

KEYBOARD SKILLS

Keyboard Routines

The below Keyboard Routines have been designed for teachers to plug in to a class session, either as a gateway to other keyboard work or simply as scheduled “keyboard time.” They are meant to be short and memorable. Each is designed to instill and enforce proper technique and good habits.

Turtle, Goldfish, Octopus

Skills: *hand position*

This exercise uses aquatic metaphors to help very young students work on developing and building strength towards a proper hand position. It is very much dependent upon isolating strength in the hands, so **keep an eye out for tension in other parts of the student's body** as they go through the positions described below. Many of these exercises can be done while sitting away from the piano, sitting on the rug, or standing in a circle. However, it can be helpful for the students to practice these techniques while sitting on the piano bench, in order to connect the physicality of the hands to the proper sitting position.

Suggested Timings	
2 Minutes	Turtle • Ask students to slowly open and close their hands into fists, while keeping the rest of their body relaxed. • Watch out for students who clench their whole body while making a fist and encourage them to try isolating just their hands. This is like a turtle emerging from its shell and retreating back inside!
3 Minutes	

Goldfish

- Ask students to make two “C” shapes with their hands and then to slowly open and close their hands with their index finger touching their thumb, like the mouth of a goldfish.
- Then, with their hands closed, have the students make little waves with their hands, as if the goldfish is swimming in a gentle stream.
- Students can explore this technique, using their thumb and forefinger together to play short melodies they are familiar with.

5 Minutes

Octopus

- Have students sit in the proper piano-playing position and put their palms on their knees, so that the fingers dangle over the edge of their legs.
- Ask students to imagine that their hand is like an octopus traveling over rocks with its suction cup feet, using the tips of their fingers to give their knees a massage.
- Expand this by having the students move their wrists around, while still keeping their fingers anchored to the knee.
- Then, expand this to their elbows, and their shoulders. Remind them to keep their fingers anchored, as if the octopus is holding onto a rock in a quick current!

Have students reflect on the experience:

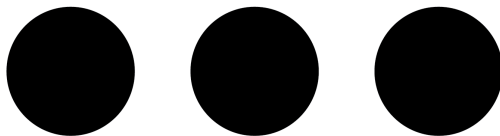
- *What other images can you think of, besides these aquatic animals, to describe how your hand should feel while playing the piano?*

Finger Ballet

Skills: *thumb transfer*

This exercise isolates the moment when the thumb crosses under, by making the thumb the anchoring point of physical focus. Emphasize and look out for fluid movements and dance-like qualities in the hand. It may be helpful to remind students of a ballet dancer’s legs—just like a pianist’s fingers, they are strong but graceful, and the rest of the performer’s body is never overly tense. As always, watch for tension in

students' bodies—it is easy for them to misplace focus on their fingers into tension elsewhere.

Suggested Timings	
1 minute	Begin by having students draw three small circles (about the size of a coin) on a piece of paper, right next to one another. 
2 minutes	Have students to place their thumb in the center circle. Explain that they will draw three different shapes in the air with another finger, while keeping their thumb placed solidly in the center. First, ask them to draw a straight line; then an oval, then a figure 8. The goal is to help students isolate other fingers in a graceful and easy manner, while being able to keep the thumb stable in a single point.
5 minutes	Establish a moderate pulse with conducting, clapping, or a metronome. Ask students to tap their fingers gracefully from circle to circle, while keeping the thumb anchored, like the gentle pointe of a ballet dancer. Do this in the most common finger crossing combinations as shown below:
3 minutes	Repeat this exercise, but now allowing the thumb to lift up slightly right when the other finger touches down on the circle. Remind students to make the crossing motion by opening and closing their hand, much like the "Goldfish." Their wrist should follow their fingers smoothly, so that they are not stretching their fingers to reach, but rather moving it to make the crossover more comfortable. Though one should caution against excessive movement, the entire arm should be moving slightly, with the finger

	leading the wrist and the wrist leading the elbow, so that the finger crossing is as easy and relaxed as possible.
3 minutes	Now ask the students to play one of the scales that they are learning, and when they arrive at the thumb crossing, to practice going back and forth on either side of the thumb (effectively doing what they did above, but at the keyboard). Remind them to stay as graceful as a ballet dancer!

