

Developing Music Literacy in Beginner Band

Kelly Connell

Music literacy is the most essential skill we teach our students, aside from tone quality. As such, it must be reinforced as an isolated concept daily in rehearsals. Literate students will be more engaged in learning their instrument, thereby enhancing your instrumental pedagogy.

Day 1-ish: Introduce Posture and Beat

ENFORCE POSTURE ON DAY 1 AND EVERY DAY AFTER.

Ready Position: The way we sit when we are about to do something

- “Sit as if you’re standing.”
- “Head over the shoulders, shoulders over the hips”
- Hands on knees (for now)

If feet can’t reach the floor, the student should scooch forward until they can (*if doing so is unreasonable, provide accommodation*).

Rest Position: The way we sit when we are not engaged in an activity

- Not naptime position!
- The same as the ready position, except that the back rests on the back of the chair.

Shorter students can scooch back until their backs can rest.

Informal Assessment: As a game, practice transitioning between the rest and ready positions. Praise students who do it correctly, gently help those who are struggling, and be okay with the activity getting a little silly, as long as the students understand the importance of both positions!

“The Beat”: The underlying pulse in every single piece of music!

Activity #1: Instruct students to get into ready position with their hands on their laps. Start the metronome at $\text{♩} = 60$, and have students pat their laps on the beat they hear. Increase and decrease the tempo and have students track the beat.

Activity #2: Instruct students to get into ready position with their hands on their laps. Play different songs over speakers and have students pat their laps when they find the beat. Help the first song or 2 until they get it!

Introduce the Quarter Note and Quarter Rest

- Quarter note = 1 beat of sound
- Quarter rest = 1 beat of silence
- Teach **(and enforce)** proper clapping technique, counting technique, and tone inflection!



Informal Assessment: Instruct students to assume a ready position with their hands in an open position and practice clapping and counting 4-beat patterns (mixing quarter notes and quarter rests) as a class on the board.

Day 2-ish: Introduce Basic Music Vocabulary

Review:

- Postures (Rest + Ready)
- “The beat”
- Quarter notes + quarter rests (Mixed 4-beat patterns)

New Vocabulary:

- Extend mixed 4-beat rhythms to 8 beats, using a barline.
 - Barline: Vertical lines that help us organize our music into equal groups
 - Measure: Space between two barlines
 - Double barline: The “period” to the end of a musical sentence. Indicates where the music stops
- Introduce sheet music through rhythm charts.
 - Pass out a rhythm chart to each student that utilizes only ♪ and ✪
 - Sheet music is read just like a book/essay:
 - Title at the top
 - The author (composer)’s name is written to the right.
 - Music is read from the top corner of the page, proceeding left to right. When we reach the end of a line of music, we proceed down the line and read the next one from left to right.
- Introduce measure numbers!

Informal Assessment #1: Call out different measure numbers and have the students touch the numbers as they find them on the page. Be sure to monitor and review answers to ensure mastery.

- Introduce the staff: The five lines and four spaces on which our music is written (we’ll explain this more in the future, but that’s all they need to know at this point).

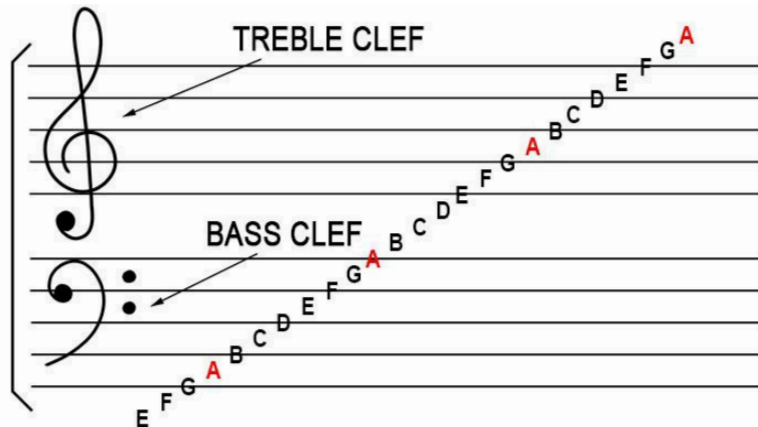
Day 3-ish: Introduce Note Naming

Review:

- Postures (Rest + Ready)
- Quarter notes + quarter rests (Count + clap 1-3 lines from rhythm charts)
- Barline, measure, double barline, staff, measure numbers

Note Naming:

- The musical alphabet is only 7 letters: **A B C D E F G**.
 - They lay on the staff in the same order:



- What comes after **G**? **A**....always!!

