

My Top Ten Tips For Learning How To Sight Read Music **By John Seeley MA BA Music**



When you first begin trying to sight read music it can be difficult, frustrating, complex and often you do not know where to even start. The following top ten tips will hopefully simplify the process and enhance your knowledge in order to improve your sight reading skills.

Top Tip 1

Find somewhere quiet, light, and aerated where you will not be distracted by background noises. Have a glass of water to hand to ensure you remain hydrated.

Top Tip 2

You will need good quality sight reading material, anything from Jazz heads to Classical studies, to maintain your focus, and motivation.

Top Tip 3

Your sheet music belongs to you, so allow yourself to make comments before you start sight reading, you do not need to retain all the information in your mind. I encourage my students to use a highlighter or pencil to make annotations to assist them as they read through the music. As your confidence builds, you will notice that you will not need as many written aids.

Top Tip 4

I teach my students to visualise and hear in their heads what they are about to play before commencing the piece.

Top Tip 5

Always start by giving yourself a pulse before you commence your sight reading and continue at this pace throughout the piece. The pulse does not have to be at full tempo to start with, it can be increased when accuracy develops.

Top Tip 6

Whenever you look at a piece of music for the first time observe the tempo markings, key signatures and the time signature. The tempo markings denote the speed of the piece and indicate how fast or slow you will need to play. Once again, you do not need to begin at full tempo. Check the key signature for accidentals and be aware of the sharp, flat and natural notes. Check the time signature; this denotes how many beats are in a bar and type of beat.

Top Tip 7

Practising is more effective if you take your time and do it slowly. You need to be accurate and precise in what you are reading, playing quickly means nothing if you cannot execute everything correctly.

Top Tip 8

Rhythm is the most vital part of sight reading music and you can practise rhythm sight reading with any sheet music. At first, ignore the pitches and only read the rhythms. Later, go back through and practise reading the rhythms and pitches together. With my students I get them to clap the rhythm first before playing the piece.

Top Tip 9

Do not just concentrate on the note you are playing, look ahead on the music to see the next note or group of notes whilst you are playing the first one. Let your eyes look ahead to comprehend what is coming next; learn to read one measure whilst playing the measure that came before it. This is difficult to coordinate at first, but will become easier with practice.

Top Tip 10

Once you have broken down the rhythms and start performing the piece, do not stop if you make a mistake. I encourage my students to forget their mistakes, compose themselves and continue as though the mistake did not happen. When performing within a group or workshop, you will not have the opportunity to stop midway through the piece to go back and correct your mistake.

I teach my own Jazz Workshop and Saxophone Workshop that run alternate Thursdays at St Michael and All Angels Church in Leigh-on-Sea, 7.30pm to 9.30pm so I know from experience that my students will not play every piece of music without making the odd mistake. I use all of the above methods, and teach these skills in my workshops and private lessons. By breaking down the pieces using these processes, the students have a better understanding of how to perform the piece in a manageable way when sight reading the whole piece, avoiding panicking, and feeling under pressure, therefore making learning to read and play music more enjoyable. These skills are tangible and can be used going forward with new pieces of music to improve your speed and understanding of sight reading music.

John Seeley is a professional musician and provides private and group teaching both classical and jazz on the saxophone and clarinet, from beginners to grade eight. For more information please visit www.johnseeleyjazz.co.uk or email teaching@johnseeleyjazz.co.uk

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