

MINI ESSAY 25

Super Awesome Sight Readers! Part 3: The Four Ingredients for Confident Music Reading

By Dr. Julie Knerr

Part 1 of this series (**Mini Essay 23**) addressed how long it should take for students to become confident readers.

Part 2 (Mini Essay 24) addressed false assumptions on the part of the student and teacher.

Part 3 will present the four ingredients that we believe combine to lead down the Long Road to reading mastery.

I say it is a Long Road, because it is true that there is a Short Road.

First, let's take a look at the **Long Road**.

Think about how you, as an advanced pianist, read. When you look at a piece of music, do you see the note name of every single note in your mind? Or do you see shapes of chords and contours of melodies? Hopefully, you see the latter. As music becomes more complicated, it is almost impossible to think of every single note name. Reading music is a complex skill that requires not only knowledge of note names, but an incredible amount of spatial awareness on the page and in the hands, combined with rhythm in real time. When you think about all that goes into reading, it is quite amazing that the brain is capable of reading complex music!

We believe, as I said in Part 2, that **Note Names Alone Are Not Enough**.

So what are the ingredients that lead to confident and fluent music reading?

Ingredient #1. Patterns and Theory: Students should see patterns in the music and relate them to how this feels physically on the piano. In the early stages, these patterns are based on the configuration of black and white keys that students learn in their Piano Safari Rote Pieces in Level 1. Later, basic theory patterns such as triads, scales, and accompaniment patterns form the basis for fluent reading in Piano Safari Levels 2 and 3.

Ingredient #2. Contours and Intervals: Shapes of melodies and the intervals within the melodies. Shapes of chords and the intervals that make up the chord.

Ingredient #3. Rhythm: Understanding rhythm in terms of the larger beat and in terms of rhythmic notation is foundational for good sight reading.

Ingredient #4. Note Names: It is important for students to become fluent in recognizing note names and playing them in the correct octave on the piano. But this is only one component to reading music. It is unfortunate that this ingredient has often been elevated to the only thing that is involved in music reading.

Working on these four areas systematically and repetitively over a period of at least three years will yield confident readers. I call this the Long Road, because it requires quite a bit of repetition over a long period of time to solidify each ingredient.

There is a **Short Road**. It is to memorize a few note names at a time and only read pieces that have those notes. This is the strategy that many traditional methods have employed. And this approach can work very well for some students. Unfortunately, it does not work for all students, and it also can lead to wrong assumptions about reading (see Part 2, Mini Essay 24).

An even more dangerous result of taking the Short Road is that often reading note name by note name divorces the notation from the sound. The student learns to think about reading and music in the wrong way. He learns that music is made up of a random collection of notes that he has to memorize separately.

Although some students will intuitively integrate individual notes into a whole, too many students will use their eyes to the exclusion of their ears, reading note by note with no understanding of the overarching melody, harmony, or rhythmic structure of a piece.

This danger can be clearly seen when the student plays unrhythmically or complains about playing with the teacher accompaniment, saying, "The accompaniment makes it harder."

In contrast, we have found that in many cases, students who understand the piece as a series of patterns, rather than viewing each note individually, actually find that it is easier to play with the teacher accompaniment, because the piece makes more musical sense when the accompaniment provides the rhythmic and harmonic support.

Because fewer notes are involved, the Short Road may make it appear that students can read well much sooner in their piano study. But in my opinion, the Long Road will produce students who understand musical structure and think about music more completely and correctly, and who in turn will become more confident readers in the long run.

In Parts 4-7, I will focus on each ingredient of the Long Road.