

The Music Sight Reading and Memorization Guide

By Trevor Maurice of www.learnclassicalguitar.com

Introduction

It's a sad fact but many guitar players fear sight reading and memorizing their pieces and try to avoid it at all costs. But in reality, sight reading and memorization is like anything else – the more you practice it the better you will get!

This guide is designed to give you the techniques that will lead to confidence in sight reading and memorization of your music. You need to form habits so that they become second nature. You do this by doing it consistently, day by day, week by week, year by year.

If you're like the proverbial "tortoise" (as in The Hare and the Tortoise) you'll find yourself gradually gaining mastery of not only sight reading and memorization of your music, but **ALL of what you practice. Trying to do the big, quick "brain dump" never works. Rather it's the "slow and steady" pace of the tortoise that always wins out.**

Which method are you going to use? Good!

Let's start with sight reading in Section 1 and move on to memorization techniques in Section 2...

Section 1 - Sight Reading

There are many things you can do to improve your sight reading. I've actually enumerated 16 points below of a primary and secondary nature to help you do this.

THE most important is to practice sight reading on a **daily basis** even if it's only a line or two. If you do this you will improve more quickly than employing a haphazard approach i.e. one day on, three days off for example.

But to be a good sight reader you also have to have knowledge. So, just what do you need to do to improve in a step by step, logical fashion?

I've organized the following 16 primary and secondary tips you can employ **RIGHT NOW** to improve your sight reading:

Primary

1. Performing **DAILY** sight reading practice;
2. Read your music like a book first;
3. Know the key signature;
4. Be aware of the time signature and any time changes within the piece;
5. Being able to count and clap the rhythm;
6. Playing right through the whole piece the first time;
7. Trying to read 1 to 2 bars ahead;
8. Being able to spot the phrasing in music;
9. Being aware of dynamic markings;
10. Identifying intervals;

- 11. Being aware of unusual syncopated rhythms;**
- 12. Recognizing repeated chord patterns and phrases;**

Secondary

- 13. Trying to read your music in a legato fashion;**
- 14. Not always playing the strict tempo;**
- 15. Keeping your ears open for different parts and voices in the music;**
- 16. Taking sight reading seriously.**

If you can perform these primary and secondary tasks well then you've got a great chance of reading your music fast and fluent!

Let's now talk about each one in more detail...



Primary Tips

Tip 1: Sight read daily

There's nothing like daily practice at anything to get good at it – whatever that may be. Well, it's exactly the same with sight reading. Daily, consistent practice will get you far, much farther than doing a whole lot of reading on one day and then missing four days for example.

It's the same if you go to the gym. Regular practice will develop healthy, strong muscles. Your sight reading “muscle” is no different – you need to exercise it! – Preferably daily. How would you go reading this one...

South Australia

Australian Folk Song
Arr. Trevor Maurice

The musical score for 'South Australia' is presented in five staves of music. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes, with a final double bar line at the end of the fifth staff.

5

9

13

17

Tip 2: Read music as a “whole” first

If you had trouble sight reading “South Australia” in the last chapter you might want to start treating your music like you would a book. By that I mean, read the music as if it **were a book from start to finish. Try to imagine where the notes are and where your fingers are going to be on the fret. This doesn’t matter if it takes a little longer by the way. Once you start doing this more and more it becomes...you guessed it, easier and easier! ☺**

Becoming familiar with the work this way also leads to less mistakes in the future and, because you get such a thorough knowledge of the piece initially, it’s easier to work the piece up again in the future after a lay-off.

This is the way the brain works – once something’s in there it isn’t going away, as they say! If you look at the end of this eBook you’ll see a lot of sight reading examples in many keys. If you start out by implementing all the techniques and tips I suggest here you’ll become much more fluent in much less time.

Think how one learns a new language. The one that’s successful is the person who consistently and assiduously and intelligently applies themselves to the task.

Tip 3: Know the key signature

What key (or keys) is the music in? Does it change key during the piece? If you downloaded my other eBook called **Music Notation Primer**, you would have worked through a section about keys and key signature's. It's a **MUST** read to get you started reading music notation. There's no sense in working through this book if you can't even recognize the basics of music notation.

Just in case you didn't get it then go here...

<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Music-Notation-Ebook-Page>

Now if you know how to read the key signature then it makes reading all the notes of the piece that much easier. For instance if there's a key signature of four sharps you're going to be in the key of either E major or C# minor...



