

## *Fifteen Top Tips to Improve Sight-Reading Skills*

1. Start by observing the key signature. Decide which major or minor key is associated with that written in the piece (it's always good to decipher the relative majors and minors as well), and mentally imagine the sharps or flats needed to play the extract. Memorise the key and keep it firmly in mind at all times.
2. Quick recognition of certain note patterns, shapes, and repetitions can be a deciding factor in the success of any test. Noticing features such as chords, arpeggio figures, scale passages, and ledger line passage work, will prove extremely important. Remembering Chordal patterns and shapes is vital because there simply isn't time to read every note. Examining the bass clef thoroughly can be beneficial, as often the left hand drives a work.
3. Pay special attention to any suggested fingering, as it's best to have this element visualised before you start particularly when negotiating scales, arpeggios or any contrapuntal sections.
4. The tempo or speed of a test must be noted, however, I always suggest playing well under tempo to begin with. For those with reading difficulties, employing extremely slow speeds is the key to eventually unlocking reading skills and becoming fluent.
5. In order to keep time, it's imperative to assimilate all aspects of tempo. With this in mind, it can be a good idea to separate the rhythm from the notes completely. Firstly, tap the intended pulse. Then tap the rhythm of the sight-reading test on the piano lid with both hands; the right hand tapping the notes in the treble clef and the left hand, tapping those in the bass clef.
6. Keep a steady pulse by counting aloud, making sure the beat is subdivided. Playing along to a metronome may be an even better, more reliable option; learning to 'sit' on the beat and not rush ahead or linger behind is also crucial. The determining factor in success here is to make sure the pulse is extremely slow.
7. There is so much information to process at once when reading; the key to perpetual motion is a very slow pulse (probably a third of the intended speed). It may be necessary to start the reading process using separate hands, only combining them when each clef has been thoroughly assimilated.
8. Slow speeds encourage reading ahead because there is ample time to find all the notes and detail in the score. It can be helpful to count a complete bar before starting to play in order to establish the pulse (I often clap a bars rest!). Once this has been fully understood, speed can be gradually built up over time, as reading becomes more proficient (this process can take a few months).

9. Never, ever stop. If hesitations are still occurring then an even slower tempo is probably required. Learning to cope with mistakes is all part of the reading experience. Eventually, errors will be ignored and will not distract from the overriding rhythmic and structural outline of a performance.
10. Musical examples or sight-reading tests must feel easy to start with, so begin with straightforward diatonic exercises. It may be necessary to start at Grade 1 or 2 even if Grade 7 is being studied. If sight-reading is all fairly simple, it's a pleasurable, painless experience.
11. Over time, larger chunks of music can be negotiated and there will be a familiarisation with the typical patterns which occur time and again in piano music, eventually including more and more detail (pedaling, phrasing, dynamics etc.).
12. For those of a slightly more advanced level, reading hymns can be extremely useful. Slow moving chord progressions act as the perfect foil because they assist with reading four parts (or notes) at once, as well as fostering knowledge and understanding of four part harmony, and they also afford the chance to get to grips with a plethora of key signatures. As all church organists know, accompanying hymns is one of the best ways to learn to read because stopping isn't an option!
13. Reading at sight is fundamentally giving an impression of a work, so it's perfectly acceptable to leave out notes and other details. Bear this in mind at the beginning of each practice session.
14. Team up with a pianist friend (or another instrumentalist) of similar standard and play through a variety of music, all well within your capability. This is an effective way of reading music because, again, stopping isn't an option! Always choose a steady tempo.
15. Enjoy! Once accustomed to reading ahead, have fun with a myriad of musical styles.



