



A teacher's guide to **sight-reading!**

Paul Harris



A teacher's guide to *Improve your sight-reading!*

When pupils can sight-read, not only do they do well in exams but (rather more importantly) it allows them to learn pieces more quickly and frees up much of our teaching time, allowing us to concentrate on developing the musician.

When an average pupil is presented with some sight-reading with no preparation the result may be all too predictable – the pupil struggles through; there is little sense of pulse or rhythm; wrong notes, key not observed. All of which result in unpleasant negative feelings and the fostering of an increasing dislike and fear of sight-reading.

The *Improve your sight-reading!* series is a highly methodical, structured and engaging approach which can be used, week-by-week, virtually from the very first lesson up to and beyond Grade 8. If taught and worked at thoroughly, it will instill a real confidence and fluency for sight-reading. Gone will be the kind of scenario outlined above! Pupils will enjoy sight-reading!

New edition

The ABRSM sight-reading syllabus for piano has been completely revised, with effect from January 2009. To help students prepare for these new exams, brand new editions of the complete *Improve your sight-reading!* series have now been published, with separate workbooks available for each of the grades 1–8 plus a Pre-Grade 1 book for beginners. They've been devised to support the new criteria at every stage with hundreds of brand new practice exercises.








In these new editions, teachers and students will find the same format: rhythmic and melodic exercises, prepared pieces with associated questions and meticulously graded sight-reading pieces to 'go solo' with. In addition, the text and music has been extensively revised, with many new specially-composed pieces included. The layout has been refreshed with new typography and music-setting throughout and a practice chart and new tick boxes have been added to every exercise to encourage students to work through the material methodically.

Contents






The nine books in the series, Pre-Grade 1, Grades 1 – 8, are based on the requirements pupils will meet when taking grade exams. However the method can simply be used to teach pupils to sight-read in an orderly and enjoyable manner quite independent of exams.

Note values, time-signatures, rhythmic patterns, keys and musical symbols are introduced systematically and explored thoroughly in a variety of musical contexts and, along the way, good sight-reading practice is introduced, discussed and developed. Here is a useful contents list for reference, covering the whole series:






Pre-grade 1

- Stage 1 – The Golden Rules
- Stage 2 – Counting
- Stage 3 –  and 
- Stage 4 –  and ; looking ahead
- Stage 5 – Reading around the middle C position
- Stage 6 – Introducing thirds and semibreves
- Stage 7 – Reading at a glance
- Stage 8 – Introducing fourths
- Stage 9 – A new left hand position
- Stage 10 – Introducing fifths; using both hands
- Stage 11 –   
- Stage 12 – Revision




Grade 1

- Stage 1 – C major; ; $\frac{4}{4}$
- Stage 2 – ; small leaps
- Stage 3 – G major; ; $\frac{3}{4}$
- Stage 4 – F major; ; mixing left and right hands
- Stage 5 – Tied notes
- Stage 6 – A minor; ; $\frac{2}{4}$; phrasing
- Stage 7 – Staccato, slurs and accents
- Stage 8 – D minor; longer exercises
- Stage 9 – Longer examples






Grade 2

- Stage 1 – Simple hands together
- Stage 2 – More movement between hands; more slurs and staccato
- Stage 3 – D major
- Stage 4 –   in $\frac{4}{4}$
- Stage 5 –   in $\frac{3}{4}$
- Stage 6 – E minor; more articulation
- Stage 7 – G minor
- Stage 8 –  groups; revision of keys
- Stage 9 – Longer examples

Grade 3

- Stage 1 – Changing hand position
- Stage 2 – Chords
- Stage 3 – A major;  groups
- Stage 4 – B minor and more D major
- Stage 5 – B \flat major and G minor
- Stage 6 – E \flat major and   patterns
- Stage 7 – $\frac{3}{8}$
- Stage 8 – More rhythms in $\frac{3}{8}$
- Stage 9 – Revision of keys and rhythms