You might also remember from the music notation primer that you can determine a key's signature by looking at the last bass note of the piece. If it's an E then you're in E major and if it's a C# then you're in C# minor.

This one's definitely in E major...

A musical score for guitar in E major, 7/8 time. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The score consists of five measures. Above the staff, fingering is indicated with letters 'a', 'm', and 'i'. Dynamics include 'p' (piano) and 'C11-----' (C11 chord). Fingerings are: Measure 1: a a a, m m m, i i i; Measure 2: a a a, m m m, i i i; Measure 3: a a a, m m m, i i i; Measure 4: m m m, i i i; Measure 5: a, m. Dynamics: p 0, p 1, p 2, p, p 0.

Other tell-tale signs for the piece being in a minor key are sharps within the music but not in the key signature i.e. the 7th note of harmonic minor scale is always raised so in C# harmonic minor the B will be sharpened (played as an actual C note)...

A musical score in treble clef, 4/4 time, with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The melody consists of seven notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, and C5. A sharp accidental is placed above the B4 note, indicating it should be played as a C5 note.

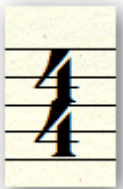
You can see the accidental note on the B. Consequently, **ALL the other B notes would be sharpened like this if you were in the key of C# harmonic minor. It's good to have a “heads-up” like this because it's going to be just that much easier to read and “anticipate” your music.**

Tip 4: Understand the time signature

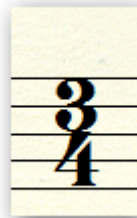
What is the time signature? Is it simple? Is it compound? Is it duple? Where are the accents falling in the music? Remember, the top number of the time signature means “how many” and the bottom number means “what type” of notes. So, in a 2/4 time signature the 2 would mean 2 notes per bar (or what adds up to 2 notes) and the 4 would equal quarter or crotchet notes for example.

Done that? Good! Well, just to make sure I want you to answer the following questions about time signatures...

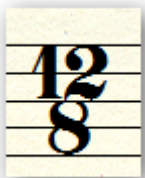
- Write down how many notes and what type they are under the following time signatures. The first one's been done for you:



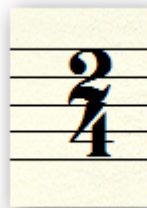
How many: Four
What type: Quarter notes



How many:
What type:



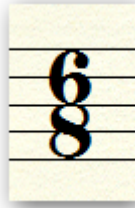
How many:
What type:



How many:
What type:



How many:
What type:



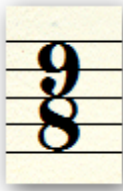
How many:
What type:



How many:
What type:



How many:
What type:



How many:
What type:

If you don't understand time signature go back to the Music Notation Primer and have a read before you continue here...

<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Music-Notation-Ebook-Page>

Now we can move on.

Tip 5: Clap the rhythm and count time

This will highlight the rhythm and give you a “heads up” when playing through the music as to where the “difficult” rhythm passages may be. It will also reveal the ‘character” or “feel” of a piece of music thus making it easier to interpret and play.

For instance the following piece will be counted: 1, 2, 3 & 4 and you could clap it easily...



That’s five claps in the rhythm. If you were also marking the beat with your foot the “and” of beat 3 is when your toes are in the air at the highest point of the movement of your toes.

You see, there are “ands” for every beat when we’re tapping our toes or clapping but the rhythm is what you actually clap, sing or play. That’s the difference. Here’s what it is theoretically like...



Tip 7: Read 1 to 2 bars ahead

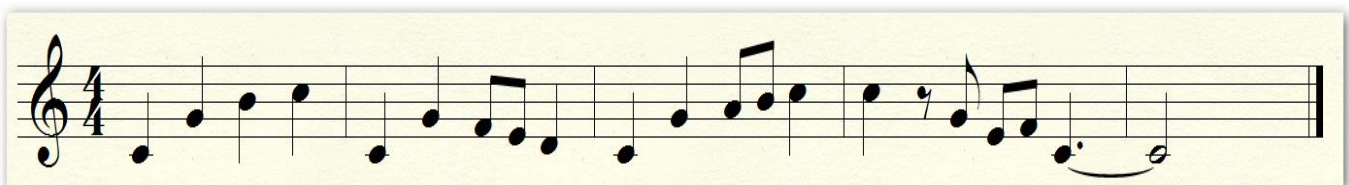
You should try, even if you haven't done much sight reading, practicing to read about 1 to 2 bars ahead of where you're actually reading. Reading ahead like this gives you "time".

