

# notable

MUSIC TEACHING



Hey ,

Have you struggled to teach note reading to your students with disabilities?

I've been there. As a classically trained pianist and strong sight-reader myself (possibly at the expense of other skills, like improvising and playing by ear), I'd always considered note reading a "no brainer" to teach.

But then I started to encounter students who "couldn't learn to read music." That is - they couldn't learn the way I taught my other students.

These students, many of them autistic\* or having ADHD or dyslexia, didn't respond well to pre-reading songs or drilling the staff with flashcards. Not even my large arsenal of fun apps and games seemed to make a difference.

Or if they *did* learn to name notes, they still couldn't play them on the piano. There was some kind of disconnect between eyes and hands. It felt like we needed to start over every week.

These students required a different approach.

After years of trial and error, of extracting what worked from all the different methods I was trying, I've learned several important lessons that I'd like to share with as many teachers as possible.

## What I've learned in 7+ years of teaching note-reading to students with disabilities:

1. Playing by sight is deeply tied up with motor skills.

Conditions and diagnoses like autism, ADHD, Down syndrome, and dyslexia often come with motor skills challenges. This can affect a student's ability to learn when they are not physically able to do what is asked of them. It can also make them less willing to *try*, since the activities can feel tiresome or seem impossible to them. It can cause them to "act out" or appear to not understand the concepts being taught. Motor skills must be accounted for from day one if these students are going to feel confident and progress.

2. Students labeled "severe" or "intellectually disabled" often don't perform simply because they are underestimated or haven't been given the same opportunities to learn.

If you've ever heard me speak or read my writing, you probably know that this is one of my soap-boxes. It's virtually impossible for us as piano teachers to accurately assess a student's level of intelligence by observing them when their speech and motor skills are relatively weak. If a student doesn't have the motor control to demonstrate knowledge or follow instructions OR the speech to answer questions and tell you what they don't know, then it's easy to think this student doesn't understand or is "in their own world."

Many nonspeaking autistic people, such as author [Ido Kedar](#), have learned to communicate independently via typing, giving us unique insight on what it's like to be underestimated for one's whole life.

This is one of the many reasons why presuming competence should be the first step of any approach with students with disabilities.

3. You need a cohesive system - not just a collection of aids

Teaching aids like manipulatives, color-coding, and flash cards are nice to have, but a *system* is ideal. Would you rather have to fix a leaky roof, or just build a good roof in the first place? It IS possible to build a strong foundation for note reading when motor skills, visual tracking, keyboard awareness, and potential gifts like perfect pitch are addressed at the outset.

4. A five-finger hand position is the best way to develop fine motor skills (like finger isolation) in students with motor deficits.

Learning to isolate fingers is extremely difficult for many students. One of my nonspeaking autistic teen students once typed that his hands "feel like oven mitts." He has trouble initiating many different types of movement, and simply pointing at an intended key is nearly impossible for him. Why would I ask him to not only attempt to isolate his "oven mitt" fingers, but also do so while contending with moving his hands laterally all over the keyboard and worrying about the keys changing underneath him? For him, and many students like him, being grounded in a five-finger position is the least taxing and most rewarding way to develop motor skills. It is the anchor from which they can learn to isolate each finger before they learn to move across the keyboard.

## A brand new resource to level up the way you teach note-reading

Many of you have started using (or at least heard of) the Milestone Method with your students with disabilities. I've gotten lots of great feedback about the breakthroughs your students are having, AND I've also gotten quite a few questions.

"How do I help my student develop their motor skills?"  
"What do I do when they play the wrong note?"  
"What if my student can't play the "holds"?"  
"What do I do when they play the right note but with the wrong finger?"  
"Should I play the songs for my student first?"

I had these exact same questions when I started working with this method, and I eventually came to answer them all. I've seen the effects of these decisions play out in the long term and adjusted accordingly.

I want to save you from making the same mistakes that I did.

So I've taken everything I know about using this method effectively and put it into a mini course for you.

This [Mini Course on the Milestone Method](#) is actually plucked from my "mega" course, Unfazed. It was one of the modules that Unfazed participants found to be most transformative for their teaching.

As much as I'd love to have you ALL in Unfazed someday, I didn't want you to have to wait. Plus, I know some of you are just looking for a little extra help with note-reading - not necessarily the level of support and resources that go into an 11-week guided course.

Here's the deal:

In the [Milestone Method Mini Course](#), you'll find:

- An introduction to the method and some background on terms that will almost certainly come up for you ("disabilities" vs. "special needs", identity-first vs. person-first language, presuming competence, and perfect pitch)
- A breakdown of each milestone
- The exact word-for-word scripts I use to introduce each Milestone
- Strategies for developing motor skills (like when and how to use hand-under-hand support)
- Solutions to common challenges that inevitable come up (What's the best way to correct student mistakes? What if a student can't look at the page for long?)



The best part, though, is that enrollment in this course includes studio-licensed digital downloads of all 3 books of the Milestone Method.

Typically, all three books of the Milestone Method are \$69 (for the bundle). This course - which includes those books - is available to you for \$97.

That's only \$28 more than you'd pay for *just the books*.

If you think you're going to want any guidance whatsoever implementing this method, or you want the trial and error already done for you, then this mini course is the perfect resource for you.

[Join the Mini Course](#)

## Discounts:

If you've already bought at least one book of the Milestone Method, I'm offering this course to you at 25% off. Check your inbox for another email from me with your coupon code - you would have received it when you purchased the book. If you bought a book and you haven't received an email with the coupon, please email me and I'll send you the code.

If you *haven't* started using the Milestone Method yet, now is your chance to get all 3 books PLUS a shortcut to using them.

This is your opportunity to boost your skills in teaching note reading and get a level of detail I've previously only offered to my Unfazed course participants.



Try the entire course for 30 days.

If the methods and framework don't work for you, email me, and I'll give you all your money back. I'll even eat the credit-card processing fees.

If you have any questions whatsoever, feel free to hit reply on this email and ask.

See you inside the course!

Happy Teaching,  
Selena

*\*You may have noticed that I used the word "autistic" (identity-first) instead of "person with autism" (person-first, which you may have heard was the most polite way to refer to people on the spectrum). This is because the majority of the autistic community prefers identity-affirming language, since autism is a neurotype, not a disease.*