Grade 4

- Stage 1 – Playing musically
- Stage 2 – Simple syncopations
- Stage 3 – 
- Stage 4 – $\frac{6}{8}$, simple rhythm patterns
- Stage 5 – More chords
- Stage 6 – More rhythms in $\frac{6}{8}$
- Stage 7 –   and   rhythms
- Stage 8 – More rhythms in $\frac{3}{8}$
- Stage 9 – Revision of keys and rhythms

Grade 5

- Stage 1 – Pianistic styles
- Stage 2 – C minor
- Stage 3 – F \sharp minor
- Stage 4 – Thicker textures
- Stage 5 – More complex rhythms in $\frac{6}{8}$ and $\frac{3}{8}$
- Stage 6 – A \flat major; syncopation
- Stage 7 – Mixing rhythms and triplets
- Stage 8 – E major, revision and some reminders

Grade 6

- Stage 1 – $\frac{5}{4}$, $\frac{5}{8}$; part playing
- Stage 2 – More ties
- Stage 3 – F minor and C \sharp minor
- Stage 4 – Moving around the piano; triplets
- Stage 5 – Sub-dividing and more patterns in $\frac{2}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$ and $\frac{4}{4}$
- Stage 6 – Revision of keys and concentration
- Stage 7 – $\frac{9}{8}$ and more patterns in $\frac{3}{8}$ and $\frac{5}{8}$
- Stage 8 – Thinking and playing musically

Grade 7

- Stage 1 – Reading ahead and memory
- Stage 2 – More ties and new rhythms
- Stage 3 – Thicker and more complex textures
- Stage 4 – More harmonic and rhythmic patterns in $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{4}{4}$, $\frac{5}{4}$ and $\frac{7}{4}$
- Stage 5 – More harmonic and rhythmic patterns in $\frac{3}{8}$, $\frac{4}{8}$, $\frac{5}{8}$ and $\frac{7}{8}$
- Stage 6 – Keys with many \sharp and \flat and the importance of scales
- Stage 7 – More rhythms in $\frac{6}{8}$ and $\frac{9}{8}$
- Stage 8 – Revision

Grade 8

- Stage 1 – Wide leaps and ledger lines
- Stage 2 – Changing metre and spread chords
- Stage 3 – Contrapuntal textures
- Stage 4 – More harmonic and rhythmic patterns in $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{4}{4}$ and $\frac{7}{4}$
- Stage 5 – More harmonic and rhythmic patterns in $\frac{3}{8}$, $\frac{6}{8}$ and $\frac{7}{8}$
- Stage 6 – $\frac{12}{8}$ and more $\frac{9}{8}$
- Stage 7 – More harmonic and rhythmic patterns in $\frac{5}{8}$ and $\frac{5}{4}$
- Stage 8 – Revision

Using the method

When we, as experienced musicians, look at music, we understand what we see and we 'get' the (musical) point allowing us to give a fairly accurate and musical rendition immediately. Our pupils can be taught to do this too. It takes time but is one of the most worthwhile skills we can help our pupils to develop.

The importance of understanding what we're reading is fundamental to building fluent, accurate and confident sight-reading. We teach this by being really thorough. Whenever anything new is introduced, we must ensure that pupils absorb, digest and fully understand, and, at the same time, make strong relevant connections – especially with aural, rhythm, scales and theory.¹

Working with the *Improve Your Sight Reading!* series is entirely self-explanatory, but here are a few thoughts to help support the method. Remember that careful preparation, and never allowing pupils to do something they don't fully understand, will always pay great dividends.