It's actually an advanced skill and that's what you're heading for. When I said it gives you time, it gets you into a good habit so that when you're performing or playing with a partner you'll be far better off if something "untoward" happens. You'll be out in front and buying time, as it were.

It also helps with confidence to be able to read ahead. Remember what it was like in school when you could read ahead of the teacher in group reading tasks. When you realized you could do this it was a real buzz! It's the same when you read music too 😊

The sight reading examples at the end of this eBook start pretty simply. You should try to use these to start to get in the habit of reading 1 to 2 bars ahead. This is a good habit to get into as you can often "anticipate" mistakes before they happen. Really good musicians (with lots of practice behind them) often read whole phrases ahead.

Try it with this very short piece...



Tip 8: *Look for natural “phrases”*

If you try to compare your music to a singer you’ll realize there are always phrases (a unit of melody or group of notes in succession) in music. And at the end of each natural phrase is where the singer would take a breath.

The guitarist also has to **“take a breath”** when playing music as this will indeed make your interpretation more musical and the whole piece “breathe” in general. In other words, it won’t have the feeling of being rushed, or stilted, or in some other way unnatural and unpleasant to the ears.

Well, if you could detect the natural phrases in music you’d stand a better chance of playing and sight reading more accurately and successfully. So what do you look for in phrases? Often times the music will have “slurs” over it. These are markings that look like ties **BUT** cover a series of notes and mean that you play all the notes under the markings in a legato (smooth and connected) way.

These are **NOT** to be confused with guitar slurs which are the hammer-on, pull-off and trill. Here is a piece from the beginner series that has slur marks over the phrases...

Lesson 5

Theme from Surprise Symphony

Joseph Haydn
Arr. Trevor Maurice

Apoyando (Rest Stroke)

Guitar

i m i m i m i m i m i m i m

Also, here's a piece that doesn't have phrase markings but you can definitely see the phrases clearly...

Ode to Joy

Ludwig Van Beethoven
Arr. T. Maurice

Play with "i.m" fingers in rest stroke (apoyando) throughout.

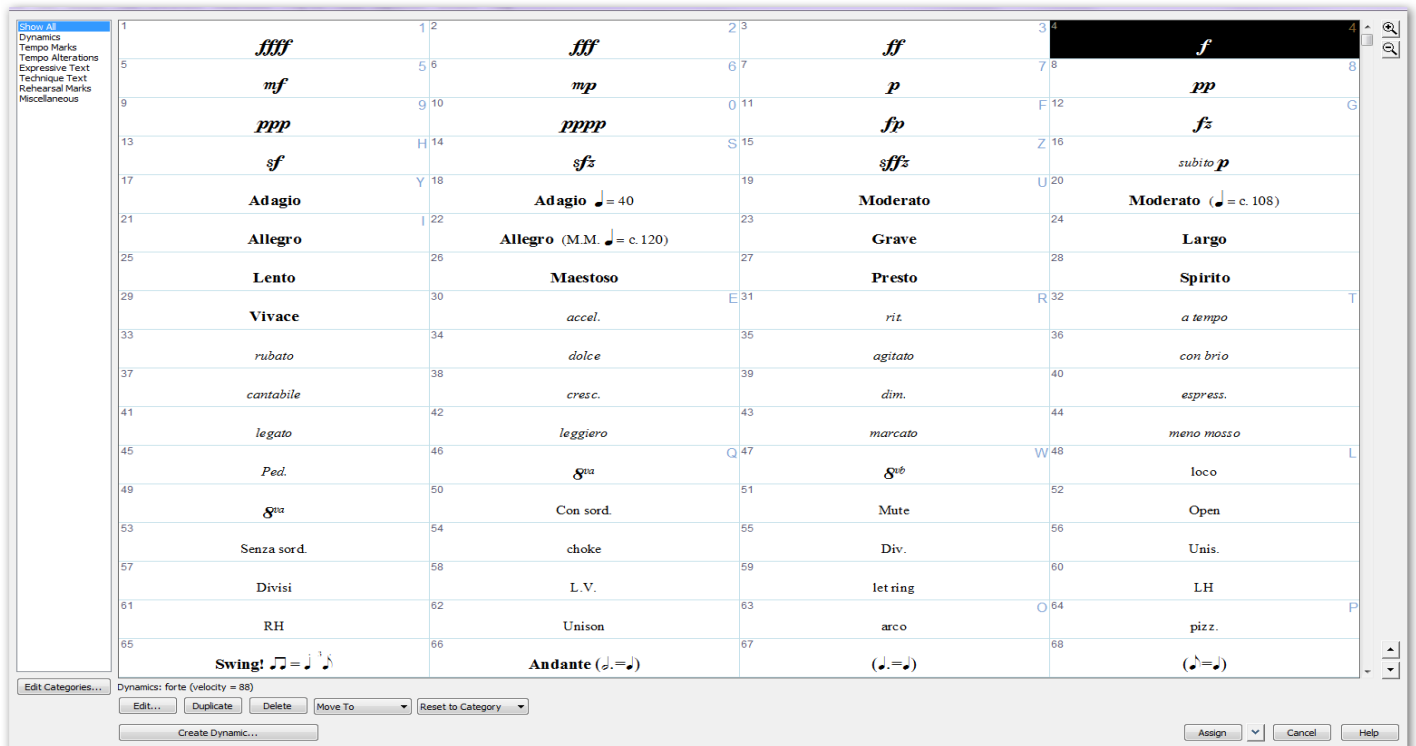
The musical score for 'Ode to Joy' is presented in five staves of music. Each staff includes fingerings (0, 1, 3) and rests above the notes. The first staff starts at measure 1, the second at measure 4, the third at measure 8, the fourth at measure 12, and the fifth at measure 16. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots at the end of the fifth staff.

