

How to Evaluate a Method Book

Excerpt from Bill Swick's *Teaching Beginning Guitar Class: A Practical Guide*

How to Evaluate the Selected Method

Here is a simple time-management idea. Count how many class days there are for the amount of time students will be taking beginning guitar. Some schools offer a semester of beginning guitar. Others offer a full year. If the school is on a quarter system, know exactly how many instructional days are scheduled for the school calendar.

The majority of states in the United States require schools to offer 180 instructional school days each school year. The state of Colorado offers the lowest number of school days, with only 160, according to the Education Commission of the States.^[1] It is important to know how many instructional days there are to know how much material one may cover and the timeline for each skill and technique.

Here is a way to evaluate the amount of material available in any method book. The following division described does not imply in any way how one *should* organize materials for a class or how one *should* time materials for a class. This division by days is a quick and simple way to make an evaluation as to how much content the selected method book may offer, with no consideration of how many days each skill or technique may require. It is, however, a realistic approach to evaluating a ratio of pages to the number of days available in the school year. This is just one consideration when selecting a method book when there is a choice of books.

Divide the method book of choice into half. This will be the amount of information covered by the end of the first semester or mid-year. Is there enough information to keep a guitar class busy every day? Divide the method book into fourths to know which page marks the end of each quarter, if the school year is on the quarter system. Then divide the number of pages in each quarter by nine to know how many pages may be covered each week. Is there enough material?

This evaluation is not to determine the sequence or content of information, only the number of pages in relation to the number of school days available.

Programmed Texts and Sequences

What is a programmed text? A programmed text requires the reader to understand page 1 before moving to page 2, etc. Information is written into a sequence which requires the reader to go sequentially through the book. A well-known example is Mel Bay's *Modern Guitar Method*, book 1. Of the above choices, *Mastering the Guitar*, *Essential Elements*, and *Bill Swick's Beginning Guitar Class* are programmed texts.

Other books are written in a format in which each chapter or section is independent from the other sections. For example, Will Schmid's *SuperBook* is really five complete books in one. It is possible to study note reading in one section, jump to another section for chord studies, and then to another for improvisation. In this type of book, the teacher must decide on the sequence.

Another consideration is the books offered in series. For example, *Belwin's 21st Century Guitar Library* offers individual books in method, theory, songs, and ensembles. *Hands on Training* and Jerry Snyder's *Guitar School* offer separate ensemble books.

Which type of method is best? Someone who is a highly skilled guitarist with a lot of experience teaching may prefer a system which offers freedom in sequencing the information. On the other hand, someone teaching guitar as a secondary instrument may prefer a programmed method.

Here is one more consideration. Most of these books offer a separate teacher's edition which has prewritten lesson plans, explanation how to teach certain skills, etc., which are most helpful. If teaching guitar as a secondary instrument, teacher editions will be most helpful.

For the most part, the information in all of these books is good and any single book will work. Choose a book compatible with teaching skills and teaching style.

It's Time to Do the Math

For the purpose of this example, *Mastering the Guitar Class Method* is a first-year guitar text. This book has 136 pages. It is now time to do the math.

The majority of states require 180 instructional school days. The school year is divided into two semesters, ninety days each. Each semester is divided into two quarters, forty-five days each.

In order to complete the selected textbook, the class will need to be somewhere between pages 60 and 70 by midterm. That means the class will be somewhere between pages 30 and 35 by the completion of the first quarter.

Quarter three will start between pages 60 and 70. Quarter four will start between pages 100 and 105.

The way this particular book is organized, if following the above formula, the class will complete the first three strings by the end of the first quarter which is very doable. The class will learn strings one through five by midterm, and so on. Quarter three will begin by playing ensemble music and Quarter four will include chord playing, blues, and various styles of chords, more advanced single-note studies and an introduction to finger-style playing. In this example, *Mastering the Guitar Class Method* is well organized and has been designed to follow the 180 school days. This is the advantage of selecting a programmed text. As mentioned earlier, experienced teachers may choose to teach from multiple books and may prefer to create an individual sequence. However it is approached, the key thing to understand is there is a finite number of school days and there needs to be enough materials to keep students active and learning on each of those days.