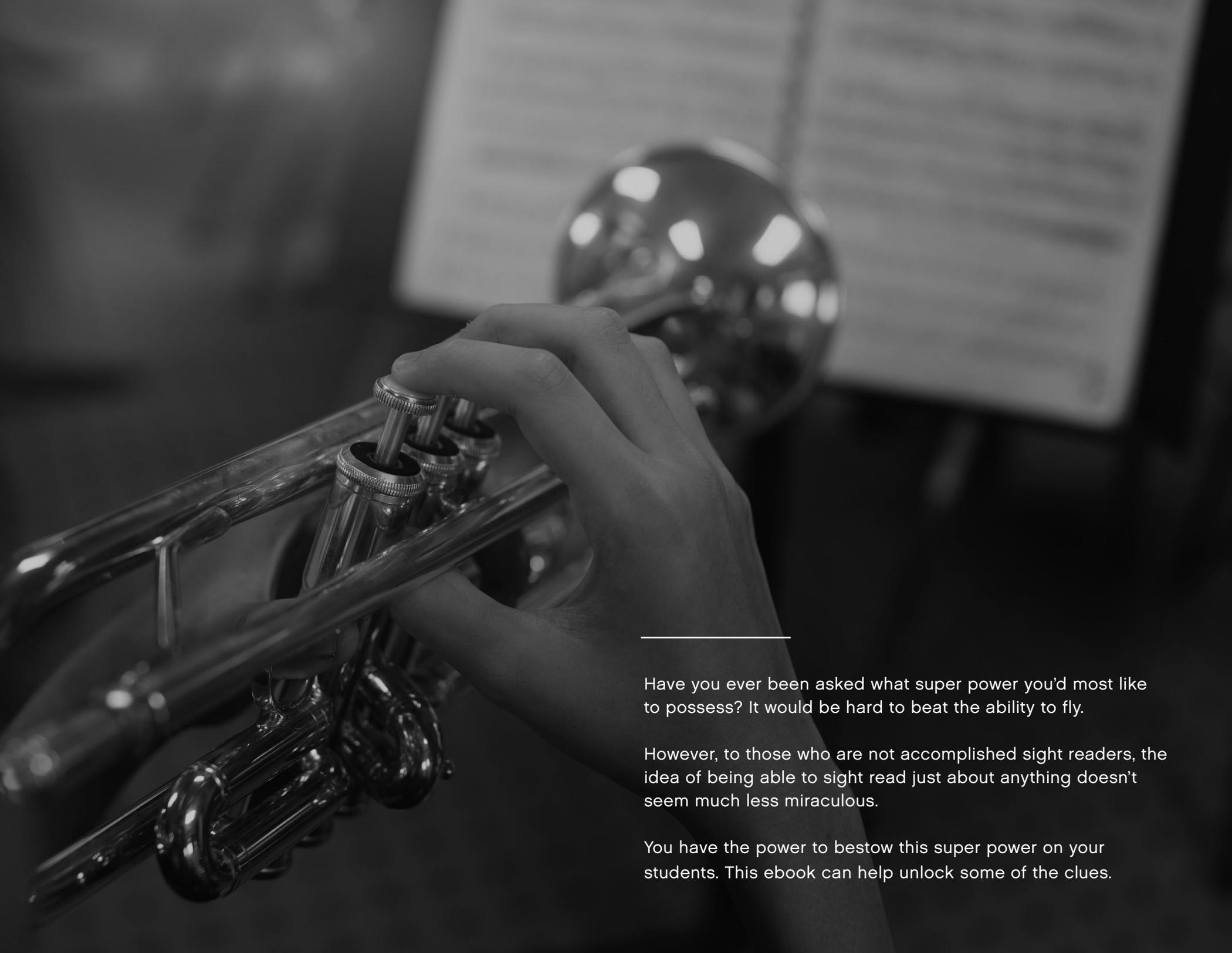




# the sight-reading ebook

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smartmusic®



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Have you ever been asked what super power you'd most like to possess? It would be hard to beat the ability to fly.

