

# Choral Sight-Reading 101

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## **Introduction**

With renewed energy advocating for music literacy in our classrooms, CMEA large group festivals will all incorporate required sight-reading into the festival experience for our students. This change is bound to cause some stress and anxiety for some, but when armed with knowledge, we hope that teachers will be ready and excited for the challenge and will intentionally build these skills in their students. This guide seeks to give you a “why”, “what”, and “how” to start sight-reading implementation.

## **What is sight-reading?**

Sight-reading is simply getting a new piece of music and singing it without a teaching/rehearsal process. If you survey 10 choral directors, you may get 10 different ways to teach it in a classroom, but each of these should include basics like how to say or count rhythms and how to build interval training (i.e. understanding how different scale degrees relate to one another). To be the most successful, it takes concerted and scaffolded instruction and should take place daily, but even introducing the concepts to your students once per week is helpful.

## **Don't have time to sight-read? You don't have time NOT to sight-read!**

When we feel trapped in a cycle of cramming notes down our students' throats to prepare for the next performance, it can feel like there just aren't enough minutes of rehearsal to devote to more things. Most secondary music teachers have around 50-55 minutes of class time, and if you are constantly teaching four, five, or even more pieces in an eight-week concert cycle, it feels difficult to justify the time. The beauty of teaching your students the skills to read is that they will learn repertoire faster, which then encourages higher level music-making! Additionally, music reading is a skill that a student can take with them after they leave your program, and philosophically, this may be the strongest selling point.

## **Where do I begin?**

Step one of implementing sight-reading in your classroom is determining which skills you desire your students to have and then the order you believe they will learn them the best. There are many resources out there, which will be listed below, but the rhythm and pitch sequences you desire may determine which resource(s) to utilize. One of these, which will be described in detail later, is [www.sightreadingfactory.com](http://www.sightreadingfactory.com) and is nearly fully customizable to what you want your students to learn. You'll invest a lot of time early on, but once you are familiar with the website, it will save massive amounts of time later and you can decide most elements in the exercises.

Please know that this document is meant to assist in the beginning stages of implementation and is by no means an exhaustive list of all ways to teach sight-reading. If you have questions, please reach out to me, a trusted colleague, music method specialist, or anyone who you feel can bounce ideas back and forth. But don't be afraid to try something new and welcome your kids on this journey for you and them!

## **Rhythm Considerations**

As one of my college professors taught me, “Rhythm is king!” (or queen) and “A right note at the wrong time is a wrong note.” Ergo, rhythm reading is the first step to building strong sight-singing skills. Consider the following:

1. How will I introduce rhythms?
2. In what order will I introduce them?
3. Which system will I use to give rhythms their sound?

## INTRODUCING RHYTHMS

It is theorized that students learn music best in the way that we acquire a language. Pared down: first we hear it, then we imitate/perform, then we learn how to read. During my warm-ups and following vocalises and ear-training, I do a lot of “I say, you say” exercises before a student sees the rhythm on the board. In the Kodaly method, folk songs/games/dances learned by rote are constantly preparing new concepts, so we name a rhythm after we have already learned its sound in the context of a song. This is not the only way! But research suggests that starting with sound improves early mastery rather than drawing a symbol on the board, giving it a name, and telling the students how many beats it gets. Using rounds/partner songs for ear-training can also be used for literacy purposes. I’ve included a short list of rounds at the end of this document that you can find quickly through a Google search.

