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## A BETTER WAY TO TEACH THE NOTES THAN MNEMONICS

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*Teaching the notes to beginners using mnemonics often results in children who struggle to read music because they huge frustration both to the teacher and the pupil. The most effective way to teach the notes is by:*

*\*using a way that is fun and engaging*

*\*catering to the various learning styles (visual, language-oriented, and kinetic)*

*\*using association and repetition*

*Teaching the notes in this way results in beginners who can instantly recognise the notes and have fun learning to do it.*

### INTRODUCTION

One of the hardest things to teach a beginner is to read the notes, and yet becoming a good note reader is so crucial to good progress. A beginner who knows the notes will be able to read music easily and progress quickly. But children that don't know the notes struggle to read music. This can become a huge frustration both to the teacher and the pupil. Not knowing the notes causes the pupil to progress slowly, get bored, or even quit.

Teaching the notes using mnemonics such as "Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit" often results in children who struggle to read music because they don't know the notes. After many years of teaching the notes using mnemonics, eventually I got to the point where I said to myself, "There just has to be a better way!"

Learning to read the notes is an academic, factual part of learning the piano. So we can apply the same principles as we would if we were teaching children information such as the capital cities of the world, for example, or the elements of the Periodic Table in chemistry.

- You could teach them in ways that leave them bored, and not really taking in or retaining the information.
- Or you could teach them in ways that capture their attention and motivate them to want to know, and want to be the fastest in naming them. You could teach them in ways that make it easy for them to learn and remember the information; it just seems to slip in to their minds without them having to try.

No matter what information we want to impart to them, what we need to know are some good principles in teaching children. Children have incredible brains; we just have to find out the way to switch them on, and if we can do that, then when it comes to learning and retaining new information, they'll leave us in the dust.

### **Demonstration**

When we learn something completely new and foreign to us, it puts us back in the position of being a beginner. It's good for us teachers to be reminded of what it's like, because I think a lot of the time we forget how it feels to be a beginner; how it feels to be sitting on that piano stool for the first time, being barraged with all this new information.

A demonstration follows in which the audience is taught something new in order for them to experience again what it's like to be a beginner. In doing this, two different ways of teaching are contrasted.

- (1) The first way of teaching has been set up so that it mimics that way that the notes are traditionally taught. The students are given mnemonics which they use to count up lines and spaces to get the answers.
- (2) The second way of teaching is completely different. It teaches by association with stories and colourful pictures. The members of the audience are also given magnetic boards with magnets which link to the stories, providing a hands-on activity that reinforces the learning.

By being put back in the position of beginners, the audience experiences what it's like to try to learn new information using mnemonics, a mechanical strategy, in contrast to learning the same information using stories and hands-on activities, which is fun, easy, and surprisingly effective.

### **Some Ways Children Learn Best**

Children learn and retain information easily when they're taught in a way that is fun and engaging, when they're taught in a way that caters to the various learning styles, and when they're taught using association and repetition.

## **(1) ENGAGING TEACHING**

Engaging teaching brings about enthusiasm and wanting to participate. When children are having fun, they are interested and stimulated, and their minds are open to learn.

- “When learning is fun, learning is easy.” (Kasibhatla, 2010)
- “I like nonsense; it wakes up the brain cells.” (Dr Seuss)
- “We don't pay attention to boring things...We remember learning that is fun, novel, different.” (Toney, 2011)
- “If we try to make work more fun, this will put our brain in the right frame of mind to learn. Put another way, if you are not ready to have fun, you are probably not ready to learn much.” (Hargrove, 2011)

The way that something is presented makes a big difference as to how well it is going to be absorbed. The brain remembers more when learning is fun.

### **Teaching Strategies that Engage the Brain**

There are many fun ways to teach that grab the attention and help the brain to engage with what is being taught, as described by Tate (2003):

**(A) Storytelling** - When a speaker tells a story, everybody listens. Stories grab your attention; you are immediately drawn in without having to try to concentrate. Stories are a great way to engage children; they love stories and can relate to them. So, if you can use stories to impart what you want to teach, you'll have their full attention.