Activity/Informal or Formal Assessment: Master the Alphabet!

A B C D E F G A
B C D E F G A B
C D E F G A B C
D E F G A B C D
E F G A B C D E
F G A B C D E F
G A B C D E F G

Set the metronome to ♩ = 60-80. In a ready position, have the students pat every note of each line forward and backward. Each note name = 1 click.

Modification for weak readers: Instead of patting, have students touch each note as they say it, pulsing with the metronome

Clefs: Symbols placed at the beginning of music to help identify note names.

- “G” treble clef: Tells us w/here G is
- “F” bass clef: Tells us where F is

Introduce Notes on the Staff:

- Don't recreate the wheel. Utilize tools that work:
 - **Every Good Boy Does Fine**
 - **Good Boys Do Fine Always**
 - **All Cows Eat Grass**
 - “The staff has 5, it has 5 lines /
E G B D F /
E G B D F /
In-between each line, there is a space /
F A C E / It spells the word FACE!”

Informal Assessment: Instruct students to get into the ready position with hand staves ready. Call out different note names on the staff and have students show on their hand staff where the note goes. Check hands around the room and help stragglers!

Modification: Isolate lines and spaces, or just focus on 2-4 notes.

Note Naming Worksheets

- **Students need repetition and reinforcement for long-term success.** Provide a note-naming worksheet you like and guide your class through the first few answers. Then, give students 10 minutes to work on a page on their own, and check the answers as a class.
 - Monitor: Check their work. Help individuals. Encourage the use of the hand staff.

Every day of class for 1-2 weeks, have students spend 5-10 minutes on note-naming worksheets. Allow them to work independently, and provide assistance to those who need extra help. Check answers as a class and ensure that every student contributes.

**DO NOT ALLOW A SINGLE STUDENT TO GIVE UP OR
GO UNDER THE RADAR!**

Day 4-ish: Building Mastery + Establish Literacy Routine

Daily Routine (10min max):

- Rhythm Literacy: Ready position. Metronome set to 60-72 BPM. Count and clap 1-3 lines.
 - Review key vocabulary: Quarter note, quarter rest, clefs, staff, measure, barline, double barline.
- Note Naming: 5-10 min of independent note naming worksheet time. Check answers as a class.

Rhythm Literacy:

Formal Assessment: For each page of rhythm charts your class masters, conduct a chair test (either individually or in pairs for the first few). Evaluate good posture, steadiness with the metronome, counting out loud, and clapping accurately. This will keep your students focused in class and help you assess pacing.

Suggested curriculum:

- Quarter notes/rests
- Half notes/rests
- Whole notes/rests
- Dotted half notes
- Time signature
- Eighth notes
- Eighth rests
- Ties
- Dotted quarter notes
- Syncopation

Be consistent with the rhythmic hand gestures you teach and enforce!

Note Naming Exercises:

Once students have a foundational grasp of note naming, it needs to be reinforced DAILY.

Activity: Using Connell's note naming sheet, have all students touch the first note on the first line and identify it, then touch the following note and identify it, then continue the same pattern until the end of the line.

- **Sequence:**
 - Classes 1-8: Pick 1 line and have the class say the notes aloud, unmetered (no metronome).
 - Classes 9-16: Add the metronome ♩ = 60. Select one line and have the class recite the notes aloud on every **FOURTH** click.
 - Ex: **G** 2...3...4... **C** 2...3...4... **D** 2...3...4...
 - Classes 17-24: Add the metronome ♩ = 60. Select one line and have the class recite the notes aloud on every **THIRD** click.
 - Ex: **G** 2...3... **C** 2...3... **D** 2...3...

