
LESSON 5.1

READING ASSIGNMENT

Introduction

In this lesson, we'll be discussing all the things a piano beginner will be learning, as well as what materials I recommend for students at this level.

As I mentioned many times previously, I believe a good method book series is crucial in the beginner phase. By the time you reach an intermediate level in piano (Grade 3 and beyond) you will have outgrown method books.

The method series I'm familiar with and recommend are Alfred and Piano Adventures, but if there's another series you'd like to use instead – do your research and go right ahead.

How long does the beginner stage take?

For 95% of students it'll take 2.5-5 years to get through the beginner stage of piano. Even motivated students tend only to average 30 minutes of practice a day, 6 days a week. That means in a year you'll have practiced about 156 hours.

I estimate 6 months to 1 year to complete each of the Adult beginner books – or approximately 156 hours per book. Beyond that, there are one to three more leveled books, which will take 6 months to 1 year each to complete (again, about 156 hours).

For children and more casual adult students, or adult students who have a significant physical challenge (such as poor mobility of the fingers), it'll take more like 5 years. But motivated adults can often reduce this time by half if they're consistent.

What are you learning at a preparatory level (musical kindergarten)?

Before you even peek at grade 1 material, there's a 1- to 2-year period of musical kindergarten to work through. During this kindergarten phase you'll learn all the basics of piano, including:

- How to read music (basic notation, rhythms, fingering, intervals, etc.)
- Time signatures
- Basic terminology and signs (tempos, dynamics, etc.)
- Common scales and keys

- Basic chords (most major and minor chords, and extras like 7 chords, diminished chords, etc.)

I would recommend really digging into these basics for at least a year. There's a temptation for students endowed with physical dexterity to fly through the beginner stages. Except for rare cases I don't recommend this approach. You want to make sure that the foundation of your piano learning is strong enough to last a lifetime. It would be a pain to skip over the rudiments just to have to go back later and make corrections.

What you'll learn at a preparatory level

At a preparatory level, and before you enter grade 1, you want to make sure you have a secure grasp of the following skills and concepts. We'll list these concepts below, and discuss each in turn.

Physical

Proper piano posture

One of the first videos I recorded for PianoTV was about [proper posture](#), so be sure to check that out. Additionally, you'll find information on posture in the first pages of the Piano Adventures/Alfred method books.

Hand position/finger numbers

You'll also find a discussion on hand shape and position in the "proper posture" video as well as the method books. You want your understanding finger numbers to be automatic, requiring absolutely no thought on your part.

The Piano

Keyboard geography

In addition to having your understanding of finger numbers automatic, you want your knowledge of the letters on the keys to be automatic. You want to be able to look at the piano and immediately pinpoint a C, or an F, or any letter, without any conscious effort. This should be second nature before you move on.

Hand positions

Method books tend to utilize hand positions – a place you put your hands as you play a piece. This is especially true of the Alfred series. Hand positions generally correspond with 5-finger scales. By the end of a preparatory level you'll be very comfortable in C, G, F and D major position, as well as D, E and A minor.

Note and rhythm reading

Note values

You want an understanding of quarter notes, half notes, dotted half notes and whole notes. More complicated note values you'll want to understand (playing effectively and knowing how to count) are dotted quarter notes, eighth notes and sixteenth notes. You'll also see eighth note triplets at this level.

Aside from the notes, you'll also want to be familiar with the equivalent rests - whole rests, half rests, quarter rests, and eighth rests. Same goes for ties.

Meter

For a preparatory level, bar lines and measures are basics to master. The time signatures you'll want to be comfortable with include 2/4, 3/4 and 4/4. You should also be familiar with (and know how to count) 6/8 time.

Metronome

You should have some experience working with the metronome (generally with very easy pieces or exercises) before moving on to a grade 1 level. This doesn't mean you need to use the metronome all the time; rather at this stage it's all about getting a feel for using it. As your pieces become more complicated, at a grade 1 level and beyond, using the metronome also becomes more complicated – so make sure you can use it well with the basics.

Notation

Your reading range should span from low C (C2) to high C (C6). Any additional notes beyond this range should be easy for you to figure out. Aim to have "guidepost" notes memorized (such as low C (C2), bass C (C3), middle C (C4), treble C (C5) and high C (C6), as well as Treble G and Bass F.

Another aspect of notation reading involves sharps, flats and naturals. Be confident with these as well.

There is also the ability to read half-steps and whole-steps, both on the keyboard and on the page. You don't need to be able to recognize these instantly, but you'll want to be able to work them out quickly.

