

## MINI ESSAY 12: MARKING INTERVALS WITH COLORS

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You may have noticed that in the **Teacher Guides**, we advise that students mark various intervals with different colors in their Reading Pieces and Sightreading Cards to aid in learning to read. They mark unisons (sames) with their "sames color," 3<sup>rds</sup> with their "3<sup>rds</sup> color," etc.

I wanted to explain this strategy further, as when I started having my students mark intervals, it was an experiment. I was not sure what might result from this strategy. Would students become reliant on the color coding? Would they ever be able to read without the color coding?

Obviously, since I am writing this Mini Essay, the experiment was a success.

In summary, I discovered that the student should not mark every interval, but in a piece with sames, 2<sup>nds</sup>, and 3<sup>rds</sup> mixed together in **Repertoire Book 1**, marking the 3<sup>rds</sup> will be beneficial until the student is confident at reading 2<sup>nds</sup> and 3<sup>rds</sup> quickly and easily.

In **Repertoire Book 2**, the student may not have to mark 3<sup>rds</sup> anymore, but as a new interval is learned and combined with previously learned intervals, it is helpful to mark the new interval. For example, in a piece with 2<sup>nds</sup>, 3<sup>rds</sup>, and 5<sup>ths</sup>, the student can mark the 5<sup>ths</sup> with his "5<sup>ths</sup> color."

Below is a unit by unit explanation of how I have students mark the intervals.

### Sames Color Unit 3. 2<sup>nds</sup> Repertoire Book 1 (Level C Sightreading Flashcards)

In **Unit 3** (2<sup>nds</sup> Unit), the student marks the sames (unisons) with his "sames color." If the student chooses orange as his sames color, make sure he always marks with orange. Do not allow him to change his color, as this will be confusing when he marks other intervals.

Marking the sames allows a young student to focus on the direction of the 2<sup>nds</sup> without the added complexity of deciding whether an interval is a same or a 2<sup>nd</sup>. The sames are found and marked before playing, which allows the student to focus solely on the direction of the 2<sup>nd</sup>.



*mf* My dog Fritz is so much fun. I say, "Fetch!" and off he runs.

If the student has difficulty determining whether the 2<sup>nds</sup> are ascending or descending, I connect the 2<sup>nds</sup> with a line and talk him through it. "We go from this line note up to this space note. Which way is this one going? Yes, it is going from down from the space back to the line. Now it is going which way? Yes, back up to the space."



I have found that it is not helpful for students to mark the sames and 2<sup>nds</sup>, because then the whole piece would be marked. Marking the sames provides enough support so that reading is not overwhelming. Not marking the 2<sup>nds</sup> challenges the student to read the 2<sup>nds</sup> without relying completely on color coding.

The student marks the sames in every Reading Piece and Sightreading Flashcard for Unit 3. I ask him periodically if he wants to try it without marking. If says yes and is successful, I congratulate him on being able to play without marking anything! If he says he wants to mark, I let him continue to mark the sames until he is more comfortable. If he says he does not want to mark but makes mistakes, I continue to have him mark the sames.

Some students love marking the intervals so much that they want to mark the 2<sup>nds</sup> also. I may let them mark the 2<sup>nds</sup> on one piece or flashcard, but then I tell them we are only going to mark the sames, not the 2<sup>nds</sup> on the other pieces and flashcards.

**Sames Color**  
**Unit 4. 3<sup>rds</sup>**  
**Repertoire Book 1 (Level D Sightreading Flashcards)**

When 3<sup>rds</sup> are introduced in **Unit 4**, we do not need to mark them, because this unit consists of Reading Pieces and Sightreading Cards that only use 3<sup>rds</sup> and Sames. Therefore, I continue to have students mark the sames in their sames color if this is helpful. If they can read without marking, they do not need to mark the sames.