- Classes 25-32: Add the metronome ♩ = 60. Select one line and have the class recite the notes aloud on every **SECOND** click.

- Ex: **G** 2... **C** 2... **D** 2...

- Classes 33-?: Continue reciting notes aloud on every other click, but increase the tempo gradually over the course of the year until it begins to push 120 BPM.
- Class ??-??: Set the metronome ♩ = 60. Select one line and have the class recite the notes aloud on **EVERY CLICK**.

Ensure that every student touches every note with their finger and chants.

Formal Assessment: Have students read two random measures of their note-naming sheet aloud with the metronome.

The Daily Routine (for the rest of the year...and beyond!)

Once you've established your music literacy routine, add it to your daily warm ups!

Daily Routine (2-10min max):

- Rhythm Literacy: Ready position. Metronome set to 60-72 BPM. Count and clap 1 line.
 - Level Up: After the line is clapped/counted with mastery, have the band play it on concert F!
 - Accommodation: Only clap a 2nd or 3rd line if there was not mastery on the 1st. Break down the issue, isolate 1 measure at a time, and then put the line together again. Then try again on a new line!
- Note Naming: Ready position. Metronome set to 60+ BPM. Students are touching the first note and chanting as a class all the note names of 1 line.
 - Level Up: Students who this is easy for, have them finger the notes on their instrument WHILE they chant the notes on the page!
 - Reminder: MAKE SURE EVERY SINGLE KID IS CHANTING AND TOUCHING THE PAGE. You need 100% participation to make this exercise worthwhile!

Keys to Success

- **NEVER rush the process.** Your class and band will proceed at a pace as slow as that of your weakest reader. Invest in every student's understanding of the fundamentals.
 - It's not about speed; it's about understanding.
 - Do not move on to a new concept until at least 90% of your class has demonstrated mastery.
 - Move at YOUR KIDS' pace, not yours.

- **ALWAYS start with what they know before teaching a new concept.**
 - Review what they know, and bridge the gap to new material.
 - KWL

- **Do not allow stragglers to go under the radar.**
 - Preferential seating
 - Split classes with your co-teacher (1 takes the kids who need to move on to other concepts, 1 takes the kids who need remedial help)
 - Allow students to make up chair tests at a later time to improve their grade. Encourage growth and getting better.
 - Call parents, students' teachers, or band colleagues. Use your network!

- **Keep Kids on their toes!**
 - Prizes!
 - Ask random questions constantly (to almost absurdity).
 - JULIAN! How many beats is a half note
 - ABBY! Show me how you're going to pulse a half rest.
 - Speed games
 - Stand up, drop out

- **Do not rush to read music with instruments.**
 - It's okay to keep literacy and instrument development separate for a while. When it feels appropriate to combine, START WITH WHAT THEY KNOW. ↴
 - Rhythm charts (tongue rhythms)
 - Note reading (long tones written on the page) - Reference the first 5 notes exercise.
 - Teach the first few pages of the method book by rote, then introduce the book! Helps build literacy confidence. "Wait....we already know this. THIS IS EASYYYYYY!"

- **If music reading gets easy for kids (even boring), THAT IS GREAT!**

- Unpopular opinion: Everything we teach does not need to be a dopamine chase. It can be as simple as taking our morning vitamins. Repetition does not always need to be fun, it needs to be done daily.
- Utilize literacy worksheets and games for time fillers, sub plans, etc....have them work on music literacy so much, every assignment is an "Easy 100!"

- **"If you mess up, KEEP GOING!"**

- Students are often disinterested in participating in class activities due to insecurity (whether it is social pressure, a language barrier, etc.) or laziness.
- WAKE THEM UP, and establish a positive culture for learning! Be there literacy cheerleader (because who else will be)? Encourage students to be confident and learn from mistakes. When a student messes up, PRAISE THEM for making a BIG mistake, and remind the class that making mistakes is part of the learning process.