Simon Says

Skills: *ear-to-finger coordination*

This simple routine incorporates elements of ear training to create a sophisticated challenge for beginning students. While particularly helpful for students who are not yet adept at reading music, it can also be scaled up for more intermediate students.

Suggested Timings	
1 Minute	Ask students to find 5-finger position, with their thumbs on middle C (or, if students are sharing keyboards, on C in two different octaves). If students have advanced beyond just C-position, they may use a more advanced position.
3 Minutes	Sing single notes from the 5-finger position—singing with finger numbers —and have students play that note on the piano, while also singing.
3 Minutes	Begin to expand the sung notes to two notes at time, followed by three notes, then four notes, etc. Repeating even one note can be a sufficient challenge, so follow the needs of the students.

3 Minutes

As the students improve at this activity and become more comfortable with their fingers, you can begin adding note names as well as fingerings, eventually working up to note names alone (without finger numbers).

For intermediate students:

- With the exception of the first note, sing the note(s) or short melody to students without any identifiers (i.e., without note names, solfège, or fingerings). Have students to play it back on the keyboard, while singing.
- Let students play the role of the teacher—working in partners, have one student sing short melodies for his/her partner to repeat back.
- Turn this game into Simon Says!
Simon Says play and sing one, five.
Simon Says play three, two, one.
Simon Says partners on the right, play and sing three.

Big Crescendos, Big Decrescendos

Skills: *dynamic range*

This physical warmup is helpful for students of any level to explore the mechanisms of their body that allow them to explore intense dynamic range. It is common for students to link physical effort and force with loud volume, so this routine will encourage students to use natural arm weight and freedom to create volume—loud songs become physically effortless.

Suggested Timings

2 Minutes

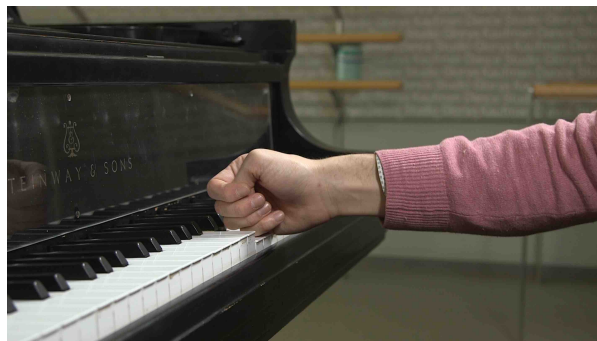
- Have students begin either at the piano or sitting in chairs around the room, with palms on knees, fingers anchored (similar to **Octopus** from Turtle, Godfish, Octopus). Lead students in using their elbows to make tiny bounces with their arms.
- Direct them to make these bounces bigger and bigger, while still keeping the fingers anchored. These bounces should have a circular shape, with the wrists making small circular motions inwards.

- Then, direct the students to again reduce the size of these bounces, until they are still again.
- Suggest that they think of these movements like jumps on a trampoline that get larger and larger simply from the momentum of the previous bounce. Or, ask them to imagine a swinging ship ride at an amusement park that gently swings back and forth, each swing becoming slightly longer.

3 Minutes

- Have the students move to the keyboards, if they have not done so already. Ask them to make a fist, and to begin to make similar small bounces on the keyboard, using the side of the fist (and the joint of their pinky that connects to the palm). Challenge them to search for the softest possible dynamic, always starting with the side of the fist on the keyboard (not in the air).

Note: *This can also be done with the volume of the keyboard turned completely down (or off entirely), allowing students to focus only on the sensations of the bounce.*



3 Minutes

- Next, direct students to create a gradual crescendo using their fists. Without lifting their fists into the air, ask them to think about how loudly they can play. Remind them to use the weight of their upper arms and focus on bouncing their arms the way they did in the first part of this routine.
- Practice going from soft to loud to soft again. You may also elect to use hand motions to direct students in practicing gradual levels of control.

