

The SFYSA Guide To Sight-Reading

by Karles McQuade, rev. July 2015

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Your ability to sight-read tells judges how well you can read music and how well you are able to navigate the note-geography of your instrument; and also, how well you pay attention. Strong sight-readers, along with strong listeners, are able to learn much more music, in much less time, much more deeply. The best sight-readers can read and play music as easily as you are reading this sentence. You should strive for a similar level of competence; anybody can attain it, but only with a good teacher and consistent practice.

LEARN HOW TO COUNT

If you have not learned how to effectively count beats and rhythms, you will not be able to sight-read gracefully. Ask your teacher for help in developing good counting habits.

SIGHT-READING IS A GAME OF THE MIND, NOT OF THE INSTRUMENT

Sight-reading takes place in your mind, long before you make any sound on your instrument.

PRACTICE SIGHT-READING CONSISTENTLY

Like any musical skill, sight-reading must be practiced consistently at home and with prompt and usable feedback from your teacher in lesson. *Ask your teacher for regular sight-reading support.*

LOOK FOR THESE CLUES BEFORE YOU MAKE A SOUND

Please note that some of this information may not be available, but gather as much as you can.

- **Rhythm**

- *When sight-reading, executing the rhythm correctly is far more important than playing the right notes; just about all teachers and conductors have this philosophy.*
 - Flawless Rhythm + Poor Note Accuracy = Respectable Score
 - Poor Rhythm + Flawless Note Accuracy = Bad Score

- **Key Signature**

- You should already have all key signatures memorized, not just major keys but also minor keys.
- If you have not memorized all key signatures, ask your teacher for help.
 - Learn the “relative minor” and “circle of fifths” rules to save yourself tons of work.
- *Neglecting the key signature is a sight-reading faux pas and will cost you points and the goodwill of the judges.*

- **Clef**

- Do not take this for granted, even if your instrument does not change clefs, but *especially* if you play an instrument that does change clefs, or uses more than one staff. Also, judges have been known to place the wrong sight-reading excerpts on the stand.

- **Time-Signature**

- **Tempo Indication**

- **Mood or Character Indication**

- Your chosen tempo is allowed to be slower than the concert tempo. These three clues above will give you a sense of how far you can deviate from the concert tempo without losing points. If this information is not available, ask the judges.

- **Weird Spots**

- Highest Note(s)
- Lowest Note(s)
- Strange Rhythms
- Strange Bowings / Breathing Spots

- **Dynamics**
- **Articulations**
 - Perform these indications as clearly as you can, so judges can tell you're thinking about more than mere sight-reading survival.
- **Pattern-Search**
 - See Below
- **Where You Are Supposed To Stop**
 - Stop where indicated; doing so tells the judges you are paying attention and able to follow simple directions.
- **Composer / Historical Era**
 - The composer and/or historical era is critical information for the advanced musician, so this information may not be available to you. However, if you feel this information will help you sight-read better, ask the judges who composed it or when or where it was written. They may not give you the information, but it will not hurt your score to ask.

Reading this list can be overwhelming, but remember that you will have had training and practice in gathering this information long before the live audition. It is imperative you have weekly help from your teacher and practice consistently at home. This type of effort will help you to develop a clear mental pathway to rapidly gathering and processing this information. You are ready when you can process this information in 30 seconds or less. Have your teacher time you in lessons. Time yourself at home.

HOW TO REALIZE THE WRITTEN MUSIC

- Locate the most difficult part
- Inside your mind, choose a tempo that allows you to manage this difficult part with grace
 - Note that this tempo may feel very slow; however, if this tempo is the fastest you can manage the difficult parts, then it is the *right* tempo
- Set the tempo in your mind, as if you were starting a metronome
- Breathe in, then breathe out and begin, in tempo
- Do not vary your tempo
 - If a ritardando or the like is clearly marked in the music, make sure your tempo changes are very clear, so the judges know you're following the music and not, instead, being sloppy
- Do not stop until you reach the designated stop-point
 - Do not stop even when practicing in lesson or at home. Instead, get to the end, then evaluate the passages that need improvement afterward.
- Do not ask, "Can I start over?"
 - Like neglecting the key signature, asking this will cost you the goodwill of the judges. If you've been doing healthy sight-reading work in lesson and at home, you won't need to.

SEARCH FOR PATTERNS

Music that's written down on a page never consists of just random notes. There will be something of a melody, something of a pattern. Use scales and repertory you're familiar with, start building a scaffolding or framework inside your mind of what those patterns are. These patterns can come from:

- The written page
 - Example: common rhythmic patterns, like four sixteenth-notes and two eighth-notes
- The feeling under your fingers
 - Example: an arpeggio
- Or a mental recording
 - Example: The opening interval of a fourth in "Here Comes the Bride!"

Pattern-searching should be cultivated in lessons and during practice. Ask your teacher for ideas. *Do not try to pattern-search during a live audition if you've never done it before. To do so will waste valuable seconds.*

SING IT!

If you can sight-sing an excerpt, then playing it on your instrument becomes a significantly smaller task. You will not be asked to sight-sing in an audition (unless, obviously, you're a singer), but this practice will develop and strengthen your mental ear ("the mind's ear"). Practice in lesson and at home. Your teacher can help you find your starting pitch, assign syllables to notes, and offer other helpful advice. Please note that perfect pitch is not required to be able to sight-sing; neither is a beautiful voice, nor is having the same range as your instrument (lady bass players, gentlemen violinists...).