However, to those who are not accomplished sight readers, the idea of being able to sight read just about anything doesn't seem much less miraculous.

You have the power to bestow this super power on your students. This ebook can help unlock some of the clues.

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Okay, you've decided to bring your ensemble's sight reading to the next level. How do work this time into your rehearsals? A lesson plan can help. Here are some practical strategies for including sight reading in your lesson plan.

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Directors who produce great sight readers do so by employing ancient secrets. One of them is to work on sight reading all year round. Asa Burk shares a few tips and techniques for year-round use, as well as some pointers specific for the day of your sight-reading evaluation.

## **How Can I Get My Students to Sight Sing?** 10

Sight singing is a tough sell to many choirs, let alone to an instrumental ensemble. Nevertheless, separating reading from the mechanics of playing can really make a difference. Here are some tips to help make it a success.

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We know that students benefit from having clearly defined, measurable goals. Learn how to apply this knowledge to sight reading, and how to assess student progress in this vital area.

## **Introducing the Sight Reading Builder** 19

What could you accomplish if you had an endless supply of sight reading material, customized specifically for your students? It's no longer a rhetorical question!

A pair of glasses with a dark frame is resting on a sheet of music. The music is written on a staff with a treble clef and some notes. The background is dark and out of focus.

# how to practice sight reading

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Ryan Sargent

Educators agree: sight reading is important. It develops musical literacy, challenges students technically and musically, and checks for understanding of important music theory skills. It can even be fun on occasion. But how should you work sight reading into your rehearsals? After all, you have limited rehearsal time and a lot to cover. Including sight reading in a lesson plan is critical.

Whether you're getting ready to perform at a [sight-reading contest](#) or simply want to develop that musical literacy with your students, here are strategies for including sight reading in your lesson plan.

## Sight Read Every Day

One approach to developing better sight reading skills is to practice every day. Obviously, music educators know the value of daily practice. The benefits of consistent effort apply to sight reading the same way they apply to practicing technique or concert repertoire.

Practicing sight reading as an ensemble doesn't have to be time consuming, and can serve double duty as well. For example, instead of playing reference recordings for your younger ensembles, have your more advanced ensembles sight read them. It's great practice, and you'll instantly get a sense for which sections will provide a challenge and where common pitfalls occur. Including this type of sight-reading activity at the end of class is a simple and time-efficient way to ensure that your ensemble practices daily.

Making sight reading part of your warm-up activity is another way to build daily practice into your lesson plan. After your usual long tones, scales, or other exercises, sight read a new exercise. This approach also allows you to customize the sight reading based on your ensemble's sight-reading abilities as well as on other repertoire you plan on working on in that rehearsal.

You might sight read a simple unison exercise from your [method book](#) that contains rhythms similar to those in your concert repertoire. Not only will students get daily sight-reading practice, their brains and fingers will be better prepared for the day's other learning objectives.

Daily sight-reading practice need not be an ensemble activity. Giving students individual sight-reading assignments for home practice can also work. These can take the form of assessments where students submit a recording of their sight reading, or students can choose from a library of sight-reading exercises.

Still building that library? SmartMusic now includes a [Sight Reading Builder](#) that automates the creating an infinite number of customized sight-reading examples. SmartMusic also makes it easy to create sight-reading assignments, and we've even created a [sample sight-reading lesson plan](#) to get you started.



## Sight Read All Day

You might also work sight reading into a lesson plan by making sight reading the focus of an entire rehearsal. This can be particularly effective when you're preparing for a sight-reading contest because students will have a chance to quickly develop their skills over a session of repeated practice. You'll also be able to offer specific feedback to the ensemble and identify places to improve for the next exercise. Perhaps your students did an excellent job managing a key change, but struggled to sight read dynamic changes. Spending an entire class period on sight reading gives you a chance to address these weaknesses.

When you spend an entire rehearsal on sight reading you can also discuss the sight-reading process in detail. For example, you'll be able to practice spending 30 seconds ahead of a first reading circling codas, time and key changes, and difficult sections on your part. You'll be able to discuss strategies for avoiding train wrecks with students – such as focusing on rhythms more than pitches.

