Sight Reading

Sight reading, in its ultimate expression, is playing a song from written music correctly and in rhythm on first sight without practice. With years of training, accomplished pianists can do this as easily as reading a book aloud. In a less strict sense, sight reading means playing directly from written music as opposed to memorizing a song. Either way, for casual players, fluent sight reading can be a huge challenge.

Playing Blind

A common problem when sight reading is losing your place whenever you take your eyes off the printed music to look at the keyboard. A similar situation occurs when you're retyping a document and take your eyes off the printed page to look at the computer screen. The difference is that when typing, you'll only lose the time it takes to re-find your place; when playing piano, you unacceptably interrupt the flow of a song.

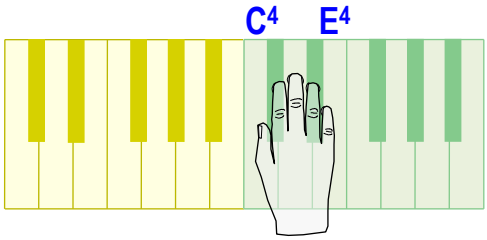
To remedy this, we'll follow the lead of blind pianists who learn to play by the *feel* of the keyboard, correcting their mistakes as they *hear* them. "Playing blind" allows you to keep your eyes on the written music, reducing the chances of losing your place.

Feeling Keys

Using a piano's alternating sets of twin and triplet black keys and the wider gaps between them as a form of Braille, you can feel for and find any key on the keyboard with your eyes closed. Try the following examples.

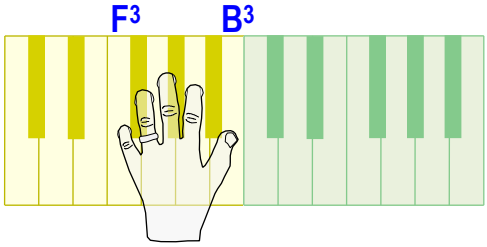
Your Turn: Find C^4 (Middle C) & E^4

Close your eyes and use your right hand to feel for and grab the twins nearest the center of your keyboard. Your thumb will rest on C^4. with your little finger on E^4.



Your Turn: Find F^3 & B^3

Close your eyes and use your left hand to feel for and grab the triplets to the left of Middle C. Your little finger will rest on F^3 with your thumb on B^3.



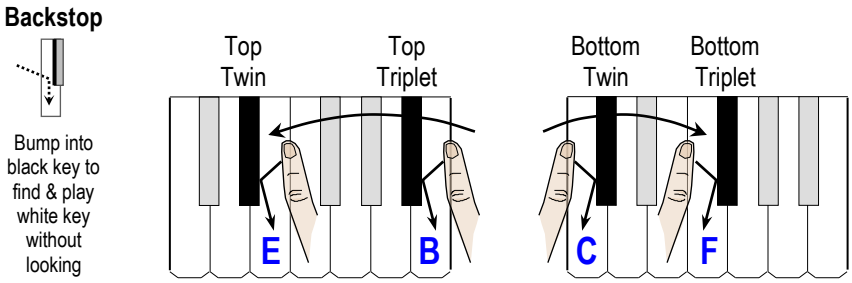
Use Backstops

To find more distant keys without looking, feel for the *gaps* between twins & triplets.

When reaching *down*, each top twin will act as a backstop for an E; each top triplet will act as a backstop for a B.

When reaching *up*, bottom twins backstop C's; bottom triplets backstop F's.

From these you can feel for any other key.



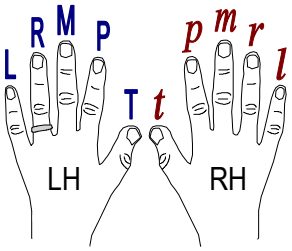
Pinching Fingers

Pinching lets you shift finger and hand positions without having to look at the keyboard, so you can keep your eyes on the written music.

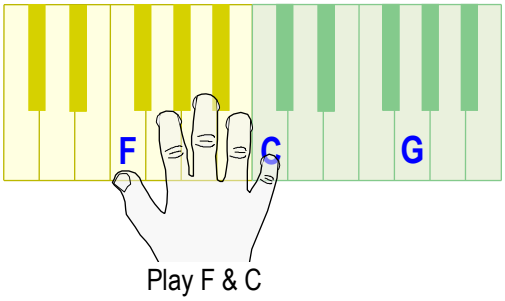
When an "old" finger rests on a key that will be played by a "new" finger, pinch the new finger *towards* the old finger and replace it on the key as the old finger moves to its next key.

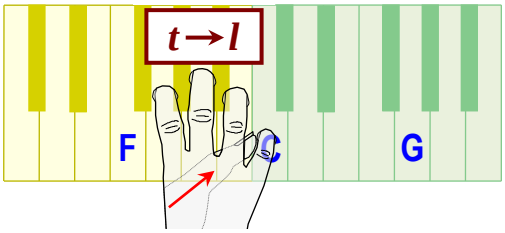
Your Turn: Follow the diagrams shown here to shift your right hand from F—C to C—G without looking.

Pinches are shown by an arrow that points from the new finger letter to the old. Pinching can occur in either direction and/or between hands. There may not be time for pinching fingers to physically touch.

