

Sight Reading Checklist

In order to successfully navigate through a song written in standard music notation, there are a number of variables you should quickly identify before attempting to play the music. You can compare the process of sight reading music notation to that of following directions as you travel from location A to location B. When you read a map or drive on a road, you are presented with various signs that specify details such as the distance you need to travel as well as where you need to turn in order to arrive at your destination. The same concept can be applied to reading music notation because your primary goal is to navigate through the piece of music without making a mistake or getting lost during the process. Not only should you be able to easily recognize all of the notes and rhythms in notation, but at the same time, you should be able to produce a performance which reflects that of prepared music. To accomplish this task, you need to follow all of the directions outlined in the notation.

This sight reading checklist contains a series of questions to ask yourself along with some additional variables to consider when sight reading music written in standard notation for the first time.

- What is the style?
- What is the song form?
- What is the clef?
- What is the time signature?
- What is the key signature?
- What is the tempo?
- Is there an introduction?
- Is there a coda?
- Are there chord changes?
- Are there repeated sections?
- Are there vamps?
- What is the highest note?
- What is the lowest note?
- Is there a bass solo?
- Locate the most complicated rhythms
- Find accidentals and modulations
- Check for articulation markings, signs, symbols, dynamics, and terms
- Position your hands to minimize shifting
- Try to read one measure or more ahead
- Do not forget to listen

In the early stages of learning how to read music notation, it will be practically impossible to play through an entire piece without stopping because you will not be completely familiar with the syntax of the musical language. However, as you become more proficient at reading, your playing will sound more like a prepared performance. Upon viewing notation, the best sight readers will know what the music is supposed to sound like before they play it. They can also read a piece of music perfectly on the first attempt and make their performance sound as if they had been playing the music for years.

Always remember that practicing sight reading is different from practicing for performance. When you are practicing reading, your main objective is to keep pace with the music because it is not going to stop if you make an error. While practicing for performance, you must stop if an error occurs, analyze why the mistake was made, and then isolate it until it can be performed perfectly without stopping. As you practice reading, choose a tempo that is slow enough to minimize mistakes but at the same time fast enough to create a challenge and push your sight reading ability. If an error happens, keep your eyes on the music, and jump back in when you can. In the beginning, base your counting on the smallest rhythmic subdivision in the measure to help maintain consistent counting. If the measure contains quarter, eighth, and sixteenth-note rhythms, count the entire measure as sixteenth notes.

When you read music, position yourself so that the neck of your bass is in a close visual line with what you are reading. This will allow you to use peripheral vision to help prepare for any necessary position shifts with your fretting hand without taking your eyes directly off the music. Read at least one measure ahead of where you are playing, and do not forget to listen to everything taking place around you. As a member of the rhythm section, it is especially important that bassists pay particular attention to the drummer or percussionist because they will often signal the start of a new section or the end of the song form with rhythmic accents.

To help internalize this sight reading checklist, go through this list item by item before you sight read standard music notation, and try to identify these variables in the notation. Since music written in standard notation can vary greatly depending on the musician notating the music and the degree of detail they include, not every piece of music that you read will feature all of the items specified in this list. At first, analyzing an entire score may take a couple minutes to complete, but after you know what to look for in notation, it will become an automatic process that can be done very quickly.