You can see where the half-notes are where you “take a breath” which is also the end of each phrase. Look for these phrases and your sight reading will be much more fluent and accurate.

Tip 9: Be aware of dynamic markings

Loudness and softness and all the way in between! That can make all the difference to the way a piece of music sounds. You are the creator of the music in the sense that you “bring it alive” with proper and tasteful dynamics. If you practice this even when sight reading, you’re more likely to do it when performing because you’re already in the habit 😊

There are many, many dynamic markings in music notation and it’ll take a while before you commit them all to memory. Here are just a few I can implement with my Finale music software program...



If you want practice in learning these dynamic markings go here...

<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/musical-terminology>

Tip 10: Identify intervals

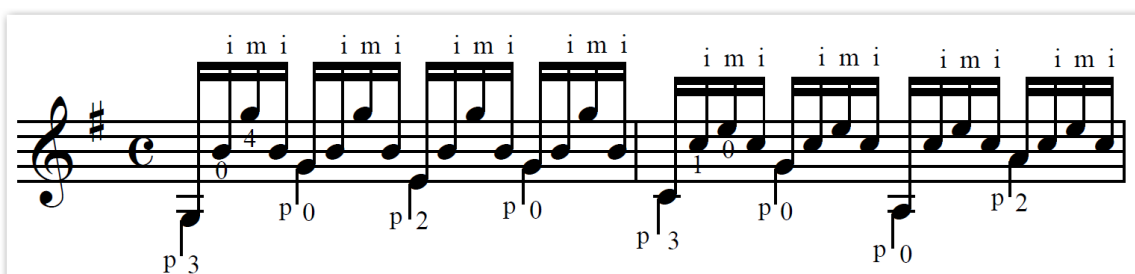
Before you play a piece of music for the first time, try to identify known melodic and harmonic intervals. This will make it easier to play “cleanly”. If you remember from the Music Notation Primer, an interval was the distance from one note to another in a chord or melody...

“An interval is always measured from the **lower note to the higher one**. You also name its distance in numbers and the **quality** or **type** of distance. Let’s start with the type.

You can have a: unison (same note); second; third; fourth; fifth; sixth; seventh; eighth (a.k.a. octave) etc. Here is an example of note intervals from the lower to the higher note...”



See if you can quickly mentally identify these intervals from the “home” note of G...



Tip 11: Watch syncopated rhythms

A syncopated rhythm is where the beats you are not expecting to be accented are accented. This is why clapping the music before you play it is always worthwhile in the sight reading of a piece. Dotted notes and syncopation (accent or accents on bars which aren't normally accented) can easily “trip you up” if you're not aware of them.

