Sight-reading self-test

Sight-reading is not a talent you have or lack. It is a habit: the same thirty seconds of looking, every time, before you play a note. This sheet gives you the habit, ten pieces in three graded steps to try it on, and an honest way to mark yourself.

THE THIRTY-SECOND SCAN

IN THIS ORDER, OUT LOUD IF YOU CAN

1. **Key signature — then name the key.** Not "two sharps"; say "D major". Now you know which notes are sharp for the whole piece.
2. **Time signature — then find the beat.** Tap it. Decide the speed you can manage, not the speed you wish you could.
3. **The hardest bar.** Find it before you start, and set your tempo by that bar rather than by the easy opening.
4. **The shape.** Where does it rise, where does it fall, where does the same thing come back? Most short pieces repeat something.
5. **Accidentals and awkward leaps.** Circle them in pencil if you are allowed to. Look for the first and last notes.
6. **Count two bars in silence** before playing, at the speed you have chosen.

THE FOUR THINGS THAT GO WRONG

AND WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

WHAT HAPPENS	THE FIX
Starting too fast	Set the tempo from the hardest bar. A slow accurate reading scores far better than a fast wreck.
Stopping to correct a note	Keep going. A wrong note costs one mark; stopping costs the pulse, and the pulse is worth more.
Reading note by note	Read the interval, not the letter — up a third, down a step. Your hands know shapes faster than names.
Eyes on the fingers	Stay on the page and look one beat ahead. If you must glance down, do it on a long note.

HOW TO MARK YOURSELF

FIVE CRITERIA · FOUR MARKS EACH · TWENTY IN ALL

CRITERION	FOUR MARKS	ONE MARK
Pulse	Steady from first note to last	No settled pulse
Pitches	Every note correct	More than four wrong
Rhythm	Every value correct	Rhythms guessed at
Continuity	Never stopped or went back	Several stops
Musicality	Dynamics and phrasing observed	Hesitant, notes only

Three and two marks fall between the two columns: three for one lapse you recovered from, two for several.

Play each piece again a week later without looking at your old marks. What matters is not the total but whether the same criterion loses marks every week — that is the one to practise.