## SEQUENCING RHYTHM FIGURES

### OPTION A:

Whole  
Half  
Quarter  
Eighths  
Sixteenths

### OPTION B:

Quarter  
Half  
Whole  
Eighths  
Sixteenths

### OPTION C:

Quarter  
Eighths  
Half  
Whole  
Sixteenths

While we have any number of options for basic rhythm introduction and sequence, I’ve seen three that are most commonly used, and I have used all three in my seven years of teaching so far. Option A is typical in a beginning band method as you are developing tone and breath consistency and may work well if your students already understand how rhythms relate to one another from previous music experience. When I taught middle school band and general music, this was my go-to. Option B is what I used for the first several years of teaching high school choir, as I felt starting small (but not too small) would make things easier for the students, and I wanted students to start with the concept that quarter notes “get the beat”. Option C is what I’ve studied at CSUB Kodaly Institute and implemented this year, and I am most excited for this sequence, because beat is emphasized and practiced by starting with quarter notes, and “fast notes” are no longer scary to my students. I also felt that my students generally didn’t have a great understanding of rhythmic relationships. Furthermore, quarters and two beamed eighths made for much more “fun” rhythm figures early on. Option C has made sight-reading so much more enjoyable for my students than ever before.

Whichever you decide to utilize, let trial and error take place for a while to determine what your students learn best. Limit introducing a new concept to one at a time, and don’t be afraid to take away something they already know when introducing something new: e.g. when introducing four beamed sixteenth notes, try having an exercise that has only eighth notes and sixteenth notes rather than feeling the need to just add to all the concepts they know! Also be prepared to decide when to add rests, when to add dotted figures, and as Kodaly method teaches introducing rhythm figures grouped rather than just an individual symbol (e.g. a dotted quarter WITH a single eighth, eighth quarter eighth as a whole idea “syn-CO-pah”, etc).

## RHYTHM PERFORMING SYSTEMS

Three widely-used systems for performing rhythms aloud are counting, tas and ti-tis, and takadimi. All three have their merits, and I will give you brief explanations and the benefits.

### COUNTING

As an instrumentalist growing up, counting was the law of the land. I had to be able to label where a rhythm landed in a measure and count a measure or measures of music as a collective idea. Here is a rhythmic example and how I would write it with counting:

1 (2) 3 4 + 1 (2) + 3 e + a 4 + a 1 (2 3 4)

I used this method for the first six years of teaching utilizing parentheses for showing beats in a longer note and dashes – for each beat of silence. For counting to be successful, students must also understand steady beat, measures, time signatures, and rhythmic relationships. I love that students who count can identify different parts of the beat, and this makes referencing specific parts of a measure within a rehearsal very quick.

**Ta and Ti-Tis**

I generally considered this system for elementary only for a long time, because it just seemed too simple. After using it for a semester with my high school students, I am officially a convert, because they have been so much more successful sooner understanding rhythms! This system is based on giving each rhythm figure a sound vs. labeling a sound based on where it falls in a measure. The emphasis, therefore, is placed on what a specific rhythm sounds like and how it relates to other figures. Here is the same rhythmic example with this system:

ta - oh ta ti ti ta - um ti ti ka ti ka ti ti ka ta - oh - ah - oh

As a basis for rhythm understanding, I think this system is fundamental. However, I will also start adding counting to our sight-reading in class so that we can better understand parts of a measure. Here is one example of rhythm syllables as taught by Mrs. Jo Kirk at the CSU Bakersfield Kodaly Institute (note the difference in sixteenths):

**RHYTHM DURATION SYLLABLES**

ta	ti ti	ta rest	ta-o	ta-o-ah-o	ta-o-ah	syn-CO-pah		
ti rest	ta-um-ti	ti-ta-um	ti-ri-ti-ri	ti-ti-ri	ti-ri-ti			
tri-pol-ti	tim-ri	ri-tim						

**TAKADIMI**

Admittedly, takadimi is the system with which I am least familiar, but I would love to see this employed in the classroom. Adapted from Indian tabla, I think of this system as a blend of two systems above. While it doesn't give different names to rhythm figures based on their placement in a measure, it does give a different name to each part of a beat. Four sixteenth notes are ta – ka – di – mi, two eighths are ta – di, and a quarter is ta, so this is similar to counting. Another benefit is that there are specific syllables for compound meter in takadimi, where there are not in other systems. Here again is the rhythmic example with takadimi syllables:



For more information on how to use takadimi in your classes, check out this short guide sourced from takadimi.net: <http://www.takadimi.net/documents/Takadimi%20short%20guide%20for%20Web.pdf>

## Pitch Considerations

As with rhythms, we must decide how we will introduce new pitches, in what order, and what system we will use to teach. I will also include some additional information on ear-training that may prove helpful.

