

The easiest answer is there isn't one secret that fits everyone. Improving Sight Reading is different for each person, as they individually bring their own skill set, talents, and past experiences. What is pretty common among those who don't play instruments or who haven't sung extensively in choirs though is that they can improve from where they are currently, and doing so brings with it a great feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction.

No one has every really learned a foreign language by reading a book. They had to immerse themselves in the sounds of the language by listening, repeating, and then finally to being able to produce their own speech with an understanding of the rhythm and the accents within the language. Music is just language, or some folks like to think of it as being similar to art graphics, computer skill, or math, or in some cases, just frustration!

Ease your frustration by learning to play the piano. It's the simplest way to improve your understanding, as music is not only linear, but also vertical, it has form and shape, texts both foreign and domestic, historical context, and pulse. If you don't have access even to a digital piano, then pick any instrument you want and learn that. You will develop skills that instantly transfer into any reading challenge (I also encourage studying the drums – at least you will have great rhythm!).

Since I play piano (at least on good days), certain things become apparent when reading for me, almost like “seeing” the keyboard, or “feeling” the notes as I read. You see this in all instrumentalists, as they transfer their tactile sense into the performing the musical phrase “prima vista” (sight-reading term in Germany).

The HOW's - Other ways to improve sight reading...

Parameters: Melody, Rhythm, Text, Style, Articulations (dynamics, fermati, accents)  
Separate the parameters in solo practice, then Isolate, Segment, and Extend: Work only on a selected short passage, perfect it at a slow tempo, reducing parameters as necessary, then extend the phrase, and rehearse it in context of phrases before and after it. Speed it up back to tempo and add the other parameters (or rehearse them separately too, i.e., the German language spoken slowly in rhythm of the music – combines 2 parameters).

Musical Patterns: Look for musical patterns when sight singing, group notes where you can, e.g., scale passages, repeating melismas (Handel For Unto Us, for ex.), arpeggios. Know the harmonic function of your note (read vertically too!) – Bass and Soprano often on tonic, tenor on the 5<sup>th</sup>, alto on the 3<sup>rd</sup> (that's also the order of loudness in order to balance a chord properly – Root loudest down to 3<sup>rd</sup> softest. In order to sing well you must know the function of every note in the phrase and how it relates to all of the rest of the music around you.

Keep singing rhythmically – don't slow down whenever you are unsure – keep the tempo!  
Audiences always will hear a rhythmic mistake before a note mistake. That said, if you're off, don't keep singing merrily on your way leading everyone else around you astray (way too many sheep in some performances). Be wise and be aware of your surroundings. Also, the battle does not go to the loudest singer. Louder in a choir is often not necessary as it's a team sport. Be aware of blend, balance, your tone color, appropriate vowels, concise rhythm, your posture, your breath, your brilliance in connecting to the true emotion of the music and channeling the composer...etcetera, etcetera...you have heard all of this before. Just do it!

When you get tired or combine parameters, often things like posture and relaxed tonal production go away – always monitor and re-check yourself for your artistic and healthy performance. You only have one voice – protect it.

And when you don't do it, it's ok, just do better next time? A lot of success in singing is practicing it until it is perfect. Everything can be accomplished in time with good habits of practice, pencils in folders so you don't make the same mistakes or miss articulations, and just good old-fashioned hard work.

Sight Reading –

Methods for notes. Much has been written about using solfeggio (either fixed or movable Do), numbers for scale degrees, or the old and famous “la-la” which unfortunately is what I learned when I was young. It's not so bad however, as I am always trying to relate the pitch to an absolute note – not perfect pitch, but at least ballpark close. Any system is a language, so if it works for you and you are familiar and comfortable with it, use it. For us tonight we will use numbers as it carries with it the convenience of establishing intervals. It does nothing for relative pitch probably, unless 1 is always middle C.

Truth: Most of what you will sight-read in the standard choral canon is tonal music, most often in 4/4, most often written in a major (or minor) scale rather than in difficult modes or disjunct intervals. Where it gets interesting is when you are reading Bach and he decides to modulate chromatically, or are reading newer music but even then, when you understand the composer's style, it can usually be a breeze to read (Eric Whitacre clusters derived from fanning the choir out from single pitches, for ex.).

So then, I have come up with what I only call the Engebretson 1-2-1 (or sometimes 1-2-3) system, where I am re-setting tonics throughout my reading cycle. This gets really easy after you do it a while, so you will find that you are re-setting as you read at tempo. This is used for intervals that are perhaps bigger, less tonal, or some sort of awkward leap. Start with the number system – exercise, 1, 1-2-1, Now the pattern changes to learn a Major 3<sup>rd</sup> - 1-2-3-2-1\_\_3\_\_1, 1-2-3-4-3-2-1\_\_4\_\_1, etc. all the way up to 8. Now you have learned all of the ascending intervals - (Ascending intervals are always easier to read – folks have a much harder time w/ descending intervals for some reason). Keep everything in the major scale in the beginning – plenty to learn. Do same w/ descending intervals, but now describe the intervals in the opposite direction – (this part is tricky). Start again on 1, but now descend – I will demonstrate this.

Now when you see an ascending perfect 4<sup>th</sup>, just remember that part of the exercise as needed. What happens when you need to sing an ascending 4<sup>th</sup>, just remember the interval or use a friendly song (Here Comes the Bride – there are millions – just google it and you'll get plenty of ideas).

A descending perfect 4<sup>th</sup>, same – just do it from your new tonal memory. Ascending Augmented 4<sup>th</sup>? Ach, the tritone, the devil in music as was once said in the past! Don't guess at where it is, use the tone you know and extend – Sing a perfect 4<sup>th</sup> up (1-4), add a half step and you're there (or think Bernstein's “Maria”). If you were to sing the line C-F#-A#, I would re-set my tonic at F# and sing up 3 notes in the major scale (easy as 1-2-3), and then I would sing my A#. There are other tricks, but sing the major scale, then adjust back as needed for now – if it were C-F#-A natural for example, I could sing up the major scale (1-2-3), and fall back 1/2 step to the A natural. Sounds hard, but it's really easy once you have it up to speed. And then you can read virtually anything. To be continued....