



Sunrise Music Piano Books

Reading & Playing Based Method

Reading-and-Playing Based Piano Method, Levels 1–6

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Introduction, Concepts, and How to Use This Method

Companion to the Scope & Sequence and the Levels 1–6 lesson book guides

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Sunrise Music & Sunshine Piano Studio

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Concept:

This piano book series was created after hearing so many people over the years state: “I started piano, quit, and wish I never had.” What was the reason for so many students quitting on their dreams to play the piano, to create the music that they loved? A major hurdle for students is mastering reading music on the Grand Staff that a piano player uses. The piano is an orchestral instrument, not just one line of notes like a trumpet. It takes dedicated practice and time to master reading and playing piano music. I was trained classically, which bases success on reading music well and applying it to your instrument, the piano. When I was older, I also trained to teach a playing-based method, so I could learn those principles in approaching playing piano. I liked several of the concepts that made it more motivating to students in the beginning to keep going, rather than giving up, because of good sounding songs. However, the student’s quickly advancing playing skills did not encourage them to want to slow down to learn to read the music they played, which was a hinderance.

That began my search and question: Could I combine the best of both worlds, reading based and playing based, to be a better teacher for my students, to help them attain their music dreams? Going through countless piano methods in music stores, I did not find what I envisioned. Creating my own piano books seemed like a daunting task, but began out of my own need and vision for a better way for students to learn to play piano. That journey began in 2012 and has produced the Sunrise Music Piano Books, Levels 1 – 6. I have used them over the years, refining, editing, and changing them to better equip piano students.

Suzanne Solum, Sunrise Music & Sunshine Piano Studio

Welcome

This guide is the front door to the method — read it once before teaching Levels 1 - 6 for the first time, and return to specific sections as needed. It doesn't repeat what's already in the Scope & Sequence document or the individual level lesson book guides; instead, it explains the concepts behind the whole series, so that the numerous individual decisions in those documents make sense as one coherent approach rather than a list of unrelated rules.

Everything in this guide assumes the companion Sunrise Music Piano Books and the teacher guides for each Level are close at hand:

- The Scope & Sequence (curriculum overview for all six levels)
- The Level 1–6 lesson books (reading lessons, songs, piano skills)

This guide doesn't duplicate their content — it orients you to it.

Who This Method Is For

This method serves absolute beginners through early-advanced students, across the full range of ages a private studio typically sees — young children, teenagers, and adults. The teaching language throughout is written to flex with the student in front of you: concrete and fun where a young child needs it, direct and efficient where an adult learner prefers it. You are always the one calibrating tone; the scripted talking points are starting points – always listen for the student's need.

The method assumes one student at a time, in a private lesson setting, with a teacher able to adjust pacing freely. It is not designed as a group-class curriculum, though individual lessons could likely be adapted for that purpose using concepts throughout

***Special Note:** TO HOMESCHOOLERS AND SELF-TAUGHT MUSICIANS: You can use these materials to learn music. However, I would also recommend watching good “YouTube” tutorials by teachers on piano basics, music, & music theory to equip yourself.

Concepts — What Makes This Method Different

Three commitments run underneath every lesson in every level. Understanding them will help you adapt, reorder, or extend lessons with confidence rather than guessing at what is essential and what is flexible.

1. Reading by Relationship, Not by Letter

From the very first lesson, the method treats interval recognition and keyboard geography — “repeat, next-door, skip-one” and hand placement on piano keys — as the primary reading strategy, with letter names introduced gradually and secondarily. Students who read by relationship can sight-read music they've never seen; a student who reads only by memorized letter names is always one unfamiliar note away from getting stuck. Learn both!

This shows up structurally: Level 1 starts with patterns & letter names establishing visual staff note direction and keyboard topology while letter names are drilled. Just make sure interval and pattern reading stays the foundational strategy, not a skill that gets quietly abandoned once letters are available as a shortcut. Using both, student reading skills advance!

2. Concepts Before Notation, Notation Before Speed

Across all six levels, a new skill is almost always introduced first by ear, by feel, or through a physical/verbal analogy — and only afterward connected to its formal notation. Reading the notation is treated as confirming something the student already understands, not as the first encounter with the idea.

Once notation is introduced, speed is consistently the last priority. Every lesson template asks for accuracy and evenness at a slow tempo before any tempo increase. State this explicitly and often in the lesson content — it's worth holding the line on this even when a student (or a parent) is eager to hear something ‘up to speed.’ “Slow is your helper to playing piano.”