Focusing on sight reading for an entire rehearsal can help ensure that your lesson plan is also focused. You'll be able to set clear learning objectives and create both formative and summative assessments for them as part of the plan. You can offer feedback during the rehearsal (formative) and then create an assignment to test the students as part of their home practice (summative).

## Gamify Sight Reading

Another option for including sight reading in your lesson plan is to make it a game. Using SmartMusic or another sight-reading assessment tool, have students participate in a sight-reading competition. This also gives students an opportunity to assess each other and themselves, developing their ears and their sight reading.

Of course, awarding a prize to the top sight reader adds to the excitement. It can also provide students with an extra incentive to practice their sight reading ahead of the next in-class competition.

## Challenge Yourself (and Your Students)

Finally, consider ways to challenge both yourself and your students when sight reading. Think about ways you can best communicate with students when sight reading – and remember that your conducting technique is communication too!

Challenging doesn't necessarily mean sight reading something with obvious technical challenges. For example, an advanced high school group might sight read "On A Hymnsong of Philip Bliss" not because the notes are challenging, but because creating beautiful, musically impressive phrasing on a first reading is very difficult. This will similarly challenge the director, who must use gesture and other conducting tools to help students read well.

These challenges can be easily incorporated into your lesson plan as learning objectives that closely align with standards. National and state standards require students to develop musical performances, not just technical ones. Make that the focus of your lesson plan. But also include a sight-reading exercise to drive the point home and work in valuable sight-reading practice time.



Ryan Sargent leads MakeMusic's content and education team, is an active trombonist, and a TI:ME board member. Read his other posts and full bio on the [SmartMusic blog](#).



# teaching sight reading throughout the year

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Asa Burk

Sight reading can be stressful and intimidating. 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 sight-reading evaluation.

# Sight Reading

## 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 be needed, and these skills will require several repetitions to acquire. Pieces are rehearsed at a much slower tempo to facilitate learning, and the complexity of the music necessitates that small chunks of music be learned and pieced together for the entire performance. Finally, these performances will require a generally 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 students to 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 lends itself to formative assessment, allows directors to refine their curriculum, and offers students instant feedback. 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.

Sight reading a piece, all the way though, 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.

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 Sight-Reading Competition**

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 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. Once you have done your homework, start to prepare your students for the process. Practice the process so you and your students will feel comfortable on the day of the contest.

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.



Asa Burk is the associate director of bands at Argyle High School in Argyle, Texas. Read his full bio and other posts on the [SmartMusic blog](#).

# how can i get my students to sight sing?

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Dale Duncan

There are many well-known benefits of encouraging singing in the instrumental classroom. Singing can improve intonation and help students develop their listening skills. Furthermore, sight singing temporarily removes instruments from the equation, and this can help identify and isolate instrument and technique problems. Personally I have seen the way singing awakens kid's brains. When students can sing their parts in tune with correct rhythm, it will increase their musical accuracy and ultimately help them become better at playing their instrument.

The challenge is in getting any student (not just instrumental students) excited about sight singing.



### **The Sight Singing Problem – in Any Music Classroom**

Armed with a master's degree in music and a wonderful student teaching experience, I brought lots of excitement into the classroom at the beginning my teaching career. I'll never forget the incredible dark cloud that seemed to descend over my classroom when I would ask students to pull out their sight-singing books. I can still hear the moans and sighs like it was yesterday.

Sight singing was a chore.

What was the problem? I had purchased the best sight-singing books! Shouldn't that do the trick? Apparently not! I was completely unable to get my 300 inexperienced middle school students to be successful at sight singing and, most importantly, to enjoy the process of learning it.

Over time, I determined many reasons for my lack of success at teaching this important skill and none of those reasons had anything

to do with their intellectual abilities or the types of students I was teaching. It had to do with me. I simply didn't know how to instill the skill sets required for them to successfully sight sing, and I didn't respect how incredibly difficult this skill is for this special age group.

