

# FITTING THE FUNDAMENTALS INTO SHORT MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSES

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Several years ago, my school switched from a four-period block to a six-period schedule with 50 minute classes. Suddenly I no longer had time to fit in all those “extras” that I knew were fundamentally important for the students, because 50 minutes seemed to barely leave time for warm-ups and a quick rehearsal. After fumbling around for the first couple weeks, I knew I couldn’t fit everything in each class. I decided to carve out a weekly schedule to make sure I had time for all the pieces. On top of the daily warm-ups (fundamentals of singing) and rehearsal I added:

- Monday: listening journals
- Tuesday: sight singing exercises
- Wednesday: rhythm reading exercises
- Thursday: sight singing exercises
- Friday: canon singing

Each of these activities takes 10 minutes or less. Thanks to this schedule, I know I’m hitting it all each week.

## **LISTENING JOURNALS**

I select a recording; anything from elementary and middle school choirs to college and professional choirs, and sometimes from solo singers. Students write down the title, composer and performing group and add notes as they listen to the piece. In many cases, and always with my younger students, I guide their listening by telling them ahead of time why I chose the recording, what I’m hoping they’ll hear, and what the performer does well. I also may ask them to use certain music vocabulary in their journaling, or to be sure to comment on a specific aspect. I sometimes ask them to share their comments with the class afterward, or with a partner. They keep these all together in a notebook that I grade every so often.

## **SIGHT SINGING EXERCISES**

At the beginning of the year, I teach my students solfege and hand signs (using moveable *Do*). When I started teaching I chose not to use the hand signs, but I’ve since changed my mind on this. I have so many kinesthetic learners for whom having the physical motion attached to the sound really helps to cement it in their brains—not to mention it keeps them focused. I use hand signs daily as a part of warm-ups to work on their comfort and knowledge of solfege, hand signs, intervals and pitch retention. Twice a week, I extend their solfege practice to sing exercises from the solfege tendency drill packet. We do one or two exercises each Tuesday and Thursday. When sight singing from written music or exercises, we always use the same steps:

1. Count the rhythm (determining time signature)
2. Speak the solfege (determine key signature/*Do*, speak in rhythm, use hand signs)
3. Sing though it in your head (sing the scale first to solidify *Do*)
4. Sing it out loud (typically together, with hand signs)

## **SIGHT READING RHYTHMS**

I start off the year with basic counting sheets to cement whole, half, quarter, and eighth notes/rests. We then work our way through the rhythm packet, doing anywhere from 1-2 lines to the whole page each Wednesday depending on difficulty of the concept presented. I also supplement other rhythm exercises based on our current literature, either written myself or found in books or the internet. I have collaborated with the upper elementary/ high school directors to make sure we are all using the same counting system. I occasionally use games to review different rhythmic concepts, like a "rhythm bee." The kids line up, I start the metronome, and we read through the exercise with each student taking one measure. If they mess up, they take a seat. I will also count lines for them, making one mistake that they have to find.

## **CANON SINGING**

The majority of my students come in with little to no practice with part singing. Rounds are a great way to introduce this concept. I try to find ones that are short, easy to memorize, and fun for the students. I usually teach these by rote to my younger groups, and sometimes have my advanced students learn them by solfege. When teaching a round, I have students sing it all together before I join as the second part. I'll then split them into two groups, and so on. There are plenty of books of canons available, though I find most of mine for free online. It's easy to tie canons into whatever other musical concepts your class is working on: tone production, intonation, vowels and consonants, different time signatures, minor vs. major, etc.

## **TYING THEM TOGETHER**

I am constantly looking for ways to tie these concepts into the rest of the period. I'll point out when certain rhythms or intervals pop up in their literature, or remind them of a concept they heard in their listening journal. There are a million other ways to work these concepts, but the thing that has made the biggest impact is the *intentionality*. Having a schedule of specific routines keeps me from assuming the kids understand. I am able to actually measure their progress, and know the concepts are sticking with them.



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