2 Minutes

- Finally, have students perform something that they have been working on—a 5-note scale, chord sequence, or short piece—using this same idea of a long crescendo and long decrescendo. Have them focus on the stability of their fingers by reminding them that volume comes from the weight of the upper arm and the sensation of the bouncing from earlier activities.

Have students reflect on the experience.

Movement Sequence

Skills: *posture*

This sequence of movement helps reinforce posture at the piano and is a good physical warmup for the beginning of a class. Model movements while you lead, as necessary.

**Suggested
Timings**

10 Minutes

1. Have students shake out their bodies for a few seconds, releasing any excess tension, like a dog shaking itself out after a bath!
2. Gradually slow down shaking until students find a still standing position—relaxed with a slight bend in the knees, but alert. Have them imagine a marionette being controlled gently by strings from above. Students can even bounce a bit in place to ensure flexibility and comfort in the knees. Inviting students to close their eyes for a minute can help increase their body awareness.

3. Ask students to put their arms straight out in front of them, making two fists, almost like a flying superhero.
4. Begin exploring miniature squats, keeping arms held out in front. Remind students to look straight ahead, past their arms, and not to let their shoulders rise or collapse. Again, think about the marionette and how its body is always suspended from above.
5. Next, ask students to fold at the waist, with their hands either still out in front or on their hips, keeping their back flat (not hunched over—similar to flat-back position in a yoga practice). Students should still be able to keep their eyes somewhat forward, almost like they could put a full tray of food on their back. Then, ask them to slowly straighten back to a normal standing position. Repeat this transition as necessary.
6. Have students sit at keyboards, keeping their arms out in front of them and their back poised. Remind them that the posture at the keyboard should maintain the flat back of the prior bend, keeping the neck poised and alert, without hunching shoulders. The image of marionettes and dancers can also very helpful here, since transitioning from standing to sitting can be a challenge. Repeat this transition as necessary.
7. At this point, students' outstretched arms should just reach the music stand of the keyboard (or the fallboard of the piano). Students should adjust their seat if they are too close or too far.
8. Have students experiment with balancing objects (e.g., stuffed animal, coin, or small cushion) on their heads and then playing a scale (or other passage of repertoire). For pairs at a keyboard, partners can take turns putting the object on the other's head and keeping track of how long the s/he is able to play without dropping the object.

Note: Each transition can be challenging for students, especially young ones with developing body awareness. It can be very helpful to check in after each step, asking students to reflect on the sensations in their body and to describe images that reinforce these sensations. Different metaphors than the ones provided can be developed together as a class, or at your discretion.

Fingertip Elements

Skills: articulation

Begin this exercise on a flat, hard surface, away from the keyboard (or, alternatively, on the upper part of the keyboard, past the actual keys).

Suggested Timings	
6 Minutes	Have students close their eyes and imagine that their hands are made of the below materials. Ask them to imagine playing the piano on a neutral, hard surface, with these materials in mind. Invite them to think about what it might look and feel like to play if their fingers were made of: • Mud/Slime/Wet Sand (Slurs/Legato) <i>Fingers should look heavy, but flexible. Remind students to keep wrists flexible, but fingertips solid.</i> • Smooth Stones/Marbles (Tenuto) <i>Similar to the above, there should be weight behind each finger. However, encourage students to find a bit of separation between each finger, as if each finger has its own marble or stone.</i> • Glass/Feathers (Staccato) <i>Remind students to keep their fingers light but strong, finding more and more separation between each finger stroke.</i> • Gemstones/Flames (Accents) <i>Students should have a quick attack in the fingertip, with this being the “strongest” articulation of the four.</i>
4 Minutes	Ask students to now use these images to play a scale or a chord (or a short repertoire excerpt) using each of these four levels of articulation.

