

Is it necessary and/or important for drummers/percussionists to learn to read music?

Let me begin by saying that I believe the goal of reading is not to teach your eyes and hands what to play, it's to develop your ears, your understanding, and your knowledge of rhythms, drums, and music. I'll also say that the relative importance of reading depends entirely on the kind of player, student, or teacher you want to be – not at all important for some, but critical for others. That said, I divide reading into two general, and different, types: *Dynamic* and *Static*. *Dynamic* is reading while playing, or playing while reading (commonly called 'sight-reading'); *Static* is looking at notated music or drum parts, studying and knowing what they mean and possibly how they sound.

First, I'll talk about *Dynamic*, or 'sight reading', of which I think of as two kinds. One is reading single-line rhythms, similar as to what you find in the Syncopation Book, Bellson Book, or any of a number of snare drum method and literature books. It's good to begin to slowly work on this as soon you begin to play drums (although you can start on this at any time, at any age). I don't think it's the most important thing to start a young, or new, student with, but it's good to start the recognition/repetition process early on. This is important because it helps to develop the ears (your eyes, brain, and hands all teach your ears). For fun, I like to get students to play something and then I'll write out what they played and show it to them, instead of the other way around. It seems to be less threatening and intimidating this way, and keeps their eyes as the focus.

The second form of 'sight-reading' is reading drum charts or parts, which I often call 'chart interpretation'. There are many drummers at all levels from world-class to beginners who don't read charts or parts, and who don't need to. Many can read rhythms and even charts at a functional level, but just may not be great chart sight-readers, mostly because it's not something they need to do on a regular basis. Although I believe it's a good skill for an independent drummer to have, the extent to which it is necessary, or useful, varies from gig to gig and style to style. Playing standards with a jazz trio may not require chart-reading similar to what you'll need in the studio on a film date. For this type of reading, I think it's very important to be able to 'chunk' measures or sections. That is, to try to get your head out of the chart and don't read beat-to-beat or measure-to-measure, but to look for and connect larger sections in the music, and to listen closely and identify musical phrases and the form of the piece/arrangement. Great chart readers know what to look at, what to listen for, and how to interpret the written drum chart in order to play musically. Remember also, there are more than a few different methods of writing a drum part; sometimes I'll even take a poorly-written drum chart and re-write it to make it much easier to follow, and keep my ears open. Many, but not all, drum charts are written as rough guides, and it's entirely up to the player to interpret and make music out of them. The ability to sight read charts and the ability to play musically can sometimes be two very different things.

Now for *Static* reading. This one develops a deep and comprehensive understanding of rhythms, drumming, and music, and for me, it's the most exciting and important reason to be able to read music. It comes first from understanding rhythmic notation and basic

music theory (time signatures, sub-divisions, etc.), and is developed from studying an existing transcription (as found in MD), transcribing something that you've heard played, reading the patterns in a drum book, or even studying the rhythms of a solo played by John Coltrane or Steve Vai, a bass line by James Jamerson or Tom Kennedy, or even the vocal phrasing of Frank Sinatra. The most important ingredient of this learning process is taking this information, studying and analyzing it, and making something new out of it. Whether you create something to play or something to know, it's important to take from what you've discovered and build on it. It could be a series of exercises, some new patterns, or just understanding what you're hearing. *Static* reading helps your hands, eyes, brain, and ears all stay connected. This understanding, examining, exploring, analyzing, synthesizing, building, and turning ideas upside-down, inside-out, and creating new ones is at the very heart of learning and growing. It helps us explore the infinite possibilities and combinations of things and to stay lifelong learners as drummers, musicians, and people – always changing, always growing. You don't have to be able to read music to do all of this, but it does make it easier. Good luck and have fun!