### INTRODUCING PITCHES

I am a high school director who gets students from a few different middle schools, and they all teach sight-reading differently, so I spend a lot of time teaching my students ear-training skills that are beyond their reading capabilities to start. For instance, I teach the major triad, “do” extended pentatonic scale (more on this later), and even the major scale prior to introducing the idea on paper. Again, I’m a firm believer in sound before sight, so when we are getting ready to sight-read for the first time and when I am introducing a new pitch, I will sing four beat melodic patterns with those pitches with the students then repeating after me. This then transitions into a written example on the board after we’ve learned about the music staff and how it functions. As an extension activity, once we’ve practiced a new pitch for a few days, I will sing melodic patterns on a neutral syllable and the students still have to sing back to me on solfege with Curwen hand signs.

### SEQUENCING PITCHES

Generally, there are two camps of people when it comes to sequencing pitches in sight-reading: diatonic and pentatonic. As with rhythm, each can be successful, and teachers may have better success in their classrooms picking one over another. Here are some thoughts on each.

#### DIATONIC

Diatonic sight-reading employs all seven scale degrees of the major (or minor) scale. Typically, a director may start with dr (do re) or drm (do re mi) and add from there. Other directors may teach drt’d first to introduce whole and half steps and reinforce tonic/dominant relationships. Here’s an example of how you could add pitches to get to an octave:

Solfa:	Scale degrees:
dr	12
drm	123
drmf (half step!)	1234
t,drmf	7,1234
t,drmf5	7,12345
t,drmfsl	7,123456
t,drmfslt	7,1234567
l,t,drmfsltd’	6,7,12345671’

*The lower tick [ , ] signifies pitches below the tonic/ do/ 1. The upper tick [ ‘ ] signifies the octave above tonic and higher.*

This system is tried and true and works well with older students who have been music consumers for a long time but who may or may not have music training. I chose to add low ti after fa, because you'd be practicing the half step m-f, so it would be just as easy to add the lower half step t,-d, but you could also wait until you've introduced the higher ti.

## PENTATONIC

After studying Kodaly with Mrs. Jo Kirk, I've become a firm believer in the power of pentatonic scales (drmsld' – l,drmsl – s,l,drms – rmsld'r' – msld'r'm') and how easy and familiar it is to our ears due to folk music. I also really appreciate the pentatonic approach, because it starts with a skip of a minor third! Absent from my pedagogy were skips until after we learned a major scale, but the music we sing in class sure doesn't wait. As mentioned earlier, I recommend not just adding pitches by the time you have four or more. For example, if the students are learning re, try just practicing drm or rms (which doubles as sld) examples. Here is the sequence I use:

<b>Solfa:</b>	<b>Scale degrees:</b>
ms	35
msl	356
dmsl	1356
drmsl (pentatonic)	12356
drmsld' (extended pentatonic)	123561'
l,drmsld'	6,123561'
s,l,drmsld'r'	5,6,123561'2'
then add fa and ti (half steps)	4 and 7

## PITCH PERFORMING SYSTEMS

Most commonly these days, choral directors are utilizing solfege as a way to assign specific names to scale degrees. Whether solfege, scale degree numbers, or even letter names, it is prudent to pick something and use it consistently with your students! From vocalises to ear training to sight-reading *to repertoire rehearsal*, students will be most literate when using a system in all portions of your rehearsal process. Here are some systems with which I am familiar:

Scale Degree Names	Solfege (American)	Scale Degree Numbers	Absolute Letters
tonic	do	1	C
	di/ra (moveable only)	1/2 OR ween/tay	Cis/Des
supertonic	re	2	D
	ri/me (moveable only)	2/3 OR tee/thray	Dis/Es
mediant	mi	3	E
subdominant	fa	4	F
	fi/se (moveable only)	4/5 OR feer/fave	Fis/Ges (jess)
dominant	sol	5	G
	si/le (moveable only)	5/6 feev/sax	Gis (jeece)/Ace
submediant	la	6	A
	li/te (moveable only)	6/7 seex/sav	Ice/Bes
leading tone	ti	7 (sev)	B