Have students reflect on the experience:

- *What other images can you think of for each kind of articulation?*
- *What do these articulations look like in notated music?*
- *What kind of sonic character do these different articulations have?*
- *How does your arm feel at each level of articulation?*

Mini-Melodies

Skills: *sightreading, composition*

Prior knowledge: comfort writing and reading music

This activity is an exciting synthesis of composing, collaborative process, and sightreading and can be adapted for students with a range of expertise. Students with more experience can be paired with students with less experience for a rewarding experience for both. Step #1 may take a few classes to successfully execute as an entire class, but it provides a gentle introduction to composition.

Suggested Timings	
5 Minutes	In pairs, have students generate a short 4- or 8- measure two-hand melody in a given key or mode. Depending on students' prior knowledge and skill level, you may choose to limit the pitches or rhythms that can be used.
4 Minutes	Once composed, have students work together with their partner to notate their melodies. Students can work together or divide roles so that one student notates the treble clef line, while the other person writes the bass line part.
5 Minutes	Ask pairs to exchange their composition with another group, and take turns sight-reading the melodies (reading the treble melodies with the right hand, and bass melodies in the left). When sightreading, remind the students to always look one or two notes ahead of the note that they are playing. You can work to develop this habit by walking around the room to pairs individually and covering the notes they're currently play with an index card or similar object.
4 Minutes	For a further challenge, these melodies can then be superimposed, and the students can try to sightread both hands at the same time.

For advanced students:

- For a more extensive use of this activity over a series of multiple classes, the Instructor may decide to take the students' work, copy it, and distribute to the whole class as a sight-reading exercise for the beginning of class.

Arpeggios

Skills: *Arpeggios, Coordination, Rhythmic Stability, Finger Stability*

Have students begin at keyboards, in pairs or individually.

Warm-Up

Suggested Timings	
5 minutes	• Lead students in a set of unison arpeggios in different keys. If students are sharing pianos, the arpeggios can be played in different octaves. • Decide on the number of octaves to fit the students' needs and your instrument limitations. • Ensure a steady tempo by either using a metronome or conducting the class. Explore different subdivisions (eighth notes, triplets, sixteenth notes) as additional ways of practicing.

Main Activity

Students work in partners at a keyboard and will be referred to as **Student A** (right) and **Student B** (left).

Suggested Timings	
5 minutes	• Call out a key and an appropriate parameter (see below). Students pairs are responsible for cuing one another and

staying coordinated.

- Initially, each parameter may require you to model it, however, as these activities become more routine, students should be able to complete each without help.

Parameters for BEGINNING Students:

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|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Minutes 5 Minutes 5–7 Minutes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parallel: Students, both using the same hand, play the assigned arpeggio together moving in the same direction. Mirroring: Student A, using their right hand, plays the arpeggio going from low to high, as Student B, using their left hand, plays the arpeggio from high to low. The students then switch hands and repeat the process. They can also switch seats in order to play the arpeggio in the opposite direction. Follow the Leader: Students can go either up or down, in parallel or contrary motion, but Student A is the “leader,” and can change tempo at will, with Student B required to listen and watch closely in order to follow the tempo. Student A must also be clear in their tempo changes. |
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Filling in Triads

Skills: chords, coordination, collaborative playing, ear training, singing

Have students begin either at desks or at keyboards.

Suggested Timings

3 Minutes

- Guide the class in singing triads—using scale degrees 1, 3, and 5—via call and response.

Note: You may adapt this to the level of your classroom by including different types of triads (major, minor, diminished, augmented, etc.) and inversions.

2 Minutes	• Extend the call and response by singing note names instead of scale degrees. • Ask students to respond by playing the notes on the piano and then singing.
1 Minute	• Divide students into partners—designating one as Student A (right) and the other as Student B (left)—and have them move to a piano if not already there.
5–7 Minutes	• Inform groups that Student A will play an incomplete triad (i.e., two out of three notes of the chord). If working with multiple inversions, ask Student A to identify the one they want their partner to create. Student B should fill in the triad with the missing note. • After each turn, have students alternate roles.