Rhythmic Exercises

Most stages begin with Rhythmic Exercises. These must be fully grasped before moving on to the Melodic Exercises – it is vital that pupils know exactly how rhythms go. Work at sustaining a steady pulse initially. Teach pupils to hear the rhythms in their head first, tapping the pulse and hearing the rhythm internally. There are many ways of doing these exercises (see below); introduce more of them as your pupils develop, ultimately teaching pupils to do them all. Once they have a number of different ways to practise the Rhythmic Exercises they can vary the methods they use from practice to practice:

- Tap the pulse with the right foot (sometimes use the left foot) and clap the rhythm (consciously hearing it internally at the same time).
- Tap the pulse with one hand and the rhythm with the other (then swap hands).
- Tap the pulse with the foot and play the rhythm on one note.
- Tap the pulse with the foot and make up a tune to fit the rhythm, using perhaps just two or three notes.
- Clap the rhythm, at the same time hearing it internally.
- Clap the rhythm with the pulse sounding on a metronome.

In all the above exercises, remember to vary the pulse.

Pupils should learn always to count two bars in – one out loud and one internally (which means that you can monitor whether the counting is in time).

From Grade 6 both staves of the Rhythmic Exercises have independent rhythms. The most straightforward way to do these exercises is to tap the pulse with the foot (or have it sounding on a metronome), the upper line with the right hand and the lower line with the left (on a flat surface or knees perhaps). However pupils will benefit very much from working at these exercises in other ways too:

- Reverse the hands (ie tap the upper line with the left hand, and the lower line with the right).
- Play each line on a single note on the piano.
- Clap or tap the pulse and hear both lines internally and simultaneously.

Most importantly, and at all levels, make sure the Rhythm Exercises are really understood before moving on to the next section.

¹ This connected approach is the basis of Simultaneous Learning which is explained fully in [Improve Your Teaching!](#) (Faber Music).

Melodic Exercises

The rhythms used in these exercises will be based on those learnt in the Rhythmic Exercises. First make sure the rhythm is absolutely understood, perhaps by clapping it through using one (or more) of the above exercises. It is an excellent idea, at this point, to hear the rhythm internally. Then check the fingering. Although, particularly in the early grade books (and in exams), the opening fingering is usually given, we still need to help pupils understand the thinking behind it. All exercises in Grade 1 and 2 are in a basic 5-finger position. So ask pupils to look for the highest and lowest notes in each piece; it is these notes that determine the finger position. So although the fingering is given, they now understand it.

From Grade 3 hand position changes are introduced. It is important that we teach pupils to become instinctive about these changes. Guide pupils to notice where it will be necessary to change hand position – again fingering help is given, but pupils must learn to understand these changes in order to develop their own instinctive reaction when sight reading. Some discussion with pupils on the principles behind these position changes is invaluable (eg using scale/arpeggio fingering, a second finger over the thumb to tuck in a black note, the various conventions for chords and so on.)

Pupils should then work through the following:

- Think about the key. Play the scale and arpeggio from memory and from notation (have a scale book handy² whenever you're working with pupils on sight-reading).
- Look for patterns – these may be rhythmical or melodic, based on scale or arpeggio shapes, repetitive, sequential etc.
- Hear the piece in the head again, this time with the melody as well. (Give the first note to help. The accuracy may be variable at first but pupils will soon improve. For those pupils who are a little uncertain about 'hearing tunes in their heads' just ask them to sing 'Happy birthday' (or any familiar tune) silently – in their heads – they'll soon get the idea!)

The Melodic Exercises, up to and including Grade 5, have no additional markings. This is to allow pupils to concentrate fully on understanding rhythm and melodic shape.

Working methodically through all the Melodic Exercises in all the books is rather like building up a musical vocabulary. Pupils will meet and come to recognise melodic patterns that recur again and again, just as they do with words and phrases when reading text.

² *Improve Your Scales!* is the ideal partner. Not only does it include scales written out but is also a fun method for learning them.

Prepared Pieces

The Prepared Pieces come with questions which are designed to help pupils to begin thinking about and processing the pieces practically and musically. This is where the understanding takes place and is very much the crux of successful sight-reading.

Work through the questions carefully encouraging pupils to 'see and understand' the music. Make sure that all patterns are noticed. Sometimes ask pupils to give you a 'running commentary' on the music, mentioning ascending and descending patterns, melodic and rhythmic patterns, phrases, fingering, hand positions, musical details and anything else that will help to define the piece's particular identity.