**(B) Visualisation** - The visualisation that goes on in your mind when you're listening to a story can enhance learning and retention of information.

**(C) Multi-sensory learning** - Using different senses makes learning more fun, and helps the brain to remember more.

**(D) Games** - Students not only learn more when playing a game but their motivation for learning increases.

**(E) Manipulatives** - Manipulatives, that is, learning aids which you can pick up and move around, enable students to use their hands in combination with their brains to actively engage with and retain content.

**(F) Movement** - Rather than having students sit while their teachers do all the work, having them actively engaged in the content helps them to learn and remember the information.

**(G) Drawing and Writing** - The brain also remembers what it writes down and draws; this is another way to get the brain engaging with the content.

These are great ways to teach in a way that is fun and stimulating, and in a way which opens students' minds to assimilate what is being taught.

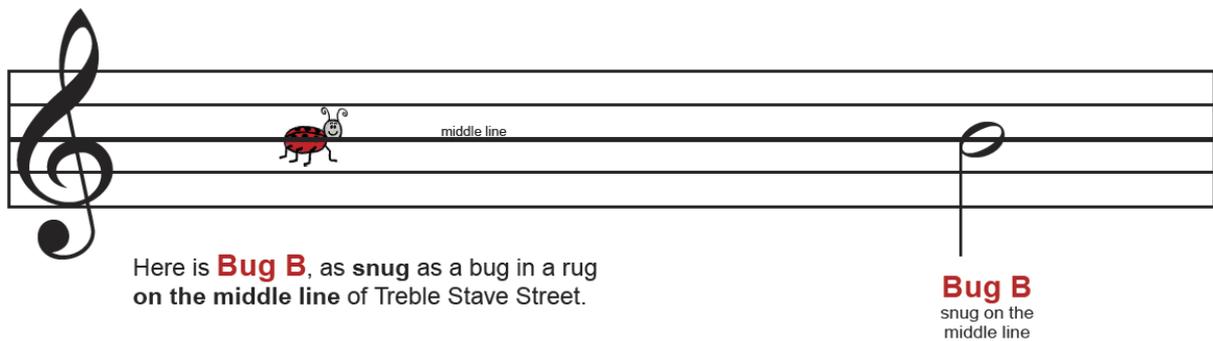
In the demonstration, when I teach with mnemonics, it isn't fun or interesting. When I teach with stories, however, it engages the audience and their minds are open for the information to go in easily. It uses multiple teaching strategies such as storytelling, visualisation, games, manipulatives, and movement to engage their brains with the content, enabling them to easily learn and recall quite a lot of information in a short time.

<b>MNEMONICS</b>  NOT ENGAGING	<b>WAYS CHILDREN LEARN BEST</b>  ENGAGING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not fun, interesting, motivating.</li> <li>• Meaningless, abstract, mechanical.</li> <li>• Tedious, slow, cumbersome to use.</li> <li>• Confusing deciding which mnemonic to use.</li> <li>• Uses only one teaching strategy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivation, enthusiasm, willingness to participate.</li> <li>• When having fun, a child's mind is open to learn.</li> <li>• The brain remembers more when learning is fun.</li> <li>• Teaching strategies that engage the brain:                stories, visualisation, multi-sensory learning, games, manipulatives, movement, drawing and writing.</li> </ul>

Teaching the notes to children using mnemonics is not an engaging way to teach. It uses an abstract, mechanical strategy which can be very tedious for a child to use when reading music. It can be confusing for children deciding all the time which of the four mnemonics to

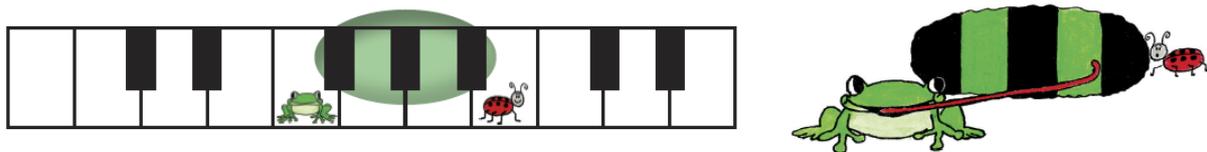
use, and this, combined with having to count up the lines and spaces to identify every note, can make reading music a difficult and slow process.

