

Teaching Students to Own Rhythm

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Q: A teacher wants all students to have good rhythm—but how do we know when they do?

A: A student who has good rhythm displays **both** the ability to establish and maintain a beat and its subdivision when playing alone **and** the ability to play in time (including subdivision) with any other external source, even when independence is required.

There are two main ways a student must develop rhythm:

1. Individual rhythm

- Be able to establish and maintain a steady beat when playing alone.
- Be able to maintain rhythmic integrity when subdividing while playing.
- Be able to do either of the above, with a beat established from another source, if that source stops once the student begins playing.

2. Group (ensemble) rhythm

- Be able to stay with a beat that has been established and continued by another source (a person, the class, a metronome, etc.).
- Be able to play a rhythm accurately while any other source plays a different rhythm within the same main beat (rhythmic independence).

As teachers, it is our responsibility to help students learn to develop both types of rhythm.

Also, as teachers, we should remember that students learn visually, aurally and kinesthetically.

Basic Principles of Teaching Rhythm

- Use a metronome to build ensemble rhythm and to reinforce individual rhythm.
- Feel it, play it, then learn what it looks like
- Vocalize rhythm syllables to build independence
- Kinesthetic movement can build independence
- Drill reinforces kinesthetic learning
- Sightreading can only happen once
- Teacher must help students begin to perceive groups of notes (rhythmic figures) in the same way we learn to read words.
- Teach rhythms sequentially (see further page in handout)

Activities for Teaching Rhythm

- Teacher model, students echo
- Student model, other students echo
- Teacher play rhythm, students notate on board (or dictation quiz)
- Flash cards
- Computer programs for drilling rhythms
- Isolate difficult rhythm—play on concert F to learn rhythm, put pitches back in
- Circle rehearsal good for advanced groups playing rhythmic music
- Rhythm tree (see further page in handout) shows relationships
- Take out ties and/or rests to make rhythms easier
- Provide background (or simplified) rhythms for complex rhythms
- Play the subdivision of complex rhythms
- Groups not involved in a passage provide “motor”
- “Bopping” good for multi-layered or polyphonic passages

Following this page are four sheets which relate to the teaching of rhythm.

1. Rhythm Tree.

Many of us grew up seeing a chart like this, but it actually looked like a tree: the whole note was at the top, breaking into two half notes and so on. I would ask you to consider using this format of the Rhythm Tree, as it shows how each level of rhythm begins and ends sounds in relation to other levels.

2. Teaching Rhythms Sequentially.

When I was a young music educator I tried to run students through as many rhythms as I could. I was accepting the “false” information that because a lot of the aggressive learners were able to do it, that we were succeeding! NO. More experienced teachers will work diligently to help all students learn to count each level of rhythm before moving on. There are always easy ways to challenge the “top” players, but the 85% in the center of the class needs to “own” a level of rhythmic reading before moving forward. This chart shows a many of leveling your rhythmic reading benchmarks for your students.


3. “3 X 5” Worksheets—(Sorry it doesn’t have the title!)