Make sure the rhythm is understood and the scale/arpeggio has been played and the key absorbed.

At some point before playing, ask pupils whether they feel they really know what they are about to play. Don't allow a pupil to begin unless you and your pupil are (almost completely) certain the performance will be correct. Once played, ask your pupil to evaluate the performance. With careful preparation there should have been no errors or hesitation. If there were, follow with a short discussion and a second performance.

Going Solo

It is now up to pupils to discover the clues to each piece themselves. They should study the music for about a minute to look at (read through) and 'understand' the music. If an examination is approaching you might suggest they reduce this to the typical thirty seconds.

Pupils must learn to think in the key (by all means play the scale and arpeggio), check rhythms and look for fingering and hand position changes. They should always try to hear the music in their heads. Eventually, with very careful methodical practice, your pupils should be able to scan the music for thirty seconds or so and really know what it's all about, resulting in confident, accurate and fluent playing.

Sight-reading musically

Whenever we speak, we put expression into what we say (without exception), whatever our mood. It's a point you might like to discuss with your pupils. Similarly, whenever we play music, it should be both expressive and characterful. That includes playing sight-reading pieces. Though the Melodic Exercises, up to and including Grade 5, have no additional markings (to allow pupils to concentrate fully on rhythm and melodic shape) pupils should still be encouraged to give their performances shape and dynamic colour. The Prepared Pieces and Going Solo sections, and all music from Grade 6 onwards are full of musical markings. As a start it's important to follow the markings – but this is only a start; there are other considerations. As pupils read the piece through in their head, encourage them to evolve an idea of its character and of how they will interpret the music. For example, does it require a crisp, rhythmic approach or more gentle, sustained playing? Will the first beats need accenting, or playing without emphasis? Does it require a fairly strict pulse, or would a degree of freedom be appropriate? Is the texture tune and accompaniment, or do both hands require equal importance? Encourage pupils to look for the clues and then play accordingly. They should never play blandly.

Multi-tasking

Sight-reading is very much a multi-tasking activity, rather like driving or playing tennis or computer games. It requires strong simultaneous connections with a number of areas. Concentrate on one or two of the following each time you work with pupils on their sight-reading reinforcing as often as you can.

Notes and melodic patterns

Pupils MUST know the names of notes and where to find them. There must be no thinking time – from symbol to physical action in a flash. Pupils must also be aware of patterns. Music is full of patterns – point them out, teach your pupils to recognise them. They will always be there, particularly the sort of melodic patterns that are as common as words like ‘the’ or ‘and’. For example



These kinds of shapes should elicit an immediate response. Pupils should know them as if they were a completely familiar word or phrase.

Rhythm

Thorough work on rhythm will pay great dividends. There’s no reason why any pupil should have a problem with rhythm, if taught thoroughly. There are only two aspects to rhythm – pulse and sub-division. Teach both carefully and thoroughly (in whatever ways you favour), ensuring that pupils really understand a rhythm before they play it.

Aural

Ultimately we want pupils, like we do, to look at music and fully understand what they see. We would like them to think ‘I know what that’s about. I know exactly what I’m going to play. I know what it’s going to sound like’.

Get pupils used to hearing music in their heads – encourage them, for example, to take their music on a car journey or on holiday, to read alongside their reading books. If they can’t hear the melody at first, they can at least begin with the rhythm. Just like reading words, pupils don’t have to play music out loud to ‘hear’ what it sounds like. Over time this skill will develop.

Verbalising

Grasping the ‘meaning’ of a musical pattern will only work when the pattern is musically understood. We can find out how pupils are processing what they see by asking appropriate questions or suggesting that they give a running commentary on the music. They will begin to connect appropriate notes into patterns and then read these patterns at a glance, which will aid fluency enormously.