When learning is fun, learning is easy! In looking for a better way, I found that children love stories. When you teach with stories their minds are wide open to receive the information you want to impart to them. You can teach the notes on the staff with stories and characters, for example, “Bug B sits on the middle line of the Treble staff because here she is as snug as a bug in a rug.”



(Wilson, 2009)

You can also teach the notes on the keyboard using the same characters, linking the notes on the staff to the notes on the keyboard, such as, “Bug B sits on this lily pad with three stripes. Frog F hides under it, hoping to catch a tasty treat!”



(Wilson, 2009)

Children love learning the notes through stories and characters. I often have beginners ask, as soon as they walk into the lesson, “Are we going to have another story today?”

I have found that manipulatives, such as picture magnets which the student can place in the correct place on a magnetic staff, and also on the keyboard, provide an excellent hands-on activity. Children love handling the magnets; to them it is like a game. It gets them moving and engaging with the content which greatly enhances their learning.



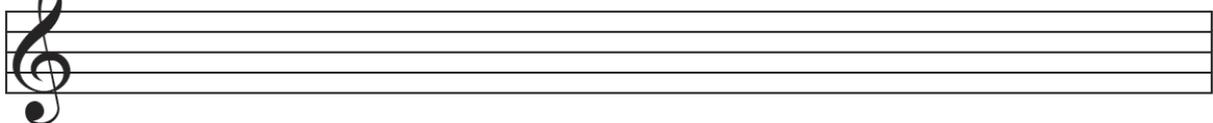
The learning can be enhanced even further by giving weekly theory pages with the stories and exercises, to practise writing and drawing the notes.

 Name these notes.



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 Draw these notes using crotchets.



(Wilson, 2009)

This all provides a multi-sensory learning experience, which becomes a highly effective way to teach the notes, and it's a lot of fun.

## (2) CATERING TO THE VARIOUS LEARNING STYLES

The term “Learning Styles” refers to the different ways of learning. The most commonly referred-to are the visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic learning styles.

- Visual - Visual learners like to visualise things and see things written down. So pictures and visual aids are extremely effective with these learners.
- Auditory (or Language-Oriented) - Some learn better through listening. They remember best through hearing or saying items aloud.

- Kinaesthetic - Kinaesthetic learners learn through moving, doing and touching. They remember best by writing or physically manipulating the information. In fact, most children excel through kinaesthetic means (Farwell, 2010). “Because of the high numbers of kinaesthetic learners, education is shifting toward a more hands-on approach; manipulatives and other "props" are incorporated into almost every school subject. Hands-on teaching techniques are gaining recognition because they address the challenging needs of kinaesthetic learners.” (Farwell, 2010)

Teaching is very effective when it caters to all three learning styles. There is a big emphasis in schools on this, so that it becomes second nature to teachers to present material in a variety of ways in order to cater to the different learning styles.

In the demonstration, when I teach with mnemonics, the information is presented in an abstract, conceptual way. But when I teach with stories and pictures, and the magnets which link to the stories, the information is presented visually, great for those who like to visualise things. Hearing the stories and speaking the information back is great for those who learn well through listening and speaking aloud. For those who are helped through moving and doing, the magnets provide a way to learn by physically manipulating the information.

<b>MNEMONICS</b>	<b>WAYS CHILDREN LEARN BEST</b>
REQUIRING CHILDREN TO THINK LOGICALLY	CATERING TO THE VARIOUS LEARNING STYLES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires children to think in an abstract, conceptual way.</li> <li>• Really hard to use with younger children; they often don't connect with it.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visual</li> <li>• Auditory</li> <li>• Kinaesthetic</li> <li>• Most children excel through kinaesthetic means.</li> </ul>

When children are taught the notes using mnemonics, it requires them think conceptually. This way of learning is more suited to adults, and can be really hard for children to connect with, especially younger children.