**3<sup>rds</sup> Color**  
**Unit 5. 2<sup>nds</sup> & 3<sup>rds</sup>**  
**Repertoire Book 1 (Level E Sightreading Flashcards)**

Reading becomes more complex when 2<sup>nds</sup> and 3<sup>rds</sup> are combined in **Unit 5**. At this point, generally students do not need to mark sames anymore. They can recognize them instantly without marking them. However, immediately distinguishing between 2<sup>nds</sup> and 3<sup>rds</sup> while reading a piece can be difficult for students. Therefore, I have the student choose a "3<sup>rds</sup> color," for example, blue, and mark the 3<sup>rds</sup>. The student continues marking all the 3<sup>rds</sup> in his Reading Pieces and Sightreading Flashcards for the entire unit.

Soft and shin - y Per - sian Cat likes to wear all kinds of hats.

**3<sup>rd</sup>s Color**  
**Unit 1 & 2. 2<sup>nds</sup> & 3<sup>rds</sup>**  
**Repertoire Book 2 (Level F & G Sightreading Flashcards)**

**Unit 1** in **Repertoire Book 2** is a review unit. No new intervals are added. **Unit 2** in **Repertoire Book 2** introduces pieces that begin on notes other than the Landmark Notes. However, no new intervals are added. The student can continue to mark the 3<sup>rd</sup>s in each Reading Piece and Sightreading Card in **Units 1 and 2**. I ask the student periodically if he would like to try playing a Piece or Sightreading Card without marking the 3<sup>rd</sup>s. Eventually he will have the confidence to do this.

Prai - rie dogs are pop - ping, peek - ing, stick - ing heads out lit - tle hous - es.  
 I so wish that I could bring one back to my house by the riv - er.  
 My mom says he likes the out - doors and does not want to come with me.

**5<sup>ths</sup> Color**  
**Unit 3. 5<sup>ths</sup> & 3<sup>rds</sup>**  
**Repertoire Book 2 (Level H Sightreading Flashcards)**

Reading Pieces and Sightreading Flashcards in **Unit 3** introduce the 5<sup>th</sup>. The student chooses a "5<sup>th</sup>s color", for example, pink, and marks the 5<sup>th</sup>s. At this point, the student should be confident at reading 3<sup>rd</sup>s and should not need to mark them. However, if he has trouble, he can mark the 3<sup>rd</sup>s also.

Si - lent - ly walk - ing in a line, Ants go crawl - ing o - ver my lunch - box.

**5<sup>ths</sup> Color**  
**Unit 4. 2<sup>nds</sup>, 3<sup>rds</sup>, & 5<sup>ths</sup>**  
**Repertoire Book 2 (Level I Sightreading Flashcards)**

In **Unit 4**, 2<sup>nds</sup>, 3<sup>rds</sup>, and 5<sup>ths</sup> are combined. Generally, at this point students do not need to mark 3<sup>rds</sup> when combined with 2<sup>nds</sup>, as they are confident about reading those intervals. However, if a student still has trouble immediately distinguishing 2<sup>nds</sup> and 3<sup>rds</sup>, the 3<sup>rds</sup> can also be marked.

The image shows a musical score for 'Bear Dreams' in 4/4 time. The melody is written in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. The lyrics are: 'At the ocean I can play on the beach, See the sea lions sun - ning there on on the the beach, It is fun to spend the day rocks. in the sun.' Blue lines mark intervals of 2<sup>nds</sup> and 3<sup>rds</sup> within the treble staff. A pink line marks a 5<sup>th</sup> interval between the last note of the first measure and the first note of the second measure. A bracket labeled '1' spans the first measure, and a bracket labeled '5' spans the first two measures.

Note that it is not necessary to mark intervals between staves when a melody moves from treble clef to bass clef. For example, in "Bear Dreams" below, marking the 5<sup>th</sup> between the last note in m. 1 and the first note in m. 2 is not necessary, since this interval does not look like a 5<sup>th</sup> on the staff. Instead, students should know that the LH note is A. Intervals are only marked within a staff.