Reading ahead

Perceiving these patterns and reading them at a glance will (with virtually no extra help) cause readers to look ahead naturally. We occasionally hear about virtuoso readers who can read many bars or even half a page (or more) ahead! When we look at music, our eyes can move up to about five or six times per second – scanning the music, building up a picture of what's there to be seen and processed. If we tell our pupils to 'look ahead', we are, in effect, helping them to kick-start this important scanning process. Otherwise they may simply read lazily. You don't need to prescribe how far to look ahead, just talk about the procedure. Pupils will find their own natural pace.

Remembering the key

The process of sight-reading uses up quite a bit of short-term memory. We take in a snapshot of musical information, process it, memorise it and play it, while our eyes are taking the next snapshot and repeating the process. All that happens virtually in a split second, so we don't want to overload the memory with extra information, especially trying to remember the key signature as we go along. We want to teach our pupils to 'think in the key' and there are two ways to help them. Firstly, as you use more Simultaneous Learning techniques³, 'thinking in keys' will begin to happen more naturally. Secondly, make sure that one of the major connections, when teaching scales, is with notation. As well as learning our scales from memory we need to know what they look like. Writing out the scale may be beneficial, thus maintaining an important link with theory, and we must learn scales with the music as well as from memory. Not only will we become more adept at recognising scale patterns (which helps fluency) but we are also beginning to 'programme' keys securely into the brain.

Fingering

Similarly, learning scales and arpeggios from notation is a great help with fingering. If scales and related patterns are learnt from notation, pupils will instinctively know what to do. All being well, the appropriate fingering will then just flow naturally into their minds.

³ For a full explanation of the Simultaneous Learning process, see *Improve Your Teaching!* (Faber Music)

Sight-reading Warm-ups:

Teaching sight-reading without (much) sight-reading!

Here is a collection of enjoyable activities you can do with pupils, especially in small groups, perhaps as they move towards a grade exam. And one of the particularly fun aspects is that there's not really any sight-reading involved! (Not that any of your pupils, after all the thorough preparation they will have now had, would balk in the slightest at the thought of doing any sight-reading!)

In these activities you'll be working at the various skills that have to come together to make a good sight-reader. Such a session can generate a great deal of fun.

The lesson, up to an hour long should go something like this:

- Rise and shine: drink a glass of water. Think about and work on a well-balanced, tension-free posture; work on relaxation. Perhaps include some brain exercises. Pupils learn to create a positive mental and physical mind-set in relation to sight-reading.
- Playing ball: rhythm exercises and games – pulse and sub-division games, hearing rhythms in the head, clapping and, yes, even playing ball! (Have a look at some Dalcroze activities.)
- Sing along: melodic exercises – singing intervals (melodically and harmonically) and short phrases from notation. 333 Elementary Exercises in Sight Singing by Kodály is an excellent publication for this purpose.⁴
- Multi-tasking: clapping and singing at the same time.
- In your head: for example, pupils might study and memorise a short phrase (internally). Then you play it with a deliberate wrong note – pupils have to identify the note. Prepare some well-known tunes and write them on manuscript paper – a prize for whoever recognises them first.
- 'Ear' ear: make a connection with old-fashioned aural, where you play and pupils write it down. Always use very simple and short melodic phrases – the kind of musical patterns that constitute regularly occurring 'musical vocabulary'. It's a powerful connection and, if presented in the right way, can be fun.
- Time for talking: pupils talk through pieces, spotting patterns, finding the clues to a musical performance, all the time developing the ability to understand and articulate what they see.
- Putting it all together: looking at a sight-reading exercise as a whole for a minute or so and feeling confident that it is understood, learning the rules of thorough preparation. Perhaps even do some sight-reading at this stage!

Do set aside some quality time to teach your pupils to sight-read – they'll be very grateful in the long run. It's very much a part of giving your pupils musical independence. And when it comes to exams, they'll simply sail through the sight-reading.

See also Chapter 7, Sight-Reading, in *Improve Your Teaching!* (Faber Music)

⁴ See also *Improve your sight-singing!* (Faber Music)

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