### SOLFEGE – moveable do

This system assigns a specific name to all 12 chromatic pitches in an octave. This is a benefit, because all distinct pitches have a different name, and I'd imagine this is significantly easier to compartmentalize for students. Curwen hand signs exist for all 12 chromatic pitches and make ear-training and sight-singing a kinesthetic experience, which is so beneficial for our kinesthetic learners. In moveable do solfege, tonic in major is do. Additional modes can start

on do using chromatic solfege names or on the respective scale degree maintaining diatonic pitches (e.g. phrygian mode is either do ra me fa sol le te do OR mi fa sol la ti do re mi). Your choice here likely boils down if you want your students to reinforce do as tonic OR if you want them to reinforce intervallic relationships between diatonic pitches. This holds true for la-based minor/aeolian (my preference) or do-based minor/aeolian. La-based serves students' ear-training earlier on in development, but do-based minor is great for understanding parallel minor keys.

## SCALE DEGREE NUMBERS

More familiar to students may be assigning each note of the scale to a number. Tonic (do) = 1, supertonic (re) = 2, etc. This is quicker and less intimidating than learning to memorize all 12 chromatic solfa. Some utilize only the traditional seven numbers, meaning sharps and flats are not a different name for the altered pitch. Others have created a system of "ee" vowel sounds for the sharps and "ay" sounds for the flats. Both are included above.

## LETTER NAMES

In some countries, letter names are utilized in sight-reading, which can encourage development of perfect pitch in youngsters. As I learned from a teacher who studied abroad, this system does account for chromatic pitches by changing the vowel sound when you pronounce the letter. Sharps end in "ees" sound, and flats end in "ess" sound. The exception is for the letter A (Ab is Ace, A# is Ice – some flip these two). Given this is a fixed system, memorizing the sound of a distinct pitch is much easier, but developing intervallic ear-training may be more difficult than a system that is moveable (moveable do solfege or scale degree numbers).

## SOLFEGE – fixed do

Fixed do is a common system of sight-reading in many other countries around the world. Because each solfa is assigned to a specific pitch (C = do, D = re), this also encourages development of perfect pitch. This system is most successful in schools that start music in early elementary, because the skills can be developed for a number of years.

## ADDITIONAL EAR-TRAINING

A key component to developing our students as fluent music readers is the incorporation of myriad ear-training exercises. Many teachers will prioritize major and minor triads, major scale, and chromatic scale, since these are included in our regional honor choir auditions, but there are many other exercises that will train the ears (and if we show them the notation, the eyes!). I've included a document here:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KPhMjrFbEPv8xMLygXPfGMLzVwzj65iy/view> containing exercises that I've notated. If you'd like the Finale file to make your own edits, send me an email, and I'll get it to you as soon as able.

# CMEA Central Section Choral Sight-Reading

GENERAL INFORMATION FOR SIGHT-READING – taken from the Central Section Festival Handbook located here: [https://f749b009-5aeb-40cd-9ab9-93c72e43b3e3.filesusr.com/ugd/b0f097\\_fba76396a83c4620b718c0b70d9f2bc2.pdf](https://f749b009-5aeb-40cd-9ab9-93c72e43b3e3.filesusr.com/ugd/b0f097_fba76396a83c4620b718c0b70d9f2bc2.pdf)

- All ensembles are expected to go to the sight-reading room immediately following their prepared music performance. This portion of the Festival experience evaluates the ensembles ability to read and interpret music. Directors will be given a choice of two titles within their classification level established at Registration to sight-read.\*\*
- Sight-reading is a closed performance situation in which no one is allowed in the room except the adjudicator, an assistant, room managers, the Festival Site Hosts, the performing ensemble and the director. Other Adults may enter at the invitation of the Director

- The Site Host, room managers, and adjudicators will do everything possible to create a relaxed atmosphere in the sight-reading room and contribute to a positive learning experience.
- The adjudicator will evaluate the ensemble and assign a rating according to the sight-reading standards and provide a mini clinic to help the ensemble to be more musically literate.