### **Out of Touch**

After six years of being immersed in academia and surrounded by highly-trained musicians (most of whom had never taught middle school) I had lost touch with some really important ideas:

1. Reading music is very similar to learning a foreign language.
2. More than 95% of my students had no private lessons in their background. So, whatever they learned about sight singing was going to have to come from me. I couldn't rely on having Peggy Piano on the back row (who had taken piano lessons for 9 of her 11 years) to lead everyone into the promised land.
3. Success AND fun are the magic potion for this age group.

I had to figure out how to instill the skills into my students in a fun way. So, over time, I developed a four-part philosophy of teaching students to sight sing.

### My New Philosophy, Part 1: It Can't Feel Like Work

I felt sure that the Kodaly hand signs would help my students improve, but they didn't seem to like using the signs. I soon realized that this age group loves to compete against the teacher! So, I made up a game that I called "Forbidden Pattern" where the students played against me.

#### Basic procedures of the game

- Everyone must use the Kodaly hand signs while they sing.
- I sing and sign a three-note forbidden pattern followed by a rest, and they immediately have to sing and sign it back to me. I announce that this is the forbidden pattern of the day. I tell them they aren't allowed to sing it anymore during the game, but that they have to sing and sign everything else that I sing and sign.
- The game begins. I sing a different three-note pattern and they echo it back to me. This goes on until I randomly sing the forbidden pattern of that day.
- Each day, there is a different forbidden pattern that the students aren't allowed to sing.
- If one (or more) student sings the forbidden pattern, I get a point. If no one sings the pattern, they get a point. Students get so absorbed in the game that they forget not to sing the pattern. It is an awesome focus exercise with which you can have lots of fun!
- Whoever scores 3 points first wins the game. I keep score daily. I make the score public to all of my classes so they will begin a friendly competition with the other classes in addition to competing with me.



## **Classroom management guidelines for the game**

They are likely to get very excited during the game, and that is a good thing. However, you need some rules in place to keep the game fun and manageable!

- They aren't allowed to warn each other that the forbidden pattern has been sung by the teacher. You should only award the students a point if they've been absolutely silent and still when you sing the forbidden pattern.
- Have fun with the game! Use what I call the distraction technique. In the middle of the game, talk about your cat or what you did over the weekend. Then, sing and sign the forbidden pattern. Soon, they will realize what you are up to. It helps them focus even more because they think you are being sneaky (and you are) because you want to win! The possibilities are endless, and the relationship you will build with them when you let loose with playful competitiveness in this way will help you bond with your students as you teach them.

## **My New Philosophy, Part 2: Set them up for Success**

If we were teaching our students how to build a house, we wouldn't simply take them into a room full of tools and say "Go!" We must teach our students how to use the "tools in their toolbox" by introducing one tool at a time and allowing them to perfect the use of that tool before moving to the next.

Here are a couple of tools that I use that have helped my students:

### ***Chaos***

"Chaos" is the word I use to describe a one to two-minute independent practice period. I give a sight-singing example and establish tonality by singing the scale and arpeggio in the key of the exercise. During chaos, each child must place themselves into a bubble and block out the other singers while singing and signing the example out loud – at their own pace. They must do so for the entire one to two-minute period.

When I teach this concept, I compare the resulting sound with how an orchestra sounds warming up before a concert.

Once you stop the chaos session, re-establish tonality and then have them sing the example as a choir. Emphasize the importance of holding onto "DO" during chaos. If you hear them wander from "DO" when they are first using chaos as a tool, stop and ask them to sing "DO." This will give you a chance to drive home the importance of never losing "DO." I always tell them that it is like knowing where you live! You should always be able to recite your home address. It is critical that students sing out loud during chaos, and that they are encouraged to work at their own pace.

### ***Accenting***

I teach rhythm separately from pitch at first. We must help students to feel and experience the importance of beat one or the downbeat. Helping them to physically feel it by doing body percussion exercises is a great tool.

