

## Are Great Sight-Readers Born or Made?

### Description

I grew up learning music by ear, so when I first began playing in an orchestra and saw how some of my friends could simply look at a new piece of music and play it in real-time, I was totally impressed (and more than a little intimidated).

I did get better at it over time, but always thought of myself as a relatively poor sight reader. Of course I shouldn't complain since I never really made a point of practicing sight-reading, but I always just assumed that I was a lost cause.

But is sight-reading ability really one of those innate qualities that we can't change very much? Or is it a skill that can be improved over time with the right kind of practice?

### Who knew?

As it turns out, sight-reading has been an area of research interest for quite some time, with studies going back nearly 100 years. There are also way more studies out there than I would have guessed – more than 90, in fact (though many are unpublished dissertations).

So this has led to a boatload of different variables – ranging from IQ to technical proficiency to improvisational ability – being studied as potential predictors or correlates (i.e. factors that might be *related* to sight-reading, but don't necessarily *make* you a better sight reader) of sight-reading awesomeness.

All in all, this has resulted in a rather confusing area of the literature with no clear theory or consensus explaining the phenomenon of sight-reading, or what we can do to increase our (or our students') skills in this area.

### 17 factors?

A [recent study](#) sheds some light on (a) the age-old debate about whether sight reading is an innate ability or if it is a skill that can be developed, and (b) what factors may be related to being good at sight-reading.

By pulling together all the relevant studies in the area, and studying them as a whole, the author was able to tease out some insights from the data that would otherwise be difficult to see if you were to look at each study separately.

Altogether, there were 154 variables across 92 studies, that had been associated with sight-reading in some form or fashion. There was some degree of overlap between variables, so most ultimately fell into one of seventeen different categories:

1. Music aptitude (as measured by various musical aptitude tests)
2. Music study (years of experience studying music)
3. Music knowledge (e.g. theory class grades or scores on other tests of music achievement)
4. Academic achievement (e.g. SAT scores, overall GPA)
5. Ear-training ability (e.g. grades in ear-training class, dictation test scores, ability to play by ear)
6. IQ
7. Perception (some measure of how quickly individuals can perceive stimuli – like the Group Embedded Figures Test which asks you to find a simple figure hidden within a larger more complex figure. Sort of like [Where's Waldo](#)).
8. Psychomotor (reaction time)
9. Sight-reading (how good you think you are at sight-reading, how much you practice sight-reading, or how many years of sight-reading instruction you've received)
10. Personality (like the [Myers-Briggs](#), or measures of leadership ability or even anxiety)
11. Practice (amount of general practice time)
12. Technical ability
13. Age
14. Attitude (interest and level of commitment in music)
15. Early exposure (listening to music as a child, early parental involvement)
16. Memorization ability
17. Improvisation skills

## The results

When you think about it, most of the 17 categories seem like they ought to be correlated with sight-reading in some way.

And as it turns out, most of them are. The strongest ones were improvisation skills ( $r=.65$ ) and ear training ability ( $r=.54$ ), followed by technical ability ( $r=.48$ ) and music knowledge ( $r=.48$ ).

Two factors were *not* related to sight-reading performance – attitude (e.g. how interested or committed you are to music), and personality factors.

Then there were some other categories that were statistically significant, but only weakly related to sight-reading ability. Factors like early exposure to music, memorization ability, and perceptual skills.

So what does this all suggest?

In reading through the results above, you may have noticed that many of the factors that are most strongly associated with better sight-reading skills, happen to be factors that can be improved with practice (hey,

good news!). Meanwhile, the factors that are more characterological in nature, and *not* impacted much by practice – like attitude, personality, and perceptual skills – have weaker associations with sight-reading.

The implication being, that while there are some innate factors that may certainly contribute to being a great sight-reader, it seems that sight-reading is a skill that can largely be improved with the right kind of practice and skill development.

Indeed, there are indications from [some experiments](#) on sight-reading that working on ear training, creative activities like improvisation, and singing/solfege do cause our sight-reading skills to improve.

How, exactly?

It seems that we become better at guessing what comes next.

Or, as the author explains in more eloquent terms, “Cues in the notation and aural cues from the performance may interact with music knowledge during sight-reading, resulting in sophisticated guessing. Aural skills may make the performer more self- and musically aware, allowing the performer to quickly form expectations and predictions during sight-reading while also adjusting performance quality quickly.”

## What’s next?

Unfortunately, there doesn’t seem to be a clear consensus in the literature about how best to improve our sight-reading skills in the most effective way possible.

But one thing that *does* seem clear, is that embracing opportunities to sight read, and making a deliberate effort to practice these skills, is just as relevant here as it is in any other area of one’s musical and artistic development.

I suspect musicians and teachers have a lot of insight in this area based on personal experience. So I’m a little curious – what are some strategies or exercises that you think are key in improving one’s sight-reading skills?

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