\*\*New this year, choral sight-reading rooms will have spiral bound packets for the director, adjudicator, and all students. Packets will contain level 1-pentatonic, level 1-diatonic, level 2, and level 3 with voicings for unison, two-part (SA, TB, SB), three part (SSA, TTB, SAB), and SATB. There will be a table of contents with page numbers for each exercise.

## CHORAL SIGHT-READING INFORMATION

- A. If there is more than one score, the director will have one minute to study the scores and make a selection. Students will wait quietly during this time.
  1. The director and students will have one minute to study the score silently.
  2. The director and students will have up to five minutes for study, discussion and singing.
- B. Ground rules for the five minute study time:
  1. The director may not sing any melodic or rhythmic part(s) to the students during this time.
  2. The keyboard may be used only once during the five minutes to establish the key.
  3. The director and students may do any or all of the following:
    - a. Discuss the selection pointing out key and/or meter changes, form of the selection or potential trouble spots, etc.
    - b. The students may break into sections to work through their individual parts. Students may practice parts aloud within their selections. The director may “rehearse” the different sections without singing or demonstrating as outlined above.
    - c. The choir may sing through selected areas of the music to check for accuracy. The director may call attention to mistakes, but he/she may not vocally demonstrate the correction for the choir. Students may go back into sections to work again.
- C. Performance:
  1. Immediately before singing, the choir may sing a scale and/or arpeggio to establish the key and to sing their starting pitches.
  2. During the performance, no demonstration either vocal or rhythmic may be given by the director. The director may call out rehearsal numbers or letters as needed.
  3. Should the director find he/she must stop the ensemble, the director should restart the ensemble at the closest rehearsal number or letter to the point where the ensemble stopped.
  4. If time permits, oral comments about the performance and the rehearsal process may be given by the adjudicator.
  5. Sight-reading is a closed performance situation in which no one is allowed in the room except the adjudicator, an assistant or secretary, the Festival Site Chair, the performing ensemble, the director and (if space is available) any individuals who are there by the invitation of the director.

## Classification Expectations

All examples will be eight measures in length, 4/4 time, with ONLY pitch and rhythm. Key signatures will be determined by the best range for that exercise (up to four sharps/flats). You can choose ANY level of sight-reading regardless of your classification for performance.

### LEVEL 1

Pentatonic – steps: d-r, r-m, s-l; skips: d-m, m-s, l-d’ (ascending and descending)

Diatonic – steps only d-s, no skips

Quarter notes & rests, half notes & rests, whole notes, dotted half notes, and eighth notes (groups of 2)

## LEVEL 2

Diatonic - d-d' all steps, skips of a third

All rhythms of level 1 plus syncopation (1 +(2) +), single eighth notes & rests, dotted quarter

## LEVEL 3

Diatonic – s,-m' with chromatic alterations such as: #4, #5, b7, b3, diatonic skips & leaps up to a fifth

All rhythms of level 1 and 2 plus sixteenth notes (III, I II, II I) and dotted eighths

A sample Level 1 exercise could be: [sightreadingfactory.com](http://sightreadingfactory.com) Tone Set drmsld' SRF level 2.

The image shows a musical exercise on two staves in 4/4 time. The first staff contains measures 1 through 4, and the second staff contains measures 5 through 8. Measure numbers 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 are indicated above the notes. The exercise starts with a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a dynamic marking of 'f'. The melody consists of quarter notes and rests, with some chromatic alterations.

# Sight-Reading Resources

[www.sightreadingfactory.com](http://www.sightreadingfactory.com)

- This website is the ultimate tool for teaching sight-reading to your students. It is almost fully customizable with options for ensemble type and voicing, rhythm figures and difficulty, range, intervals, key signature, time signature, and more. If you purchase a teacher account, you can save customized examples under a name and generate an unlimited number of exercises with that customization. You can also purchase student accounts and assign sight-reading examples directly to the students.

