

Rhythm Reading Introduction

If reading music is a skill that you don't yet have or one that you would like to sharpen, my belief is that the following 6 (Rhythm Reading) pages will serve you very well. Reading music requires that you take in and process different types of data at the same time. These include information about which notes to play, and a lot of direction on how to play them. But by far the most important component to consider at any given moment while reading music, (and the aspect that will demand most of your attention) is the rhythm. In order of priority, your brain will (and should) consider the various aspects of what you are reading in this order:

- ① Rhythm (starting with the tempo and time signature)
- ② Notes (starting with the key signature)
- ③ Elements of style (articulation, dynamics, and style markings).
- ④ Form (repeats, DS and CODA locations).

The only way really to become comfortable processing all of this data in real time is to work on them all separately. If you are not currently fluent on which note is on which line or space, take any piece of sheet music and just identify note names. Don't worry about any other aspect of what you are reading. Just identify notes. DO NOT write the letters over the notation. Take as much time as it takes to figure out every note. It will get faster sooner than you expect it to, (if you haven't written the letters over the notes). If you need a starting place for this, the middle space is a C. The line above that is D. The space above that is E. The line below C is B, and the space below that is A.

Now lets talk about Rhythm Reading.

The six pages are numbered 1 through 6 and are meant to be worked on in order. Do not look at page 2 until you can read page 1. These pages are not meant to be played with your instrument but are meant to be vocalized. All six pages are in 4/4 time (which means that every bar has 4 beats, and each beat is written as a 1/4 note). So every bar has the equivalent of 4 1/4 notes, that would be the same in value as 8 1/8 notes, or 2 1/2 notes, or 16 1/16 notes.

Understand that any written rhythm is a precise subdivision of

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time at a given tempo, so the first step to reading is ALWAYS to first set a tempo. It is best (by far) to use a metronome, but tapping your foot at a constant tempo will do. If you are at the beginning of this process I suggest a tempo of 50 bpm (beats per minute) to start.

Before you start reading page 1, I suggest that you just count along with your metronome (1,2,3,4,1,2,3,4,...). Do this for at least 20 seconds. Try to be as precise as you can matching your counting to the clicks of the metronome. After you are comfortable with this, imagine the place in time that is exactly half way between metronome clicks and say “and” at those points. Now count (1+,2+,3+,4+,1+,2+,3+,4+...). If you tap your foot along with the metronome, the “click” happens when your foot is down and the “+” happens while your foot is up. We refer to the count as a “down beat” and the “+” as an “up beat”. After counting downbeats and up beats is comfortable, I suggest that you practice leaving out each down beat for 4 bars in a row. **This will give you 4 bars of (+,2,3,4)**



Then 4 bars of (1, + 3,4)



Then 4 bars of (1,2, +,4)



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And finally 4 bars of (1,2,3, +)



Practice hearing the silent downbeat in your mind as you vocalize the up beat.

At this point you are ready to look at page 1.

Notice that every line of music (on the 6 pages) has two lines of notes. The bottom line is just the four 1/4 notes, and are there primarily as a reference for you to better understand the written rhythm above. Notice now that the upper line is the same (one bar) rhythmic pattern repeated over 4 bars. The first two lines of page 1 are the same as the examples above.

(4 bars of 1,2, +,4) then (4 bars of 1, +, 3,4)

Set your metronome to 50 bpm and start reading. As you read bar 1 and say (in time) 1,2, +,4,1,2, +,4... follow with your eyes as you would while reading English. By the time you get to the fourth bar (of every line) you already know how it goes, so (while vocalizing bar 4) look ahead at the first bar of the next line. The objective is to read the first bar of each new line without dropping a beat. If you find this difficult to do the strategy is always to slow the tempo down. If you are new to reading music, it's quite possible that 50 bpm too fast. Try 40 ppm. Find the tempo where you can do it and work there.

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My suggestion is that you stay with page 1 until you can read it without mis-reading or dropping a beat at 70 - 80 bpm. At first you will have to concentrate on every beat to understand the rhythm that has been written, but as you progress make an effort to see the whole bar as a short musical statement. Again, this is the same as not having to sound out every word in written English. Rather you recognize short phrases at a glance. You may spend several days on each page and slowly raise the tempo incrementally over that time. When you start a new page you should slow the tempo back down to 50 bpm and work the tempo up as your reading get more comfortable. It is very important to work at a tempo that allows you to read without tripping. If you are making mistakes or having to re-start you need to slow down.

Completing these six pages will give you a solid grounding in reading. At this point you can read music.

After you have been through all six pages there is great value in going through them again and working them up to 120 bpm. If you see the benefits of rhythm reading and want to pursue it further, I suggest the book "Modern Reading Text in 4/4" by Louis Belson. This book takes the work you have started here a lot further.

After you have been through the six pages you will want to start reading while playing your instrument. If you have never read music before, I suggest that you look at "Rubank Elementary Method" for (your instrument). Being a method book and not song book, it is designed to teach you to read. It is presented as a series of Lessons where Lesson 1 leads to Lesson 2 etc. The rhythms (in the early lessons) are much easier than the those in the six pages, but the level of difficulty increases as different concepts are introduced and as the lessons progress. The music in this book is not hip or familiar, but you'll be glad you got through it!

Adding the demands of playing your instrument to the other aspects of music while reading the music that you're playing takes

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getting used to, and this books addresses these challenges.

Whenever you address a piece of music that you intend to read and play that is currently too difficult to execute, the strategy to approach this is the same no matter what level you are reading at. Firstly slow it down to a tempo where you can analyze it one beat at a time. Secondly remember the order of priority that I mentioned earlier. 1. rhythm 2. notes. 3. articulation and musical elements. Figure out the rhythm before considering what notes are involved or how to play them. I find that a helpful step to internalize difficult rhythmic passages is to vocalize the rhythm (as you did with the six pages) and execute the finger movement of the line on your instrument while you vocalize the rhythm.

As a final suggestion for developing single line reading I recommend a series of book by Lennie Neihaus called “Jazz Conception for Saxophone”. (Basic, Basic Vol. 2, Intermediate, Advanced). Again these are not song books, but etudes that are written at a specific reading level and intended to improve your reading skills. If you put yourself through the Rubank book start with Basic and work your way through the series.

If you take the suggestions I have made to heart I have no doubt that you will be reading fluently much sooner than you expect and at a level that you didn't expect.



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