Also, using the Kodaly "TA" system works well. I have my students over-emphasize beat "1" with their voices when they "TA", and "rev" their voices like a car engine while singing half notes, dotted half notes and whole notes to keep the beat steady as they perform rhythm exercises. Instilling strong accenting skills helps greatly as they learn to cope with different time signatures.

### ***Hand-Pulsing***

Once we combine pitch and rhythm in a real-sight singing exercise, we should only use quarter notes, and we should teach them to pulse their hands to the steady rhythm in addition to using the Kodaly hand signs. If we do this successfully, it will be much easier for our students when they encounter their first half note or dotted half note in the middle of a sight-singing exercise.

Dealing with varied note values in the middle of an exercise is a challenging feat of incredible coordination for beginners and must be taught deliberately and carefully and practiced daily. In the early days of teaching sight singing, I failed to recognize how hard it is for them to combine singing accurate *pitch* and rhythm at the same time.

### **My New Philosophy, Part 3: Be Consistent**

Sight singing is not easy. It requires so many skill sets that trained musicians often take for granted. The dots on the page are filled with information that their brains have no idea how to interpret until we carefully show them. Ten minutes per day – every day – will go a long way. It will give us the time to teach our students what the tools in their toolbox are and how to use them.

Successfully identifying the symbols on a matching quiz isn't enough. They have to use the symbols and interpret them each and every day with simple, progressive sight singing examples that are appropriate for their age. Like a new language, they must speak it often in order to improve their skills.

### **My New Philosophy, Part 4: Praise Them**

We all know how important it is to praise our students when they get it right. With sight singing, it is even more important to acknowledge every single small success...especially with this age group. For example, when I see a student "pulsing" correctly, I call their name out and tell them "Great job on the pulsing!" Immediately, other students make sure they are pulsing, too.

I often compare sight singing to life. It will not always be perfect. Sometimes, you will sail right through. Other times, you are going to hit a huge obstacle and get knocked down. Do you just lie there? Or do you get up, dust yourself off and keep on going?

As their teacher, it is incredibly rewarding to help students on this important journey. It is our job to guide them toward music literacy. And when we take the time to teach them how to use the tools in their toolbox and share a little fun, laughter, and celebration along the way, we will have had a great time instilling a skill in our students that will last them a lifetime!



Dale Duncan teaches over 300 choral music students at Henderson Middle School near Atlanta, and is the creator of the creator of the [S-Cubed Sight Singing Program for Beginners](#). Learn more on the [SmartMusic blog](#).

# assessing student progress in sight reading

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Suzanne Whitney

I love helping my students grow into smart, hard-working, and self-sufficient musicians. Part of this means torturing them with sight-reading exercises every time I see them. Trust me, they love me for it. Sarcasm aside, while sight reading may not be our students' favorite activity, or even our favorite thing to teach, there is no denying the benefits of consistent sight-reading practice.

## Specific Goals

To help students become great sight readers, we need to provide them with opportunities for sight reading and instruction that guides them towards progress. In order to track that progress, students need to know what their specific goals are. Young musicians know they need to reproduce what they are seeing on the page, but it is necessary to break that down further.

When students have specific goals, it is easier to see how they progress. A specific goal means we can set up checkpoints between where our students are now and where we want them to be. It is important to know the difference between “almost there” and a total success. What do each of those checkpoints look like? What can we improve to make it to that total success? This is where my good friend the rubric comes in.

## Rubrics

Rubrics give students the structure to understand what they are trying to achieve. The requirements, or checkpoints, on that rubric are one way to track your students progress.

I have three basic rubrics for sight reading: beginner, developing, and advanced. Students who are just beginning to learn how to sight read should keep their focus on the basics. To me, that means setting specific goals in four categories: pulse, relative intonation, rhythmic accuracy, and pitch accuracy.

Developing students can expand their goals to include articulation and dynamics. Finally, the advanced students will add goals to master tone quality and musicianship/style while sight reading.