Denise Bacon's *185 Unison Pentatonic Exercises*

Zoltan Kodály's *333 Reading Exercises*

Audrey Snyder's *The Sight-Singer* Level 1.

Masterworks Press

S-Cubed (great for middle school/jr. high)

Rounds/Partner Songs:

- Ah, Poor Bird
- Hey Ho Nobody Home
- Rose, Rose
- C-O-F-F-E-E Round
- A-Ram-Sam-Sam
- Shalom Chaverim
- Oh How Lovely in the Evening
- Viva La Musica (Praetorius)

## Implementation Ideas

From *Amanda Isaac*:

- Sight-reading – 1-2 exercises per day (depending on the length & complexity of the exercise)
- I write the exercises on the board/screen initially and then move to physical copies.
- “Don’t Stop and Never Give Up!” is their mantra.



- I always ask them to analyze the exercise and identify the “challenges”.
- I scaffold them through those spots and then put it all together.
- Other days we’ll just talk it through and then sing it.

*From Molly Peters:*

Remember that your music is your best sight-reading material! Have the kids solfege directly from their performance pieces as much as possible. They can write the solfege syllables into their scores and they'll be reading in 2-4 parts in less than 10 minutes. And if/when you have an accidental, you can give it to them and call it "out of sequence." Don't be afraid of sight reading with occasional accidentals! I tell the kids I'm giving them tools for their toolbox so if I didn't show up one day they could still sing.

*From Jack Bertrand:*

I do my best to make sight-reading a daily exercise. How many minutes I want to spend on sight-reading that day determines how many exercises I do, but it’s probably an average of 1 or 2. Most often, my sequence of activities is stretches, breathing and vocalises, ear-training, then sight-reading. I particularly love to go from singing scales/triads/arpeggios to the “repeat after me” exercises that I mentioned before (four beat melodic patterns) that reinforce our newest notes and/or intervals that we are studying. I then project the sight-reading example on the board, give them their starting pitch, and give the students 60 seconds to practice. I expect them to practice aloud and use Curwen hand signs. Priorities in their practice time are determined by the example in front of them, but “rhythm is king” (or queen) and just knowing the names of the solfege confidently are the two biggest hurdles I have found for my kids. I will typically draw their attention to strange transitions, rhythm patterns, or melodic patterns to make sure they spend a few extra seconds there. When 60 seconds are up, I play the note again and count them off to start. If they crash and burn part of the way through (most common in my intermediate class), we start again at the beginning and I do not give any musical commentary until they can get to the end of the exercise. Then we rehearse sections if needed, then generate a new exercise if there is time.

*\*Note\* I also assess sight-reading on an individual level so I can become more acutely aware of my sight-reading leaders and what skills need to be developed.*

The biggest difference between what I do in my class and the process for sight-reading at festival is the added 5 minutes of rehearsal time and the initial 60 seconds is silent. As we get closer to festival, I will start devoting one day a week to “festival sight-reading”, which will be in this time format with the voicing that the class will read at festival. The more advanced the class, the more I have students teach during the 5 minutes, because this is our time to show the adjudicator what they are capable of.

## Final Thoughts

Additional contributors:

*Amanda Isaac, Director of Choirs at Bakersfield High School*

*Susanna Peeples, Director of Choirs at Granite Bay High School*

*Molly Peters, Director of Choirs at West Ranch High School & Rancho Pico Junior High School*

I hope that this guide has given you the starting tools to implement sight-reading into your choirs. When I first began at North, the students had limited or no reading skills and had a sour attitude about the whole process, but now in my fifth year, the students really enjoy it and feel a strong sense of success. I am incredibly thankful for my commitment to literacy, because it has grown my program’s ability to learn and retain music, and it allows us to sing much more complex music. I know that it can do it for your program as well!

If you have questions, comments, or hesitations, please reach out! You have trusted friends and mentors, CMEA Central Section and local MEA leadership, and myself at your service. We are rooting for all programs to adopt sight-reading into your rehearsals and fall in love with teaching it, so we are just phone calls or emails away.

Musically yours,

Jack Bertrand

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