The image shows a musical score for 'Bear Dreams' in 4/4 time. The melody is written in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. The lyrics are: 'Deep in a cave ern Lies a slum - ber - ing black bear. What is he dream - ing? Of green for - est and sun - light?' A pink arrow points to a 4<sup>th</sup> interval between the last note of the first measure and the first note of the second measure. A bracket labeled '3' spans the first measure, and a bracket labeled '2' spans the first two measures.

**4<sup>ths</sup> Color**  
**Unit 5. 4<sup>ths</sup> & 2<sup>nds</sup>**  
**Repertoire Book 2 (Level J Sightreading Flashcards)**

**Unit 5** introduces the interval of a 4<sup>th</sup>. The student should choose his "4<sup>th</sup> color," for example, green, and mark the 4<sup>th</sup>s. Generally, 4<sup>th</sup>s are the most difficult interval to read. However, because the student has already combined three intervals in his reading, 2<sup>nds</sup>, 3<sup>rds</sup>, and 5<sup>ths</sup> in **Unit 4**, reading 2<sup>nds</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>s in **Unit 5** actually seems easier, since there are only two intervals to read.

When easier units follow harder units or easier pieces follow harder pieces, the student gains confidence in his ability and has forward momentum to continue learning new pieces. If every piece was harder than the last, learning piano would seem like climbing a very steep mountain with no plateaus. Including easier pieces amidst the more difficult ones is like finding a flat plateau in the mountains. Children do not learn in constant inclines. They learn in inclines and plateaus. Providing plateau pieces (or units) that are easier in the middle of the upward progression is the most natural way to build confidence and motivation to keep working.

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Monkey in the Zoo' in 4/4 time. The melody is written on a treble clef staff, and the bass line is on a bass clef staff. The lyrics are: 'Mon - key in the zoo. Look, he stole my shoe!'. The intervals between notes are marked with green lines and numbers: '1' above the first measure and '5' below the first measure of the bass line. The notes are connected by green lines, and the lyrics are placed below the notes.

**4<sup>ths</sup> & 5<sup>ths</sup> Colors**  
**Unit 6. 2<sup>nds</sup>, 3<sup>rds</sup>, 4<sup>ths</sup>, & 5<sup>ths</sup>**  
**Repertoire Book 2 (Level K Sightreading Flashcards)**

**Unit 6** combines 2<sup>nds</sup>, 3<sup>rds</sup>, 4<sup>ths</sup>, and 5<sup>ths</sup>. The student can mark the 4<sup>ths</sup> and 5<sup>ths</sup> as needed, but at this point he may not need to mark any intervals.

Also, we have noticed that by the middle of **Repertoire Book 2**, students often begin reading the notation of their Rote Pieces and Challenge Pieces, because at this point, their reading ability has almost caught up with their playing ability. Because the reading progression has been built in a systematic and slowly paced manner, with the playing level kept ahead of the reading level, by the time students' reading level catches up to their playing level, students are not intimidated by the score of even difficult looking Rote Pieces.

### Summary

When I first had students mark intervals with a color, I worried greatly that they would become reliant on this marking in order to read the intervals. However, the opposite occurred. When students felt confident, marking was phased out, and the students could read with no trouble. I think the marking helped for the following reasons:

- The act of analyzing the intervals in each Reading Piece and Sightreading Card meant that the student was actively looking at each interval and deciding what it was. This systematic analysis of intervals helped students recognize intervals quickly.

- In a piece that focused on several intervals, marking one interval alleviated reading difficulty just enough for the student to read fluently and thereby gain confidence in reading. If no marking was allowed, the process of reading may have been too difficult for some students, which could demoralize them about their reading abilities.

Marking intervals is phased out as the student becomes more adept at reading each interval. By the end of **Repertoire Book 2**, students usually do not need to mark any intervals, but feel confident in their ability to read well.