

Sightreading & Stickings

by Joel Fountain

A large component of sight-reading on the drum set is musical interpretation of the given piece, and this requires both excellent listening skills and superb rhythmic reading skills. Therefore, we must diligently internalize reading to the point that we no longer have to think about it, and are not caught up on any stickings we may wish to utilize during performance, or how (or where) a particular rhythm will be voiced on the drum set. By working on these 3 stickings you will have the flexibility to read and interpret the rhythms and scores you have been provided as you hear them, and to focus more on the musical elements of the piece and not be burdened or cumbered by the technical aspects of sight-reading specific rhythms.

We will use three different stickings while playing and reading syncopation and/or other similar reading books with 'melodies.' The three stickings are:

Right hand lead (abbreviated R.H. Lead): Every downbeat (or strong beat) is played by the right hand and all up-beats (or weak beats) are played by the left hand.

Left Hand lead (L.H. lead): Every downbeat (or strong beat) is played by the left hand and all up-beats (or weak beats) are played by the right hand

Alternate (R.H. follows left hand and vice versa): The most common sticking pattern drummers use where you are continuously alternating hands between strokes.

Below is a practical example to aid your understanding. Try to imagine you that you seeing this as a 'background' figure in a score, or even a tutti (shout) section that the whole ensemble is playing.

example

R.H. LEAD
R L R L L L R L L R R L R L L R

L.H. LEAD
L R L R R R L R R L L R L R R R L

ALTERNATE
R L R L L R L L R L R L R L R L R L R L

The image shows four staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. Each staff contains a sequence of notes and rests. The first staff is labeled 'example'. The second staff is labeled 'R.H. LEAD' and has stickings R L R L L L R L L R R L R L L R written below it. The third staff is labeled 'L.H. LEAD' and has stickings L R L R R R L R R L L R L R R R L written below it. The fourth staff is labeled 'ALTERNATE' and has stickings R L R L L R L L R L R L R L R L R L written below it.

It may seem challenging at first, particularly L.H. lead for right handed drummers (and possibly R.H. lead for left handed drummers, however often left handed drummers are more familiar with ambidexterity to begin with), but with some time and practice it will begin to feel more comfortable, and it will greatly aid your ability to express yourself around the entire drum set while sightreading. NB: the art of sight reading is not the same as preparing a solo piece (and many drummers do indeed confuse these two skills). Real sight reading is the ability to take a score or drum part you have never seen before and turn it into music right at that moment (or within 2-3 takes if on a recording session) while hearing it for the first time. There is zero time for preparation when reading, hence the need for flawless sightreading and interpretation skills.

Example using 16th notes - same sticking rules apply

The image displays three staves of musical notation, each representing a different lead pattern for 16th notes. Each staff consists of a treble clef, a series of 16th notes, and a corresponding sticking pattern below the staff.

R.H. LEAD
 RRL LLRRL L RLRRRLRLRR L L L L LRLRLR RLRRRLRRR

L.H. LEAD
 LLR RRLLLR R LRLLLLRLRLL R R R R RLRLRL LRLLLRLLLL

ALTERNATE
 LRL RLRLRL R LRLRLRLRLRL R L R L RLRLRL RLRLRLRLR
 RLR LRLRLR L RLRLRLRLRLR L R L R LRLRLR LRLRLRLRL

One important point: At the beginning of the book *Syncopation* by Ted Reed he states "Count out loud, this is a must in order to become a good reader." I can tell you that Ted Reed is not wrong. It may be possible to become a great reader without counting out loud, but in my experience every drummer who could not count out loud was also a relatively weak sight reader. So I agree that this is a 'must,' at least for 99% of us drummers. I would suggest you use every tool available to aid in your development and progress, and maintain an open mind and approach to learning.