

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^{rds} with their "3^{rds} 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^{nds}, and 3^{rds} mixed together in **Repertoire Book 1**, marking the 3^{rds} will be beneficial until the student is confident at reading 2^{nds} and 3^{rds} quickly and easily.

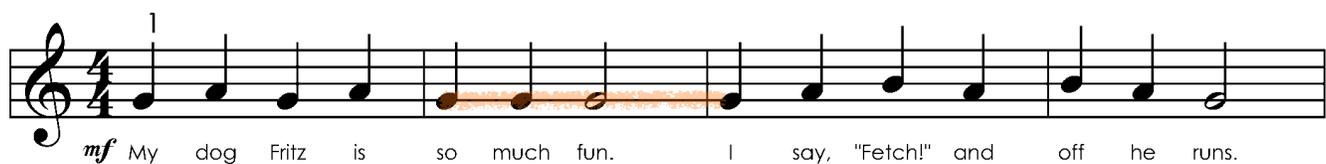
In **Repertoire Book 2**, the student may not have to mark 3^{rds} anymore, but as a new interval is learned and combined with previously learned intervals, it is helpful to mark the new interval. For example, in a piece with 2^{nds}, 3^{rds}, and 5^{ths}, the student can mark the 5^{ths} with his "5^{ths}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

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

Sames Color Unit 3. 2^{nds} Repertoire Book 1 (Level C Sightreading Flashcards)

In **Unit 3** (2^{nds} 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^{nds} without the added complexity of deciding whether an interval is a same or a 2nd. The sames are found and marked before playing, which allows the student to focus solely on the direction of the 2nd.



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

If the student has difficulty determining whether the 2^{nds} are ascending or descending, I connect the 2^{nds} 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^{nds}, because then the whole piece would be marked. Marking the sames provides enough support so that reading is not overwhelming. Not marking the 2^{nds} challenges the student to read the 2^{nds} 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^{nds} also. I may let them mark the 2^{nds} on one piece or flashcard, but then I tell them we are only going to mark the sames, not the 2^{nds} on the other pieces and flashcards.

Sames Color
Unit 4. 3^{rds}
Repertoire Book 1 (Level D Sightreading Flashcards)

When 3^{rds} 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^{rds} 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^{rds} Color
Unit 5. 2^{nds} & 3^{rds}
Repertoire Book 1 (Level E Sightreading Flashcards)

Reading becomes more complex when 2^{nds} and 3^{rds} 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^{nds} and 3^{rds} while reading a piece can be difficult for students. Therefore, I have the student choose a "3^{rds} color," for example, blue, and mark the 3^{rds}. The student continues marking all the 3^{rds} in his Reading Pieces and Sightreading Flashcards for the entire unit.

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 a piece in 4/4 time. The melody is written in the treble clef and the bass line in the bass clef. The lyrics are: "Mon - key in the zoo. Look, he stole my shoe!". The score is divided into four measures. The first measure contains the notes G4, A4, B4, and C5. The second measure contains D5, E5, F5, and G5. The third measure contains A5, B5, C6, and D6. The fourth measure contains E6, F6, G6, and A6. The intervals between notes are marked with green lines and numbers: 1 (between G4 and A4), 2 (between A4 and B4), 3 (between B4 and C5), 4 (between C5 and D5), 5 (between D5 and E5), 6 (between E5 and F5), 7 (between F5 and G5), 8 (between G5 and A5), 9 (between A5 and B5), 10 (between B5 and C6), 11 (between C6 and D6), 12 (between D6 and E6), 13 (between E6 and F6), 14 (between F6 and G6), and 15 (between G6 and A6). The numbers 1 and 5 are also written below the first and second notes of the first measure, respectively.

4^{ths} & 5^{ths} Colors
Unit 6. 2^{nds}, 3^{rds}, 4^{ths}, & 5^{ths}
Repertoire Book 2 (Level K Sightreading Flashcards)

Unit 6 combines 2^{nds}, 3^{rds}, 4^{ths}, and 5^{ths}. The student can mark the 4^{ths} and 5^{ths} 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.