Have students reflect on the experience:

- *When filling in a triad, how did you position your hands to avoid colliding with your partner?*
- *What feelings are evoked by the different qualities of triad (major, minor, diminished, augmented)?*
- *How does the spacing of a chord change its sound?*

For beginning students:

- **Working as a class:** When leading the singing warm-up, consider singing only two notes of the triad and asking the class to work together to identify and sing or play the missing note. (5 Minutes)
- **Chord quality:** Since one missing note in a triad can lead to multiple possibilities, organize the activity by defining a specific chord quality.
Let's find major triads. What note do you need to add to your partner's interval to create a major triad? (5 Minutes)
- **Triad flash cards:** For students just beginning to read music, consider creating flash cards with preselected triads. Working in pairs, have Student A select and play two of the three notes to play while Student B works out the missing note. Students can use the flashcards to check their work. (7–10 Minutes)

For advanced students:

- **Range:** Depending on students' theory skills, you may wish to modify this activity by asking students to play the extracted interval in two different ranges on the piano. This requires both students to hear harmony in a more expansive way, as well as calibrate to the size of the instrument and synthesize the position of their partner's choice. (5–7 Minutes)
- **Singing:** After forming a new triad together, ask each pair of students to sing the triad in root position with scale degrees 1, 3, and 5. This is particularly challenging if using an open position. (7–10 Minutes)
- **Working as a class:** Divide your class into three groups—Groups A, B, and C. Assign one pitch of the triad to Group A and a different note of the triad to Group B, and have the two groups sing their given pitches. Have Group C work together to identify, sing, and play on keyboards the missing pitch. (5 Minutes)

Improvised Pop Songs

Skills: *creativity, improvisation, hand positions, harmony, collaboration*

Prior knowledge: familiarity with the I–IV–V–I progression

Students work in partners at a keyboard and will be referred to as Student A (right) and Student B (left).

Suggested Timings	
5 Minutes	Prepare students for this activity by having them call out responses to questions such as these: • <i>What are some of your favorite songs right now?</i> • <i>What are some of the things you really like about that song?</i> • <i>What are some of the characteristics of your pop song?</i>
2 Minutes	Review how to play a I–IV–V–I chord progression in a chosen key (triads in the right hand, with a simple one-note bass line in the left).
3 Minutes	Share with the class a rhythmic ostinato that Student B will apply to

	the I–IV–V–I progression. Have all Student B's experiment briefly before all playing together in unison.
5 Minutes	Using a 5-finger position corresponding to each chord, have Student A improvise a melody on top of that chord progression. Remind Student A to listen closely to Student B's chord changes in order to coordinate the hand position switches.

Have students reflect on the experience:

- *What makes our favorite music so catchy?*
- *How do we know when to switch harmonies?*
- *How does the rhythm change the character of the song?*

This activity can also be tied to the [Improvisatory Music Core Work](#).

For beginning students:

- **Simplified Harmony:** Allow beginners to use single notes instead of full triads, and give them a reduced rhythmic ostinato figure.
- **Rhythmic Coordinated Ostinato:** To match the simplified left-hand melody, Student A may also play a reduced number of notes in rhythmic unison.
- **Hand Switch:** Student B can play the melody, while Student A plays chords above.

For advanced students:

- **Composition Assignment:** Challenge students to arrive at a final version of their melody, which they can repeat multiple times or perform for classmates. Consider asking students to notate their melody and accompanying chords on staff paper, or add lyrics to their pop songs!
- **Extended Progressions, Melodies, and Ostinati:** Offer a series of extended chord progressions that are common in pop music (e.g., [iv, IV, V, I] or [V6, IV, V, iv]). Challenge students to think of more difficult ostinato figures. Advanced Students may also want to break out of the 5-finger position, adding scales and other ornaments to their improvisations.

Discovery extension:

- Advanced Students can work together to learn, by ear, how to play a favorite song. This can be done with the help of the instructor in small groups or as a class in a series of broken down steps. Help students to first identify the ostinato from the chosen song and then direct students to the proper hand position in which to play the melody. From there, students can work towards playing the chord progression and melody on their own. This may take multiple classes