3. Original Pieces and Real Repertoire, in a Deliberate Ratio

The Scope & Sequence specifies a shifting ratio of original, classical, holiday, blues, and traditional teaching songs (composed/arranged to introduce one skill at a time) level by level. The reasoning: a beginner needs pieces engineered around exactly the skill being taught, with no competing difficulty. An advancing student needs increasing contact with real musical literature, since the entire point of the method is to graduate the student into independent repertoire study, not keep them inside a method book indefinitely.

Level 6 in particular leans hard into this — by design, it introduces real (lightly simplified at most) intermediate repertoire across several eras.

The Lesson Template

Every lesson in every level and layout follows the same eight-part structure. This consistency is deliberate: once you're fluent in the shape of the template, you can move quickly through any lesson in the series, in any level, without re-learning a new format each time.

Section	Purpose
At a Glance	Skill focus, what it builds on, what it sets up. Keys & Concepts used. Read 1 st at top of the Reading Music – Lesson page. It tells you in ten seconds if this is the right lesson for where the student actually is.
Learning Objectives	Concrete, observable outcomes for the lesson. Give deliberately specific instructions ('play X without looking down') rather than vague ('understand X better'), so you can tell if the student understood.
Warm-Up	A short (around 5-minute) bridge from whatever's already secure and learned into today's new material. Always do this — skipping straight to new content loses the deliberate on-ramp reinforcement.
Teaching the Concept	The conceptual heart of the lesson, usually taught by ear, by feel, or through analogy before notation appears. Includes examples in the lesson — a starting point for your own words, not a verbatim script.
Reading	Drill: Note Flashcards, Interval Recognition, Keyboard Location Connecting the just-taught concept to its notation on the staff, usually moving from identification → isolated practice → applied reading
Hands Together	Where applicable, the combination step — deliberately sequenced after each hand/skill is independently secure, never before. LH, RH, BH each 10x slowly!
Practice Assignment	What the student should actually do between lessons. Written for the student/parent to read, since this is the part most likely to leave the room with them.
Common Problems & Fixes	Anticipated failure modes with specific, concrete fixes — written so a teacher under time pressure mid-lesson can scan and act quickly rather than improvising a diagnosis from scratch. Tried & true!

*Lessons can also add a 9th, optional element: a **Teacher's Note** you write in the lesson. Use it sparingly for things that don't fit the template itself — most often pacing flexibility (a lesson that may reasonably span more than one session) or a deliberate scope decision worth flagging (a lesson that's intentionally lighter than its neighbors).

The Six Levels at a Glance

Each level ends with a specific, observable mastery benchmark, and the next level's opening lesson is built to assume exactly that benchmark — no more, no less. This table is the fastest way to check whether a piece of repertoire, or a transfer student's playing, fits a given level.

Lvl	Focus	Entry Point	Exit Benchmark
1	Pre-Reading to Early Staff Reading	No prior experience	Sight-reads a 4-measure piece in a known 5-finger position, naming intervals as a primary strategy
2	Multi-Position Reading, Expanded Staff Fluency	Level 1 benchmark	Sight-reads an 8-measure piece with a position shift and simple I-V accompaniment, no recalculation pauses
3	Ledger Lines, Functional Harmony, Rhythmic Complexity	Level 2 benchmark	Sight-reads using ledger lines and I-IV-V, executing a dotted-rhythm and a syncopated figure without demonstration
4	Key Signature Fluency, Early Intermediate Texture	Level 3 benchmark	Sight-reads in a 1-sharp/flat key with broken-chord left hand, shaping a dynamic arc without prompting
5	Extended Harmony and Stylistic Range	Level 4 benchmark	Sight-reads with an octave leap and a secondary chord, distinguishes swing notation, describes stylistic character
6	Intermediate-to-Early-Advanced Fluency	Level 5 benchmark	Sight-reads a 16–32 measure intermediate piece with no stops, handles a modulation, describes interpretive choices

Notice the pattern: every level's entry point is the previous level's exact exit benchmark. There is no level that assumes more (or less) than what the prior benchmark actually certifies. If a student doesn't yet meet a benchmark, the right move is almost always to stay in the current level longer, not to advance and patch gaps retroactively.

Placing a Transfer Student

Not every student starts at Level 1, Lesson 1. Here's a practical placement process for a student arriving from another method, another teacher, or a long break.

