

# Borrowing a Literacy Strategy From Band Class

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## Literacy

A band teacher explains how a process he uses to train budding musicians' inner voice can be used to help struggling readers improve.

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In band class, we don't spend a lot of time on passages of text, but you might be surprised by how much our rehearsals focus on reading skills. Students are learning a set of symbols we convert to sounds to convey meaning—it's literacy in a different language.

Reading in band has an additional hitch: Students have to read their parts while hearing several other parts at the same time, which requires them to be strong, independent readers—and sheds light on a common weakness in beginners that occurs in the reading of text as well.

Struggling readers who are native English speakers are very familiar with their language, and many of them have used that familiarity to develop coping mechanisms and shortcuts that get them through reading, to a point. When a student starts band, however, the language is often entirely new. Coping mechanisms don't really work—instead they reveal a student's weaknesses in reading music.

While these can take many forms, the most common weakness in my beginners has been in a skill that, in music, we call *audiation*. Audiation is, in part, the skill we use to mentally picture what a passage of music on the page sounds like. In literacy, a similar term is *subvocalization*. With my students, I use the term *inner voice*.

At its core, reading is basically an auditory process that happens to have some visual steps. We don't get meaning from text—we get it from words, and to our brains, words are sounds. Our inner voice is the bridge between sight and sound. It also bridges sound and meaning, not just decoding the words but adding elements like fluidity and inflection. Just as we had to practice with our outer voice to develop clear speech, our inner voice requires modeling and experience.

As students build this skill, there are telltale signs when it is underdeveloped. In the band classroom, those signs include:

- looking away from the page while playing (relying on memory or outside cues)
- needing to hear how a passage goes before trying to play it,
- getting lost when hearing different parts or others' mistakes,
- mixing up similar spots in the music, and
- playing the same spot differently each time.

The same problems can show up when students read text. Teachers should be on the lookout for students:

- looking at others, or the teacher, for cues when reading or reciting aloud,
- reading without inflection, or ignoring punctuation completely,
- skipping or replacing minor words like *for*, *of*, *a* or *an*, etc.,
- replacing words with those of similar "shape" (strength/straighten, every/very, etc.), and
- reading a word correctly in a familiar passage but differently in a new context.

Many of these signs mimic issues that students with vision problems have, so it's a good idea to check for those, too. In either case, the student is trying to read with incomplete information and is filling in the gaps with cues, memory, or guesses.

## Building the Inner Voice

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With young readers, a lot of what we do is aimed at developing the quality and "volume" of the inner voice. Here are some of the methods and mantras I use with my band students that may also help students who need more practice with reading text.

**Read, reread, and re-reread:** As soon as we begin reading music, I work with students to establish a clear, dependable process that I refer to as "the steps."

First, we read a passage through, focusing on the notes (names and fingerings) until there are no pauses or hitches. Then, we count and clap just the rhythms. Next, we pair the counting with the fingerings, to combine what we've learned from the first two steps, and then check for expressive markings that indicate style or volume, and incorporate those into the counting.

Finally, we play through the passage slowly. If there are problems, we revisit the appropriate steps and try again a bit slower. Once we have the accuracy and fluency we need, we can gradually speed up to the appropriate tempo.

**Make the internal external:** At every opportunity, I have students do these steps out loud. We say the note names out loud, and we have a system of counting syllables for rhythm

paired with claps and hand motions. I insist on the counting being loud and clear. Our inner voice can't say what it hasn't been taught, and it must hear the information in our own outer voice.

**Insist on the steps:** Once we have our steps, we always use them—even with relatively easy pieces. Most students will try to make the process go faster by skipping steps, but I don't let them. Speed comes from fluency, and fluency comes from following the steps more times. Our goal is to learn the process, not the product.

**Don't let students memorize or guess:** We'll often start in different places or change songs so that we're drilling the steps rather than the songs. Memory is not the inner voice—it's a recording of someone else's, and an unreliable one.

**Talk about mistakes:** As we work on a piece of music, we talk about the most common mistakes and why they happen. Later, I'll ask students to predict the problems they're likely to have with a new piece of music. Building this kind of metacognition is like vocal coaching for the inner voice.

**Listen individually and often:** I'll give a student a new song and have them walk me through the steps. If they're skipping, flipping, or halting, those are insights into what their inner voice isn't saying yet.

**Never tell them how it goes:** Students grumble, but I remind them of the steps and then put the work back on them. They can handle it, with time and effort.

**Do this with students of all levels:** Inner voice problems come from perfectly natural shortcuts all of our brains take, so even the most advanced students aren't safe. If the shortcut works just once, the student can get hooked on it. I can't let the fact that a student sounds fine hide bad habits as they develop—they'll be the ones who pay for the bad habits later.

By explicitly targeting students' inner voice, we can head off so many harmful habits that lead to later failures and frustrations, and we can give students a critical tool for success—in band, in English, and beyond.