

Sight-reading

Sight-reading is not a talent you either have or lack — it is a procedure, and nearly all of it happens before you play a note. Examiners give you around thirty seconds to look, and most candidates waste them staring at bar one.

THOSE THIRTY SECONDS, SPENT PROPERLY

Key & time · 5s	Shape & range · 6s	Find the hard bar · 8s	Hear it · 6s	Set tempo · 5s
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Never begin at bar one and read forwards. Take the whole page in first, then go hunting for the one thing likely to trip you.

WHAT TO LOOK AT, IN THIS ORDER

LOOK AT	ASK YOURSELF	WHY IT MATTERS
Key signature	Which sharps or flats? Name the key out loud.	Nearly every wrong note in sight-reading is an unplayed accidental.
Time signature	How many beats, and is it simple or compound?	Decides how you count and where the stress falls before you start.
Shape & range	Where does it start and end, and how high does it go?	Gives the phrase a destination, and warns you of the shift before you meet it.
Rhythm only	Tap or say the rhythm of the whole piece.	Rhythm errors sound far worse to an examiner than a wrong pitch.
Patterns	Any scale, arpeggio, repeat or sequence?	Most bars are things you already know. Read groups, not notes.
Dynamics & articulation	What is marked, and where does it change?	Free marks. Playing them separates a pass from a good pass.

THE FIVE RULES WHILE PLAYING

- 1 Choose a tempo you can hold at the hardest bar — then go slower than that.
- 2 Keep going. Never stop, never go back, never correct.
- 3 Eyes ahead of your hands — read the next bar while playing this one.
- 4 If you are lost, keep the pulse and come back in on the next barline.
- 5 A steady wrong note beats a hesitant right one. Rhythm is the priority.

HOW TO PRACTISE IT

Every day, one new short piece you will never play again. Reading the same book twice is not sight-reading — it is learning.

Use music two grades below your playing level. If you are struggling with the notes, you cannot practise the skill.

Duets are the best training there is: someone else keeps the pulse, so stopping is not an option.

The examiner's view

They listen for pulse, shape and character — not perfection. A reading that keeps time, observes the dynamics and reaches the last bar unbroken scores well even with several wrong notes. One that stops twice to fix a note does not.

Reading for composers

Fluent reading is how you steal. Once you can play through a page at sight, every score in the library becomes a source — sight-read piano reductions of pieces you love and you absorb harmony faster than any exercise teaches it.

DON'T LOOK AT YOUR HANDS

Learn your instrument by feel so your eyes never leave the page. Looking down loses your place, and finding it costs bars.

COUNT THE EMPTY BARS

Rests are notes you don't play, not pauses. Count through them aloud until they hold their full length.

ONE GLANCE, ONE DECISION

Having chosen a tempo, commit to it. Changing speed mid-piece is the clearest sign that you are reading, not playing.