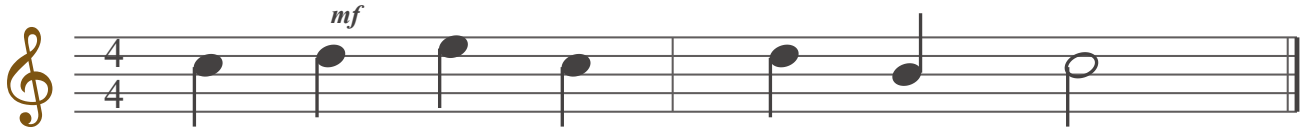
Step one · four to read

Steps, simple time, one key signature at a time

NAME _____ DATE _____

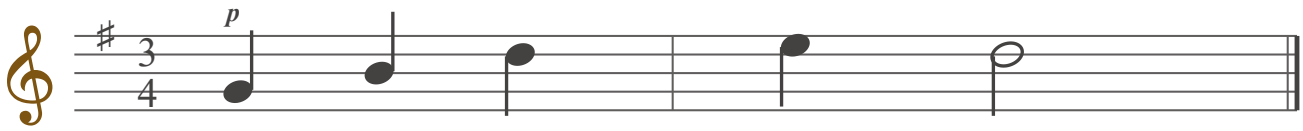
A · C major, 4/4

Steps only · say the key aloud first



B · G major, 3/4

One sharp · watch the leap in bar 1

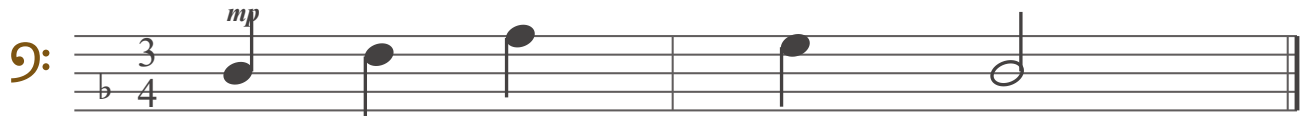


C · F major, 4/4

One flat · every B is a B♭

D · D minor, 3/4, bass clef

One flat · read the clef before the notes



YOUR MARKS

OUT OF 4 EACH · 20 A PIECE

CRITERION	A · DATE	B · DATE	C · DATE	D · DATE	SECOND ATTEMPT · DATE
Pulse	/4	/4	/4	/4	/4
Pitches	/4	/4	/4	/4	/4
Rhythm	/4	/4	/4	/4	/4
Continuity	/4	/4	/4	/4	/4
Musicality	/4	/4	/4	/4	/4
Total	/20	/20	/20	/20	/20

Before you play, write down: the key, the beat, and the bar you think is hardest. Getting those three wrong is how most marks are lost, and all three are free to check.

The criterion losing you marks this month

_____ — practise that one alone for two weeks: clap the rhythms, or read pitches without playing them.

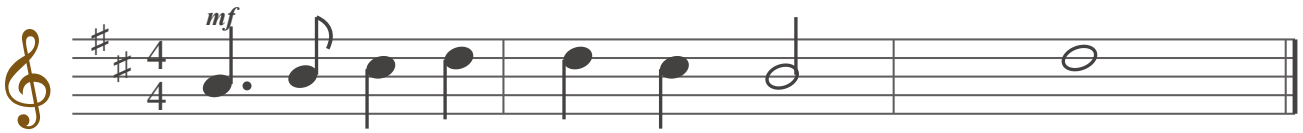
Step two · harder

Dotted rhythms, compound time, one note outside the key

Run the same thirty-second scan. Two new things to look for: a dot after a note lengthens it by half, so count the short note that follows it into the same beat; and in 6/8 the beat is the dotted crotchet, so there are two beats in a bar and the quavers come in threes.

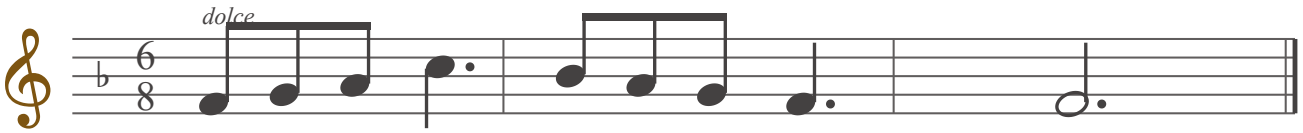
E · D major, 4/4

Two sharps · a dotted crotchet and a quaver in bar 1



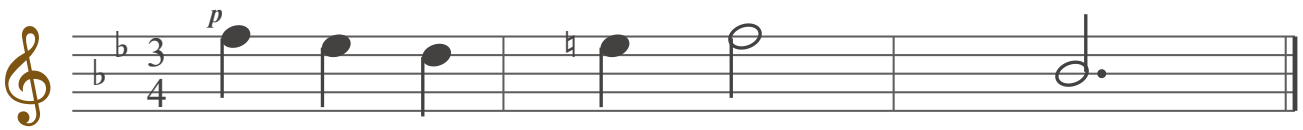
F · F major, 6/8

Two beats a bar · feel the quavers in threes



G · B♭ major, 3/4

Two flats · one natural sign that is not in the key



YOUR MARKS

OUT OF 4 EACH · 20 A PIECE

CRITERION	E · DATE	F · DATE	G · DATE	SECOND ATTEMPT · DATE
Pulse	/4	/4	/4	/4
Pitches	/4	/4	/4	/4
Rhythm	/4	/4	/4	/4
Continuity	/4	/4	/4	/4
Musicality	/4	/4	/4	/4
Total	/20	/20	/20	/20

Move on to step three only when two of these three score 15 or better without slowing down. There is no prize for reading hard music badly.

