

Six Considerations for Teaching Note-Reading First

By Bill Swick

1. One of the daily student objectives should include “to build strength and independence in each finger for both the left and right hands.” Playing individual notes will accomplish this goal. Chord playing requires fingers to hold down a string sometimes for a long period of time. This can often be painful and lead to discouragement if the fingers are not first prepared for it through individual note playing.
2. Note-reading is a year-long skill. It is recommended to spend 2-3 weeks on the notes on each string, requiring the first half of a school year to learn the 18 notes in first position. By the Spring semester, students will be ready to perform ensemble music.
3. Often new students to the school are added to the guitar class. While this can happen at any time, mid-term seems to be a time when a lot of new students arrive. Your class just spent the first half of the year learning note reading which means students now have the strength and independence to start playing chords. If new students cannot already read music, they can begin learning chords with the rest of the class.
4. Most state education organizations approved the inclusion of guitar class with the intention that it will cover similar content as band, orchestra and other instrumental classes which includes note reading. State standards are available at this link: <https://www.guitarfoundation.org/page/StateStandards> This is made available through the Guitar Foundation of America Education Division. Check out some of the other great resources while on the site. Become aware of what is required by your state.
5. The NAfME *Best Practices for Guitar Education* was assembled by some of the top guitar educators in the U.S. *Best Practices* encourages note reading from modern notation (not TAB) as a significant element of every guitar classroom and as the starting point for beginning guitar.
6. Guitar students tend not to sing in class. This is particularly true if there are boys and girls in the class and even more so at the beginning of the year when there is unfamiliarity amongst the students. Teaching chords and songs tend to lose their punch if no one is singing. Finding popular music for everyone to agree on is also a major challenge.