	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Sufficient	Above Average	Excellent
Pulse	Does not maintain any consistent pulse - notes played as if at random.	Has a concept of what pulse should be, but is inconsistent in application. May start and stop throughout performance.	Clear concept of the pulse. Performance includes noticeable fluctuations.	Consistent pulse throughout majority of the performance.	Consistent pulse throughout entire performance.
Relative Intonation	No proven concept of the key center in the performance.	Most notes out of tune. Little relation to each other or the key center.	Few intonation issues. May lose the key center, but is able to recover.	Maintains key center and relative intonation throughout performance with minimal errors.	No noticeable intonation issues in performance.
Rhythmic Accuracy	Extremely inaccurate - notes played as if at random.	Basic understanding of rhythmic notation, but the majority of rhythms are played inaccurately.	Mostly accurate rhythm. Performance may include several mistakes.	Almost perfect rhythmic performance. May include minimal mistakes that do not detract from the performance.	Completely accurate rhythmic performance. No noticeable mistakes.
Pitch Accuracy	Extremely inaccurate - pitches performed do not reflect the melodic contour of pitches written.	Most of the pitches are inaccurate. Melodic contour may be decipherable.	Most of the pitches and the melodic contour are accurate.	Pitches are almost perfectly accurate. May include minimal mistakes that do not detract from the performance.	Pitches are completely accurate. No noticeable mistakes.



### Rubrics In Practice

I like to have a rubric in front of my students when they are sight reading. Students can check in with those visible requirements that are appropriate to their level of mastery. This allows them to have a clear goal before they begin and a way to assess themselves after the exercise has been completed.

First, I will decide which rubric we are working with. Then we will discuss the goals for that rubric. This allows the student to provide some self-assessment before they even look at the sight-reading exercise. Which of the categories is hardest for them? Which do they

feel most comfortable with? What will their main focus be while trying to complete this exercise? It is important to take note of their answers.

I keep a folder or a Google doc for each student that includes both my assessment and their own self-assessments. This record allows me to track the technical progress that I see and also the progress in each student's comfort level with different musical concepts. This sort of record makes it easy to tailor instruction to the needs of each student. Once we have talked through their goals, the student has to do the darn thing!

## Using SmartMusic

Students are given a study period with each exercise before they sight read. In recent years I have been using SmartMusic when working on sight reading. SmartMusic brings a number of tools together in one place that help me track my students' progress. These tools also help them understand that progress.

First, there is the recording. I used to record my students on my phone or another recording device, so they could hear how they did. It is really important to go back and listen. When I was a beginning student and nervous about sight reading, I wouldn't be able to remember anything that I did after the fact. So, providing that opportunity to listen to what a student did allows them to learn from their mistakes, as well as celebrate their successes.

Once they have submitted that recording I have that a record of their progress in SmartMusic that I can go back and listen to. I can compare recordings over the months and years to see the progress that they have made.

I also appreciate that when I use SmartMusic for sight reading I can [create custom rubrics](#) and enter in all of the details shown above. This means that my student and I can talk through the rubric after completing the exercise. We discuss how they would grade themselves and what grade I think they have earned based on the performance and recording. Then we can submit that grade in SmartMusic. There we can both look back and see their progress over time.

As students progress they need more and more fresh exercises at just the right difficulty level. Finding or writing new exercises can end up feeling like an exhausting task. SmartMusic's new [Sight Reading Builder](#) offers educators the ability to generate and customize an infinite number of exercises.

## Achieving Success

Assessing a student's sight-reading progress is really about helping each student learn what success is, and achieving success. The assessment should allow them to actively understand how they can achieve success. It should never be about putting down a hard line and saying that they didn't do well enough.