Step 1: Start With the Benchmarks, Not the Lesson Numbers

Work backward through the six benchmarks in the table above, starting from Level 6's. Ask the student to sight-read something appropriate to each benchmark, starting with whichever level seems like a reasonable first guess based on their general level. Find the highest benchmark they can actually meet under real sight-reading conditions — not the highest level they've previously been told they're “on.”

Step 2: Place Them at the Start of the Next Level

A student who meets the Level 3 benchmark begins at Level 4, Lesson 1 — even if their prior method covered material that resembles Level 4 or 5 content. The lesson numbering in this method is about this method's specific sequencing logic, not a universal difficulty scale.

Step 3: Watch the First Two or Three Lessons Closely

Placement by benchmark is usually accurate, but it's a snapshot, not a guarantee. If a student placed at the start of a level struggles with material that assumes the previous level's benchmark, don't hesitate to drop back — doing so early costs far less than discovering a gap three lessons later.

A Note on Vocabulary Gaps

Transfer students sometimes have uneven foundations — strong reading but shaky rhythm, or vice versa. The benchmark process surfaces overall readiness but won't always catch a narrow gap. If something feels off despite a clean benchmark result, it's worth deliberately testing a few specific skills from the relevant level's Scope & Sequence entry (technical, reading, rhythm) rather than assuming the benchmark told the whole story.

A Note on Pacing

Every level in this method is reached by mastery, not by a calendar. This is stated explicitly in several individual lessons (particularly in Level 1, and at lighter or more demanding lessons throughout), but it's worth stating as a general principle here too.

What This Looks Like in Practice

- Some lessons — particularly capstone lessons, and anything involving genuine hands-independence — may reasonably extend across two or more sessions. This is normal, not a sign of falling behind.
- Some lessons — particularly ones flagged as deliberately light (Level 3's 6/8 preview, for instance) — may compress into a few minutes if a student already has the relevant exposure.
- Age and starting point vary enormously, especially at Level 1. A capable adult beginner and a five-year-old beginner may both succeed with this method, but at very different paces, and that's expected rather than a problem to solve.

The Risk of Rushing

Because each level's opening lessons assume the previous level's exact benchmark, advancing a student before that benchmark is genuinely secure tends to surface as confusion two or three lessons later, in a way that's harder to diagnose than if the gap had simply been addressed at the time. When in doubt, the lower-risk choice is almost always to stay rather than advance.

The Risk of Over-Caution

The opposite failure mode is real too: a student who has clearly met a benchmark but is kept repeating familiar material out of excess caution can lose engagement. The benchmarks exist precisely so this judgment call has a concrete, observable answer rather than a vague feeling in either direction.

Using This Placement Guide Alongside the Lesson Books

In practice, this guide is most useful in two moments:

1. Before starting a new student at Level 1, or before teaching this method for the first time
— read the Philosophy and Lesson Template sections in full.
2. When placing a transfer student, or deciding whether to advance or hold back a current student — use the Six Levels at a Glance table and the Placement section.

****Everything else*** — the actual content of what to teach, lesson by lesson — lives in the Scope & Sequence and the six level lesson book guides. This guide's job is to make sure those documents are read with the right perspective. Every good teacher fine tunes each lesson for student needs.

Notation & Terminology Conventions

A short reference for use with the Sunrise Music piano books.

Element	Convention
Chord labeling	Roman numerals (I, IV, V, vi, vii°) throughout, introduced gradually level by level per the Scope & Sequence. Lead-sheet letter-name chord symbols (e.g., 'Cmaj7' is a C chord with a major 7 th added.)
Finger numbers	Standard 1 (thumb) through 5 (pinky), introduced in Level 1 Lesson 1 and used consistently in early-level scores. Level 4 and beyond should add fingering only where genuinely non-obvious, consistent with the method's growing independence goal for the musician.
Dynamics	Standard Italian terms and abbreviations used throughout the piano books (p, mf, f, cresc., dim.). English-language instructions for the terms are taught in the lessons, use a music dictionary; plain-language dynamic explanation taught in lessons.
Skill-focus tags	Every lesson piece has skill-focus, consistent with the Scope & Sequence's repertoire guidelines, so lessons & pieces remain selectable by need, not just by sequence. Look for the skill-focus in each lesson.
Style/composer	The books contain composer info or style notes that accompany arranged repertoire, per the Scope & Sequence. Look for these across all levels of books.
Pedal markings	Introduced starting Level 2, in Piano Skills; the use of standard pedal markings. Add verbal instructions for pedaling the song once introduced. Add listening to develop the ear to hear when to clear the pedal.