



# Keyboard Fundamentals: Sharpening your sight-reading skills

## **Overview:**

Why is sight-reading important? Why is it harder on keyboard percussion than maybe other percussion instruments? How many little targets are there to hit? Why aren't percussionists as good at sight-reading compared to other instrumentalists? These are only a few questions that we may need to answer because there can be many pitfalls and drawbacks in playing these instruments. The goal of this clinic is to find better ways to approach the topic and lay down a foundation to be more successful at sight-reading.

*“Sight-reading is learning to train your eyes to stay out of the way of what your hands can already do.” – Gordon Stout*

## **The 5 S's of sight-reading:**

- Setup – the environment
- Sight – the visual
- Scales – the kinesthetic
- Study – the “science”
- Success – the final product

## **Setup:**

To ensure success before you even play a note, you will need to make sure everything is in place. Check the height of the keyboard and adjust it to where it feels comfortable to play. Have your music stand low and near the keyboard. The bottom of the music stand should hover right above the accidental notes on the keyboard. Center your music and body in the middle of the range of music you will be playing. Find the lowest note in the piece and place your left mallet there and find the highest note and place your right hand there. Place yourself and your music in the middle of this area for ease of reach and reading.

## **Sight:**

Part of the equation for sight-reading is your ability to see. You will need to work on and trust your peripheral vision. You can see more than you think. Stare at music and you should be able to see your mallets and bars of the keyboard. Remember to look up while playing. Think of the keyboard being the shining bright light of the sun. You can glance at the sun but you don't want to get caught looking too long or it will burn your eyes.

Get used to the layout and locating the notes on the keyboard. Find the pattern of the two-accidental grouping and the three-accidental grouping to locate the correct bars. Some beginning keyboard method books start with the C scale (all white notes) while

others use the accidentals as a starting point. Beginning method books also start with larger notation and note heads and then gradually move to smaller notation.

Try to look at bigger chunks of music. Think of the way you read words. You don't read each individual letter to say the word. You are able to take in the more and even look ahead while reading. Take in the general line and shape of the music instead of each individual note or beat. Take a quick snapshot of the music and move your eyes ahead of the actual music you are playing. Think of sight-reading as short term memorizing.

**Pro-tip:** Do NOT write the note names in your music ever. It will serve as a crutch and you will take longer learning and locating the correct note on a staff and on the instrument. Some method books come with the note names written in beforehand. If possible, I recommend blacking out the note names.

### **Scales (and arpeggios, stickings, etc.):**

Scales are key in gaining facility around the instrument. Most pieces are in a key and that will help guide you to play certain notes and have you stay away from certain notes. When practicing scales find many different variations to use (groupings, intervals, patterns, Green scales) and even improvise over the scale. Arpeggios are also very useful for bigger leaps and because the chords usually outline a scale that is being used. Just like using your sight to hit the correct notes you will need to use your muscle memory in action as well. It will be very beneficial to learn various scales and modes to learn the shape of the line on the keyboard but also to work on your music theory.

Another fundamental area of concern is sticking. Stickings can be tricky on the keyboard percussion due to the tempo, direction of the line, intervals, etc. I highly recommend being able to play timing exercises using different stickings and stick control exercises to help gain a better understanding of rhythm and implement facility. It helps to separate the different musical elements so when you put them all together you have a nice foundation to build upon.

### **Study:**

Here is a list of things to look for and analyze when you get the music but before you play a note:

- Clef and key signature
- Time Signature (tempo markings)
- Accidentals and key modulations
- Articulations (rolls, dead strokes, pedaling, etc.)
- Any odd looking rhythmic/melodic/musical idea (double-flat, syncopation, extended rests)
- Stickings
- Dynamics
- Phrase markings (slurs, *ritardando*, *crescendo*, *accelerando*, etc.)

- Patterns (verbatim repetition, motives, sequences)

*Other ways to sight-read:*

- Note by note
- Phrases
- Intervals
- Harmonically

### **Success**

You have prepared the other S's in the outline and now you are ready to tackle sight-reading. Here are some quick reminders as you read:

- Slow and steady wins the race
- Pick a tempo that works for the toughest part
- Focus on the rhythm
- If the notes go up the staff go to right, if the notes go down go to the left
- Always look ahead
- Look at bigger chunks of music
- Don't stop till you get enough (continue through your mistakes)

### **Conclusion:**

Getting better at sight-reading is a journey not a destination. The more you sight-read the better you will become at it. Read anything and everything you can get your hands on. Raid your music/band library. Get your hands on other instrument method books (flute, trumpet, violin, etc.) and any percussion ensemble music. Guitar etudes make great four-mallet reading and beginning to intermediate piano music can make great duet pieces. Sight-read with friends. Making music is much more enjoyable in the company of others. By using this outline of the S's of sight-reading you can make huge strides in your musical ability.

### **Supplemental Resources:**

Here is a list of beginning keyboard method books:

- Kite, Rebecca – *Reading Mallet Percussion Music*
- Eyles, Randall – *Mallet Percussion for Young Beginners: A Peripheral Vision Primer*
- Goldenberg, Morris – *Modern School for Xylophone, Marimba, and Vibraphone*
- Green, George Hamilton – *Instruction Course for Xylophone*
- Peters, Mitchell – *Fundamentals Method for Mallets Book 1*
- Wessels, Mark – *Fresh Approach to Mallet Percussion*
- Whaley, Garwood – *Fundamental Studies for Mallets*
- Wylie, Kennan – *Simple Steps to Successful Mallets and More Percussion*

Below are some excellent resources for further development of sight-reading and the ability to practice.

- Speed Note Reading Tutor (interactive online resource)  
<http://www.vicfirth.com/education/keyboard/speednotereading.html>
- Music Theory Exercises (note identification, key signature, intervals, chords, etc.)  
<http://www.musictheory.net/exercises>
- Sight-reading Factory (online etude generator/app)
- Sight-reading Machine (phone app)
- International Music Score Library Project (public domain music scores)
- Practice keyboards at home
  - Yamaha, Adams, Adventure, Majestic, Premier
  - Beetle Percussion Mallet Pad
  - Lay keys on bed

## GET IN TOUCH!

Have questions or comments? Feel free to contact me!

[molinao@nsula.edu](mailto:molinao@nsula.edu)

[olivermolina.com](http://olivermolina.com)

[music.nsula.edu](http://music.nsula.edu)



olivernmolina



@olivernmolina



olivernmolina



@olivernmolina

Special thanks to Yamaha Percussion, Vic Firth Sticks and Mallets, Remo Drumheads, Sabian Cymbals, Black Swamp Percussion, and Northwestern State University!



**VIC FIRTH**



**YAMAHA**

