

## Singing Towards Literacy: Building Music Reading Skills in the Elementary Choir

- I. Singing together - “The Water is Wide”
  - A. Adding body percussion
  - B. What can we learn from this song?
- II. Exploring Dimensions of Literacy
  - A. Various definitions of literacy emphasize different abilities and behaviors
    1. Definitions from [UNESCO](#); [National Assessment of Adult Literacy](#) (USA); and the [National Literacy Trust](#) (UK)
  - B. Challenges with “Music Literacy”
    1. This concept has been used to cause harm, and to make distinctions and barriers between people using racial, gender, and socioeconomic factors.
    2. This term has also been a way to distinguish between those who can read music and those who can play/sing by ear, often to celebrate the former and minimize the latter.
    3. As part of [CMEA](#)’s efforts in disrupting exclusionary and marginalizing practices and procedures that promote hierarchical assumptions, it is important to expand ideas of what “musical literacy” means beyond a narrow focus on notational literacy.
    4. Concepts of musical literacy must honor the prior experiences and knowledge of the students, and must include (and recognize the importance of) oral and aural approaches to learning, grounded in relevant tasks of creating, performing, responding, and connecting.



QR code for full handout,  
including musical examples



QR code for slides

5. Applying emergent literacy theory and Scarborough's Reading Rope to the development of musical literacy skills.

### III. Singing Towards Literacy

A. Music literacy should focus on developing young musicians who can make music with understanding, understand the music they are making, and who are prepared to engage with music kinesthetically, aurally, iconically, and symbolically.

1. This includes fostering understanding of their own vocal instrument - "vocal literacy".

a) Posture, breath, phonation, resonance, diction, expression, etc.

2. Young singers should also develop a sense of what it means to sing together - "ensemble literacy".

a) Blend, balance, unison, intonation, listening, awareness, etc.

B. These dimensions of literacy can be developed throughout the rehearsal.

1. Warm-ups and rote songs/exercises build the "audio library".
2. Rehearsal processes can continuously draw students' attention to what they are feeling, hearing, and seeing.
3. Short moments of sight-singing instruction can relate to specific examples in octavos or draw from rote song material.
4. Musical transitions between songs can prepare students for the next portion of rehearsal by activating prior knowledge.

C. Developing various forms of literacy together gives the choir a shared language that enables them to better work together as a group.

D. Exploring and understanding musical ideas through singing and the voice puts students in touch with their own instrument.

E. Through rote learning, a sound-to-symbol approach, communal and individual work, isolating of concepts, extraction of meaningful musical patterns, and a general spirit of play, each rehearsal can both prepare concerts and develop literacy skills.

### IV. Practical Examples

### V. Final Thoughts and Questions