Here's another definition...

“A syncopation or syncopated rhythm is any rhythm that puts an emphasis on a beat, or a subdivision of a beat, that is not usually emphasized...Syncopation is one way to liven things up. The music can suddenly emphasize the weaker beats of the measure, or it can even emphasize notes that are not on the beat at all.”

<http://cnx.org/content/m11644/latest/>

Here's a little graphic example of a syncopated rhythm...



In the second bar the emphasis shifts to the “&” of the second beat of the bar thus making it a syncopated rhythm. If I highlighted the counting in color of this music you'd see the accented beats...

1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

You can now see the “odd one out” so to speak.

Tip 12: Recognizing repeated chords

As you improve your sight reading try to recognize chords, chord patterns and phrases that are repeated. This cuts down on your “work” tremendously. Look at the bass note of the chords and try to determine what they are before you play...

Grazioso

Dioniso Aguado
Arr. T. Maurice

Guitar

The musical score for 'Grazioso' is presented in two systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 4, and the second system contains measures 5 through 8. Each measure features a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with a bass line. Fingerings are indicated by letters 'm', 'i', and 'a' above the notes. Dynamics are marked with 'p' (piano) and 'p1' (piano first). The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 2/4. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

You can see many chords here e.g. an A major chord, followed by a G chord then a C chord. When you see such chords it really helps you to cut down on the amount of reading you’ll need to do and that I like! 😊

Secondary Tips

Tip 13: Read in a legato fashion

That means play in a “smooth & connected” way unless indicated otherwise in the music e.g. *staccato* (short & detached). It’s like anything you’re trying to make a habit of, the more you do it the easier it becomes.

Practicing in this way also makes your general playing more legato and thus more successful overall.

Tip 14: Don’t always keep strict tempo

When you’re a little more advanced with some sight reading skills “under your belt” you might have the chance to add a little *rubato* to your music.

Rubato is a conscious speeding up or slowing down of a phrase or phrases to make the interpretation more musical. Just remember though, if you speed up or slow down in one part then you usually “balance” it somewhere else in the music to make the piece chronologically (overall time taken) correct.

When you do this in practice it’s easier when playing “for real”, as it were.

Tip 15: Listen to the “voicing”

This one’s slightly more hard than other tips but try to listen to bass and treble (or inner & outer) voices in the music both when you “read” the music before playing it, and when you are actually playing.

You could even sight read just the separate lines first as you build up your skills until you can do it harmonically rather than melodically. Here I’ve done that for you by separating the melody from the bass in color...

Moderato in D
Opus 35 No.17
Fernando Sor
Arr. Trevor Maurice

C11----- C11-----

a a m a m a i i

p p 0 p 0 p 4 p 3 p 4 p 3

Tip 16: Take sight reading seriously

In the way you take your musical pieces seriously, take your sight reading seriously. By that, I mean try to “perform” them rather than just go through the motions as it were. This will help you develop the habit of being musically aware at all times.

Section 2 - Memorization Techniques

As in sight reading music, there are also techniques or methods you can use to make your memorization of musical pieces more effective. As you'll notice, these techniques overlap and if you use these techniques in combination you may find that your memorization improves dramatically.

The following techniques should prove helpful...

- 1. Reading the music like a book before playing it**
- 2. Using the “Overlapping Method”**
- 3. “Visualization” of the music**

By performing these three techniques and then combining them together will give you the best chance of memorizing your music effectively. I say effectively because you want to be able to play and recall the music years later, not just tomorrow or next week.

I know myself that pieces come back to memory very quickly years later because it has been ingrained in my subconscious brain very firmly as it went in. To make a habit of these techniques should ensure it will do the same for you if you perform them diligently.

Day 1- Read the music like a book

You need to read your music like a book **BEFORE** you sight read it. That is, when you first choose a piece of music, **DON'T** pick up your guitar but look over the music like you're reading a book.

That's right, read it from start to finish taking notice of all the musical attributes of the music. This could be time and key signatures, tempo, dynamic markings etc.

Read each line and take note of what notes are played and their rhythmic values. Try to imagine where your fingers will be on your guitar and where the notes will be played on the fret. If you can, try to imagine what the music will sound like.

Then, after actually sight reading it following the tips you've learned so far, play through your music from start to finish slowly.