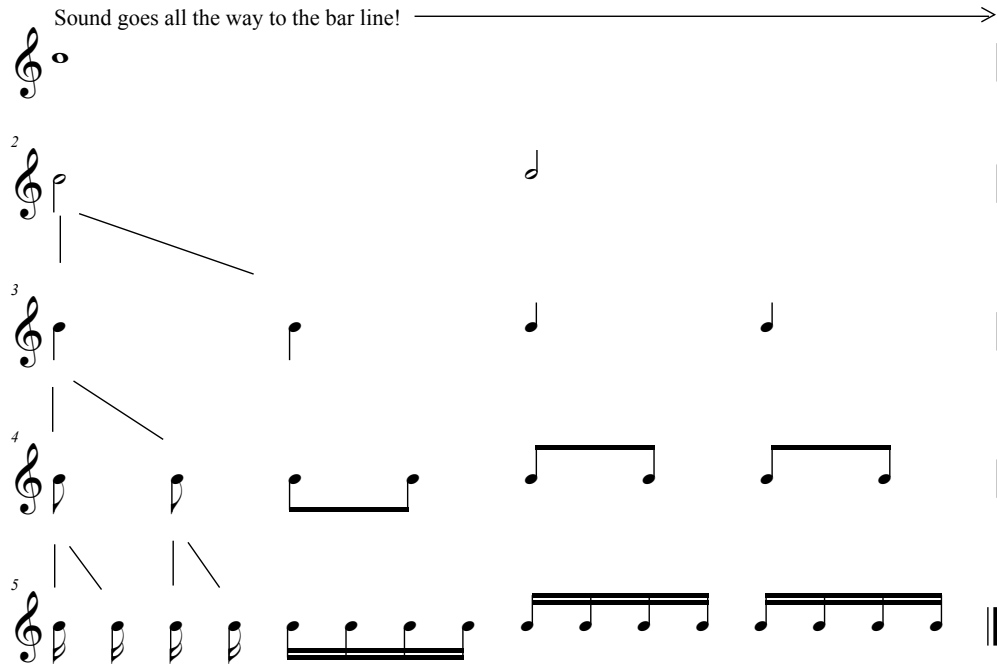
These should focus on one new concept at a time.

4. Simplifying Rhythms

For more advanced students, a teacher may find great value in relating a particular rhythm to an easier version, or skeleton. Often removing ties and rests can make the foundation rhythm clear to a student. Comparing a foundation or skeleton rhythm to a problem spot is a great way to help students learn to analyze their own rhythms!

Rhythm Tree

Sound goes all the way to the bar line! 



The diagram illustrates a 'Rhythm Tree' for a musical phrase. It consists of five levels of musical notation, each in a treble clef, connected by vertical lines and diagonal lines that branch out to the right. The levels are numbered 1 through 5 on the left side. Level 1 shows a single whole note. Level 2 shows a half note. Level 3 shows a quarter note. Level 4 shows an eighth note. Level 5 shows a sixteenth note. The notes are positioned on a staff, and the branching lines show how the duration of the notes is halved at each level. A horizontal arrow at the top points from the text 'Sound goes all the way to the bar line!' to the right, ending at a vertical bar line. The final level (5) ends with a double bar line.

Teaching Rhythm Sequentially

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I. Start with the "unit beat"



II. Combining whole beats



II.b. The associated rests



III. Duple subdivision, but only as a unit



IV. These two subdivisions are one level harder



V. MAJOR GOAL: Fractionalizing a count across a beat



VI. Related to the above rhythm



Here, the road forks. After the above concepts are mastered, you may progress to the quadruple subdivision, but you will also begin the compound meter by starting with the "unit beat" again, which which will be the dotted-quarter note.

VII. Quadruple unit, but always as a unit



Compound -- The unit beat



VIII. Combining the quadruple subdivisions



Compound -- Simple subdivision



IX. Quadruple subdivisions with rests



Compound -- more difficult



Compound -- subdivision to the next level



Later, students with a firm grasp of both simple and compound can learn asymmetric meters



Have them mark triangles and lines!

Using 15 measures allows you to play a scale ascending and descending.
 Formatting it as 3 measures across and 5 lines down makes it fit the page better!

1. Clap and count.
2. Write counts above measures.
3. Play on scale (the note changes helps them keep up, helps teacher follow a student who has "wayward" rhythm).
4. Play down the first measures on each line, then move to the second measures, etc.
5. Play in a round two measures apart. You can divide the class into two groups many ways!
6. Divide class in three groups, play in a round, two measures apart.
7. Teacher plays a random measure and have class guess which measure.
8. Have a student play a random measure and have the class guess which measure.
9. If you have successfully done "4" have half the class read the normal way and half the class read down.
10. Counting chain—each student in turn counts one measure from a continuous phrase
11. Make up your own teaching activity!