Intervals

In addition to being able to read notes quickly, you'll want to be able to identify intervals quickly. Have a good working knowledge of 2nds, 3rds, 4ths and 5ths, while also being able to determine a 6th, 7th or 8th reasonably quickly.

Key signatures

Key signatures that you can easily read at this level include the key of C, G, F and D major. You should also understand what their relative minor keys are (Am, Em, Dm and Bm).

Basic syncopation

You don't need to master syncopation at this point, but you'll want to know how to define syncopated notes, as well as being able to count and play them.

Formatting (repeats, codas)

By the end of a preparatory level you'll have worked with repeat symbols, 1st and 2nd endings, and codas.

Expression

Dynamics

At this level you'll be familiar with all the dynamic markings:

- *ff, f, mf, mp, p, and pp*
- *Crescendo and diminuendo/decrescendo* and their symbols

Phrasing

Have a working knowledge on how phrasing works and how to play slurs and phrases. This includes the two-note phrase and how to phrase a melody.

Damper pedal

By the end of a preparatory level you should have some experience both with reading pedal markings and playing syncopated pedal. Like many of these skills, you don't have to master it – but you should have a basic capability of using the pedal syncopated-style.

Straight 8ths vs. swing 8ths

By the end of your preparatory journey you'll have tried music with straight 8th notes (by far the most common) as well as swing 8th notes (where the 8th note pairs have a bluesy lilt to them).

Chords

Major and minor chords

Here are the chords you'll want to be comfortable with:

- All white-key major chords (C major, D major, etc.)
- All white-key minor chords (C minor, D minor, etc.)
- V7 chords in the main hand positions (the V7 chord in C position, G position, F position, D position, D minor position, E minor position and A minor position)

You'll also want to understand how major and minor chords are built, and chords that are common to familiar keys (C, F, G and D major; A, E and D minor)

How to build a 7 chord

Not only will you want to play the easier 3-note versions of 7 chords (such as your V7 chords), you'll want to understand how a 7 chord is built (the full 4-note version).

Other types of chords

In addition to understanding major, minor and 7th chords, you'll also want to be able recognize and identify augmented and diminished triads (3-note chords).

Chord variations

In addition to playing solid chords, you'll want to know how to play broken chords and a BT pattern. If you're working with Piano Adventures you'll become familiar with cross-hand arpeggios as well.

Inverting chords

You certainly don't need to be a master of this – but knowing *how* to invert chords is important. You'll also want a few basic chord inversions in your toolbelt, an easy thing to accomplish if you're going through the standard method books since they use chord inversions.

Using Roman numerals to represent chords

You should know 8 Roman numerals to represent each note/chord of the scale. You only need to be familiar with 3 chords per scale, though – the I, IV and V7.

I, IV and V7 chords in the standard keys

You'll want to know how to play the I, IV and V7 chord progression in the key of C, G, F and D major and A, E, D and B minor. If you're following through the method books, learning these progressions should be an organic process.

It'll help if you're familiar with the terms of some of these chords/scale degrees: *Tonic*, *subdominant* and *dominant* are the main ones to know.

Technique

5-finger scales (pentascales)

By the end of both adult method books you'll have tried many pentascales. The ones I recommend having memorized by the end of the preparatory level are all the white key major and minor 5-finger scales.

Various touches

Become comfortable with basic the piano touches, *staccato* and *legato*.

1-octave scales

Various 1-octave scales you'll want to be familiar with include C, F, G and D major, and A, E and D minor. You should have these memorized, both the notes and the finger patterns.

Chromatic scales

Chromatic scales are something you should learn pre-grade 1 as well. They're fun, simple, and used in a lot of repertoire.

Terminology

Basic tempos: *Allegro*, *andante*, *largo*, *moderato*, *adagio*

Basic symbols: *Fermata*, accent, arpeggiated chords, *8va*

Basic styles: Waltz, 12-bar blues, scherzo, two-part writing

Basic forms: Binary

Other terms: Ritardando

Other theory

How to build a major scale

You don't need to have the formula for building a major scale memorized, but you should be comfortable with the process and the pattern of whole tones and semitones.

Different types of minor scales

You'll want to know the difference between a natural minor scale and harmonic minor scale. You don't need to have harmonic minor scales memorized, but you'll be digging deeper into them at a grade 1 level and beyond so it's handy to know what they are.

Relative major/minor keys and chords

You'll want to understand how each major key connects with each minor key. Don't worry about having these memorized but understand the theory behind it. The most common ones are worth memorizing) from experience playing them) – C/Am, F/Dm and G/Em.