Next, turn the music over and try to play as much of it as you can remember. When you come to a part that you can't remember turn it back over and look at the music or bars you can't do, and play through them several times.

Then turn it back over and try from that section again. Don't worry if this part isn't 100% successful, you're just "planting the seed" as it were, and practicing your sight reading at the same time!



Day 2 – Use the Overlapping Method

Start at the beginning of the music and play through the first two bars several times. Next, play the same two bars not looking at the music. If you've memorized those two bars play the third bar over several times.

After that turn the music over again and play through bars 2 and 3 from memory. If that is successful you would then read and practice bar 4. After that you would turn the music over again and play bars 3 and 4 from memory. Keep doing this until you've completed a whole section or the whole piece of music.

If the music is in sections you might want to try to play though that whole section before applying the “overlap method” to the next section. Put the music away and then try the whole thing at the start of Day 3. If it still needs work you could (should) add the visualization technique as outlined below.



Day 3 – Visualization of the Music

On the third day, after you've tried to play through the music from memory, try to visualize it in your mind away from the instrument. This will probably be hard at first but as I mentioned above, the more you practice the better you'll get. If it's too hard to visualize the whole piece then try it in sections or phrases.

The “visualization” can take the form of both sight and auditory functions. “Seeing” it in your mind should do wonders but “hearing” it as well will add another dimension to your memorization.

Doing these exercises over three days (and re-doing it if necessary) should yield some good results in terms of memorizing the piece. If you apply this method to your entire new repertoire in the future then you should improve your skills in both sight reading and memorization of music.



Section 1 - Sight Reading Pieces

I now have a slew of pieces for you to practice! Forty to be exact AND there are exercises from the eight most popular keys for guitar, namely: C major, G major; D major; A major; E major; F major; Bb major; Eb major. There's also an equivalent exercise in their relative minor keys, namely; A minor; E minor; B minor; F# minor; C# minor; D minor; G minor; C minor.

Further, you can build up your skill gradually by sight reading whole notes right up to 16th notes. Here now are the exercises. Print them off then use the links below to match the sound clip to correct if you're sight reading accurately...

<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Exercises-1-8-Whole-Notes>

<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Exercises-9-16-Half-Notes>

<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Exercises-17-24-Quarter-Notes>

<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Exercises-25-32-Eighth-Notes>

<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Exercises-33-40-16th-Notes>

<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Exercises-41-48-Whole-Notes>

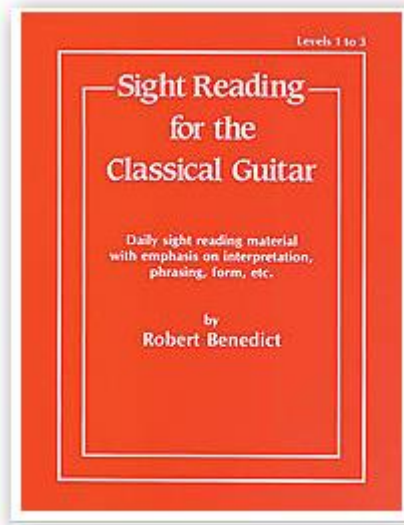
<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Exercises-49-56-Half-Notes>

<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Exercises-57-64-Quarter-Notes>

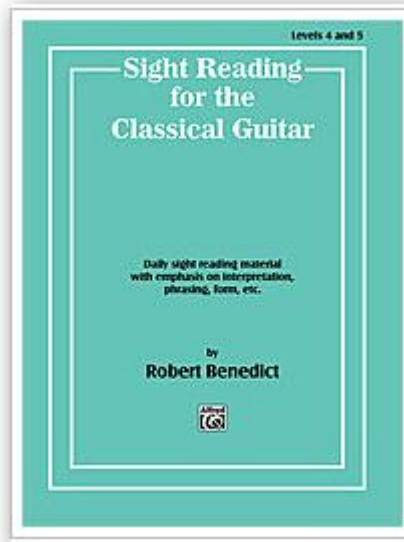
<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Exercises-65-72-Eighth-Notes>

<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Exercises-73-80-16th-Notes>

Additionally, you might use these great books by Robert Benedict...



<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Sight-Reading-Levels-1-3>



<http://www.learnclassicalguitar.com/Sight-Reading-Levels-4-5>

I hope these little tips help you to improve!