Children learn best when you cater to the various learning styles. I don't know, and I don't need to know, which styles of learning my piano students favour. But when I teach them the notes with stories, pictures, manipulatives, and theory pages, I know that I'm catering to all the learning styles and therefore am teaching in a way that will be effective with them all.

### **(3) ASSOCIATION WITH REPETITION**

Learning by association is when you connect something known with something new and unknown in order to learn it. For example, you've just met someone and you see their face and hear their name for the first time. Both things are new to you, and you may need to link the name and face with something you already know in order to help you remember them.

By using associative learning, you are able to access the information directly, so that when you see the person's face, you are able to link, through the association, to the person's name. And when you hear the person's name, you are able to go back the other way, through the association, to recall the face.

After some practise and repetition, the link would get stronger and stronger, until eventually you wouldn't need the association anymore; the name and face would be permanently linked in your long-term memory. An interesting fact about repetition is that when you repeat a thought, physical connections are made between your brain cells (Johnson, 2000). With each repetition of the thought, another connection is made. The more connections there are, the easier it is to remember that thought (Tipper).

Sometimes we are able to remember things without using an association, but then again, a lot of times we're not. Using an association can enable us to quickly learn a lot of information. It really does empower our brains to take in and retain a lot more, and to do it quickly.

In the demonstration, when I teach with mnemonics, it gives a strategy rather than a direct link to the information. The learner has to depend on using the mnemonic to get the answers, rather than having a direct link to the answers. When I teach with the stories and pictures it gives an association so that the audience is able to access the information directly and instantly. It's really powerful. With some repetition, that access is strengthened so that it becomes easier to recall the information. Eventually, after more repetition, the association would no longer be needed, as the link to the information would be stored in long-term memory.

<b>MNEMONICS</b>  A STRATEGY RATHER THAN A DIRECT LINK	<b>WAYS CHILDREN LEARN BEST</b>  ASSOCIATION AND REPETITION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It gives a strategy rather than a direct link to the information.</li> <li>• The learner depends on using the strategy to get the answer.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linking unknown things to known things.</li> <li>• Immediately enables direct access to information.</li> <li>• After enough repetition, the association is no longer needed because the information is wired into long-term memory.</li> </ul>

Mnemonics do not teach children to instantly recognise the notes, but they must constantly count up the lines and spaces in order to identify note names, which can become very tedious. As mentioned previously, it can also be confusing for children deciding all the time which of the four mnemonics to use. Relying on mnemonics to read the notes can make reading music a difficult and slow process.

When you teach the notes with stories and characters that link to note position children are immediately enabled to instantly recognise the notes, without needing to employ a strategy of counting up the stave.

The stories and characters are an association which link three things together: the note on the stave, the note name, and the note on the piano. Through using manipulatives such as the magnets and magnetic stave, and through theory pages with note-naming and drawing exercises, the link is practised and repeated, until, after enough repetition, it is wired into long-term memory. Then the association is no longer needed because the note is known.

### **A Better Way than Mnemonics...**

After many years of frustration teaching the notes to beginners using mnemonics, I now teach four octaves of notes with characters and stories to beginners in their first year of tuition. It is so fun to teach this way, and children love it! It engages them, it caters to the various

learning styles, and because it associates the notes with characters, it enables them to instantly recognise the notes on the stave and find them on the keyboard. I now have no problem with children who struggle to read music, and even children as young as five can easily learn to read music this way.

Two years ago I compiled some resources which teach four octaves of notes to beginners in this way. I had magnetic staves and characters manufactured, and theory books printed, called *Wilbecks Easy Notes for Piano Beginners*. Many other teachers are now using the resources, and they are experiencing the same success, and having fun with it too.

For more information on these resources, visit [www.easy-notes.com](http://www.easy-notes.com). To read teacher feedback, visit [www.wilbecks.wordpress.com](http://www.wilbecks.wordpress.com).

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**About the Author:**

**Rebecca Wilson** is the creator of Easy Notes, a fun and interactive way to teach the notes to beginners. She has been teaching piano for 17 years, and is passionate about helping young beginners to love learning music.