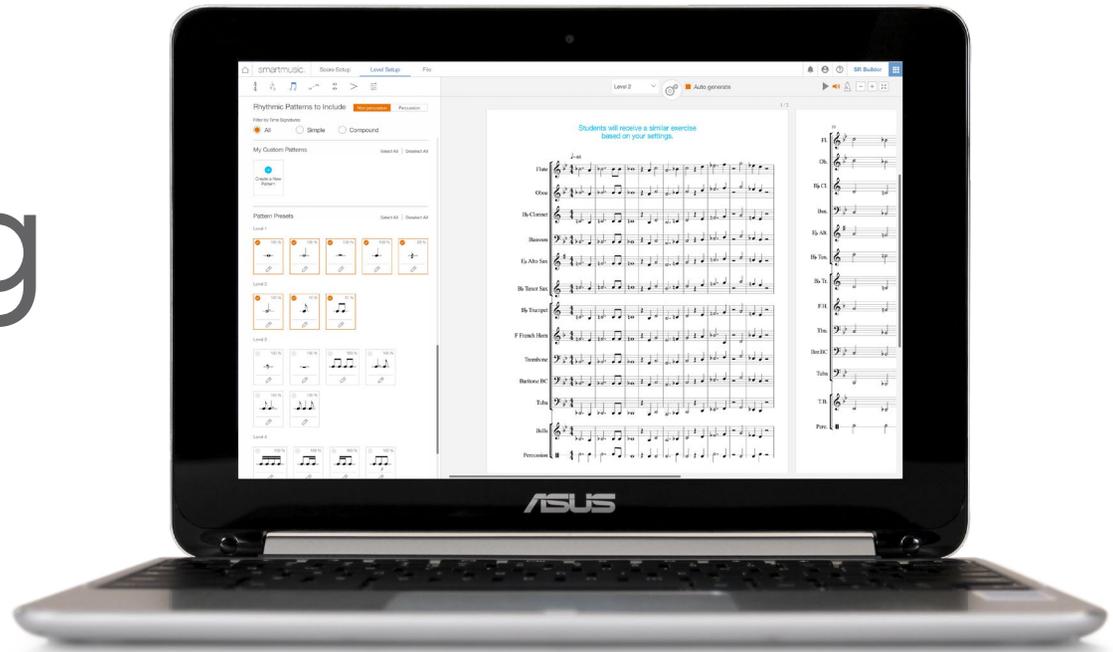
To see true progress through assessment, students need to take an active part in the process. A deeper understanding comes through this type of collaborative assessment. With understanding comes progress, success, and the emergence of those smart, hard-working, and self-sufficient musicians I know each of my students can become!



Suzanne Whitney is MakeMusic's social media manager and an active vocal instructor. Read her other posts and bio on the [SmartMusic blog](#).

# the sight reading builder

smartmusic.



Every music educator wants their students to become strong, confident readers. They know that as students' reading skills develop, every other aspect of their musicianship improves as well.

Of course, developing strong sight readers requires practice – and great sight-reading exercises. Not only do you need to have a limitless supply of exercises, in the ideal world they are also specifically tailored to your students' needs.

## Capabilities

The Sight Reading Builder empowers you to instantly create an unlimited number of sight-reading exercises for any type of ensemble or individual instrument.

Because you set the parameters, you can provide your students with exactly the type of challenges they need. You can select from ten predefined difficulty levels, as well as customize key signatures, time signatures, articulations, rhythmic patterns, and ranges.

Best of all, you can utilize this unlimited supply of music to create meaningful student assignments. SmartMusic will generate a new exercise each time a student loads an assignment. Students can start each assignment as many times as they wish before submitting it, and they will always work with a brand-new exercise.

## Accessibility

Every educator with a paid SmartMusic subscription has full access to the Sight Reading Builder, and can use it with students in the classroom as well as send related assignments to students with standard (\$8/year) or premium (\$12/year) access.

Today you can own SmartMusic, including the Sight Reading Builder, for just \$40 – and you can try it out for free.

[Learn more at smartmusic.com.](https://www.smartmusic.com)

Helping your students become better sight readers can change their musical lives – and overall confidence – forever. SmartMusic can help. From the Sight Reading Builder and a vast library of repertoire, to proven practice tools, it's a modern day, web-based woodshed.

It's also accessible; compatible with the devices students use and more affordable than you might think, starting at \$40 per year for a full educator subscription. [Try it for free](#) or [get a quote](#).

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