Say the rhythm before you play it. A dotted crotchet and a quaver is "one — and-a", with the short note pushed late. Speak it, tap it, then read it: the hand plays what the voice has already sorted out.

One rule above the rest. Never stop. Examiners, conductors and accompanists forgive wrong notes; none of them forgive a broken pulse. If you lose your place, keep counting and come in again at the next barline.

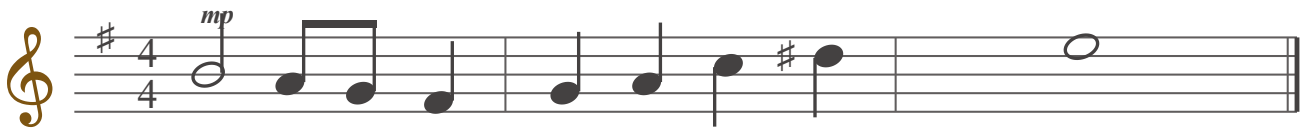
Step three · hardest

A raised leading note, semiquavers, two staves at once

In a minor key the seventh degree is often raised as the melody climbs to the tonic, so expect an accidental that is not in the key signature and check whether it returns. Semiquavers are twice the speed of quavers, not a new rhythm to guess at: find the beat they belong to and count within it.

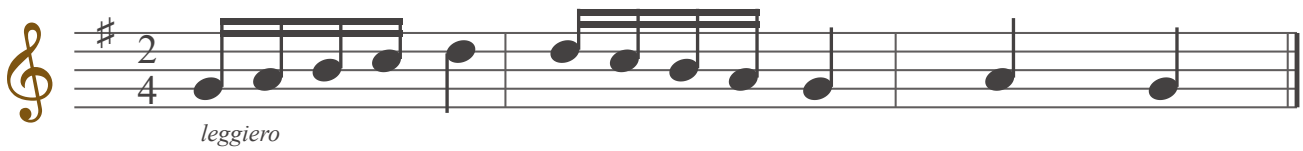
H · E minor, 4/4

One sharp · and one more written in when it is needed



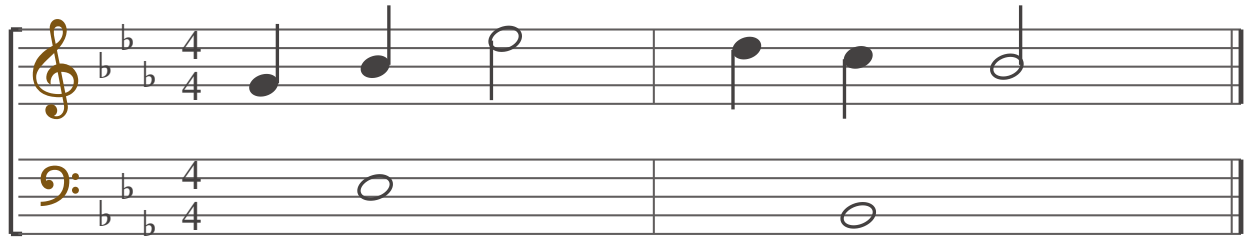
I · G major, 2/4

Four semiquavers to a beat · keep the pulse slow enough for them



J · Eb major, 4/4 · grand stave

Three flats · read both clefs together, and the lower part first



YOUR MARKS

OUT OF 4 EACH · 20 A PIECE

CRITERION	H · DATE	I · DATE	J · DATE	SECOND ATTEMPT · DATE
Pulse	/4	/4	/4	/4
Pitches	/4	/4	/4	/4
Rhythm	/4	/4	/4	/4
Continuity	/4	/4	/4	/4
Musicality	/4	/4	/4	/4
Total	/20	/20	/20	/20

When all ten pieces sit at 15 or better, keep the habit and change the material: one new page of anything unfamiliar, once a week, read once only. Reading something twice is practice — reading it once is sight-reading.

Two staves at once. Do not read them note against note. Read the lower part as a shape — where it moves and where it holds — and the upper part as the tune, then let the barlines keep them together. Where the left hand holds a long note, that is your moment to look ahead.