

Struggle With Sight Reading? Try This...

Are you one of the many pipers out there who learned to read music as you learned the bagpipes?

Sight reading is a skill that many of us struggle with – it's an entirely new language that we learn at the same time as the many other skills we need to play our instrument. But many pipers shy away from trying to improve how they read music, when it's just a skill we need to work on like any other!

Here are some tips to try if you want to get better at this vital musical skill.

First, don't stress about it too much. Start with the basics – and rhythm is key. When you first learned to read English, you didn't start with Shakespeare, right? You took baby steps with simple books. The same principle applies here. Begin with basic rhythms. Explore YouTube or rhythm tutorials to get a feel for the beats and timings. Tap along to music on the radio in your car, focus in on the beat and clap along in tunes you encounter throughout the day (I highly recommend bookmarking a few quality pipe band tunes to help with your ongoing bagpipe music immersion at the same time), and most of all, remember to have fun while you're doing it! You'll be surprised how quickly you train your ear to pick up the groove and rhythm in music.

Once you're comfortable with rhythms, you can move on to identifying notes. No need to dive into complex pieces right off the bat. Spend some time looking at sheet music you have – band tunes, or solo stuff. Then seek out new tunes from friends and bandmates so you can mix up the note combinations and test your knowledge. Familiarize yourself with the staff and how different notes relate to each other. Just like learning the alphabet, start simple and gradually increase complexity.

Another great exercise is to write out tunes you already know – ideally from memory. Sounds challenging, right? But this forces you to engage with the music, deepening your understanding of note relationships and rhythms. If remembering tunes to write them down is too hard, even copying from existing sheet music can be enlightening. You'll learn how musical phrases are constructed, and soon enough, sight reading will feel more intuitive.

Practice these things consistently – but again, remember to enjoy the process. The goal isn't to become a sight-reading robot. Instead, let your curiosity guide you. Choose tunes you like the sound of, or that you're interested in. The more you engage with music, the quicker you'll pick up new skills. Embrace the process as part of your musical journey.

And remember, sight reading goes hand-in-hand with your overall playing ability. As you improve your bagpiping skills, your sight-reading prowess will naturally grow. Before you know it, you'll be tearing through sheet music with confidence!