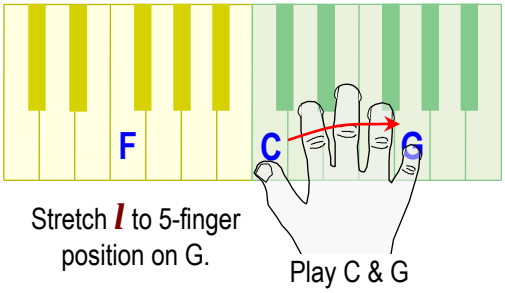


NEW → OLD	OLD ← NEW
L → M	m ← l
t → m	R ← P
T → t	P ← p





Pinch *t* under your hand to *replace* *l* on C.



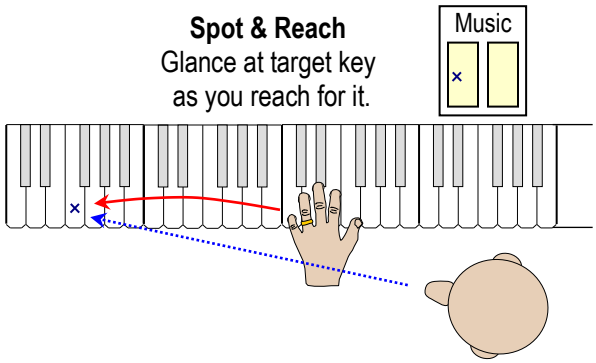
Spotting Keys

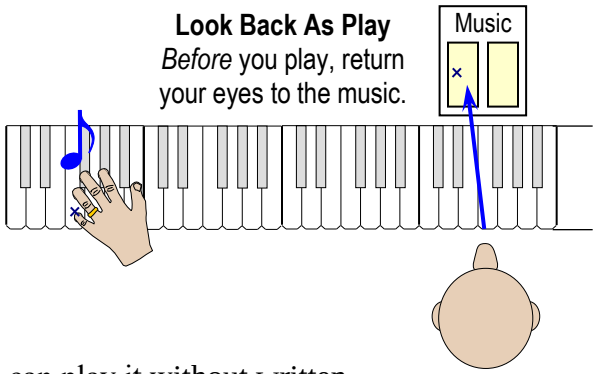
Sometimes it's difficult to reliably play a key that is several octaves away without looking. In this case, you *will* want to temporarily remove your eyes from the music and look at the key.

The paradox is that if you continue to look at the key while trying to play it, you'll likely overshoot and play the wrong key!

The trick is to "spot" or glance at the key as you reach for it but look back to the printed music just *before* you actually press the key.

Your Turn: Try reaching for and playing some keys that are far above or below Middle C. See if it helps to look away before pressing a key.





When Memorizing, *Look* at Keyboard

Sometimes you'll want to memorize a song so that you can play it without written music. In this case, you *will* want to look at your hands and the keyboard. In fact, it would be foolish not to take advantage of your eyesight to ensure you hit the correct keys. If you observe professional pianists playing from memory, they often focus on their hands and the keyboard. Freed from having to read the music, they can place more emphasis on nuance and emotion.

Reaching Intervals

In addition to Playing Blind, Feeling Keys, Pinching Fingers, and Spotting Keys, learning to recognize intervals in written music, then training your fingers to feel, reach and hear those intervals without looking will further help you keep your eyes on the written music.

Interval: An interval is the *musical* distance between any two keys of a scale. This includes black keys for every scale but C or Am. But if you focus on learning to reach the white-key intervals shown here, you can then reach to the appropriate nearby black key as needed.

Anchor: Once you have a finger anchored (fixed) on one key of an interval, your goal is to be able to reach and play the second key of the interval without looking.

Your Turn: Play the intervals shown here with your eyes open, one hand at a time. Then with your eyes closed, randomly call out and play various intervals. In time, your fingers will develop "muscle memory" for each interval.

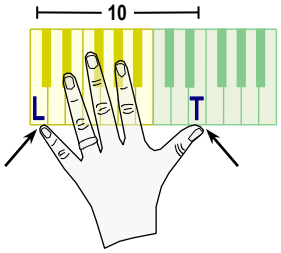
Home Position: Think of the 5th interval in 5-finger position as your comfortable "home" position. Intervals 2, 3, and 4 live in the home, but you must leave home to reach intervals 6, 7, and 8.

Dissonance: Each interval produces a distinctive sound. Most sound pleasant and harmonious, but the 2nd and 7th intervals sound somewhat unpleasant or "dissonant."

Hear Errors: Once you learn to recognize their sounds, you'll hear when you've played the wrong interval. For example, if you reach to play an octave and it sounds unpleasant, you've likely played a 7th interval and need to stretch your hand one key further.

Hand Span: An octave might be hard to reach for players with small hands, while those with larger hands can often reach more than an octave. With practice, fingers stretch and spans increase.

Attack
To maximize your hand span, "attack" the keys from slightly beneath the keyboard with just the tips of your thumb and little finger. Playing just the edges of the outer keys avoids accidentally pressing down on the inner keys.



Maximize your hand span by playing just the *edges* of keys with the *tips* of your little finger and thumb.

White-Key Intervals