



Making the Most of **REHEARSAL TIME**

By Kristina R. Weimer

With limited instruction days and time, music teachers can easily feel like they're playing a game of beat-the-clock. Before we know it, precious rehearsal time can quickly disappear. If your class is 45 minutes long and students spend 5–8 minutes at the beginning of rehearsal assembling their instruments and getting ready to play and another 2–4 minutes at the end of the rehearsal putting everything away, you can lose 7–12 minutes of each rehearsal. Over the course of a week that adds up to 35–60 minutes—a full rehearsal or more—solely dedicated to starting and ending. If each week is structured this way, like a growing debt, lost rehearsal time begins to compound.

What follows is a simple three-minute strategy I used to establish expectations and procedures at the beginning of rehearsal. This strategy eliminated wasted minutes and promoted a smooth and successful start to each rehearsal. And while three minutes might not sound significant, when added up over the days and weeks, you will enjoy the dividends of that compounded rehearsal time.

With our ensembles, I used a three-minute drill at the beginning of class to establish structure and routine, getting everyone to their seats with all necessary materials, focused, and ready for rehearsal. As soon as the tardy bell rang, I started a timer set for three minutes (you can make it more visual by projecting the countdown).

Students and the teacher have responsibilities during these three minutes.

Student Responsibilities

1. Enter the classroom in an appropriate manner. The three minutes is in addition to the time allowed to travel between classes. I taught in a small school where students had three minutes to travel between classes. If they entered the room before the tardy bell rang they had that time as well. Visiting with friends is fine, if they can manage their time and tasks.

2. Completely assemble their instrument in proper working condition. This includes oiling valves if necessary, and getting a working reed in place. Percussionists must work together to have all equipment necessary for the day's rehearsal set up and ready to play—timpani tuned to the proper pitches, all mallet instruments uncovered and in place, and all accessories, stands, and mallets out and properly placed in appropriate areas.

3. Gather all necessary materials. All students must have their folder with their method book, all repertoire, and a pencil inside. They must get their music in rehearsal order and place it on

the stand with their pencil. I assigned each student a folder and expected them to keep their book, repertoire, and pencil in it. They were also assigned a folder slot, so essentially, they only had to grab their folder, bring it to their stand, and put things in order.

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repetition are key.**

Teacher Responsibilities

1. Have materials clearly listed on the board. Prior to class be sure to have everything students need to successfully set up for rehearsal. On the board, I stated the day's objectives so students would know our daily goals and the rehearsal order (including warm-ups, method book page or example numbers, and repertoire when applicable). I taught three bands (6th, 7th, and 8th grade) and assigned each a different section of the board and used a specific color marker so they could easily find their information. I completed this before leaving the previous school day to avoid rushing in the morning or in between classes.
2. Make sure your timer is accessible when the tardy bell rings. I carried the timer in my hand, as I was expected to be in the hall outside the classroom door monitoring students as they changed classes, and greeting those who entered the room. As soon as the tardy bell rang I would hit start, then walk inside and set it on my stand. Students were free to look at it to see what time remained. If you are using your phone it is easy to keep it in a pocket or have it close by ready to start when the bell rings, and you could project it on a board or wall.
3. Have all your materials in order. You will lose credibility if students see that you are disorganized and unprepared as you dig through a pile of scores to find today's repertoire. If you use visual aids such as rhythmic patterns for warm-ups or repertoire, make sure they are on the board or on flashcards ready to use. Audio aids such as recordings should also be ready. If you are using instruments to demonstrate, ensure they are assembled and quickly accessible (model this behavior for your students). As they are setting up and getting seated, walk around to be sure students have all materials. Keep an eye on the timer. As it approached 30 seconds I would go to the podium. This gave them fair warning that rehearsal was about to start, and time to quickly finish getting ready if they weren't already in their seat.
4. Create a nonverbal plan to start rehearsal. If you start rehearsal by talking instead of playing right away, students will take longer to get settled. Play immediately and save announcements for the end of rehearsal. I used a number of strategies. Sometimes I would use echo patterns—singing or playing. I would sing or play a short melodic pattern or chant a rhythmic pattern (relevant to the day's objectives), and students would echo. This was a great way to work playing by ear into our rehearsals. I also used Curwen hand signals. I would state "concert ___" and then show *do* while students played the correct pitch. Other times I would start playing recorded music, give the instructions "do as I do," and lead students through a movement sequence using rhythm patterns found in the repertoire to establish rhythmic feeling.

However you choose to begin rehearsal, I believe it is important to begin nonverbally

with a warm-up or activity relevant to your objectives. The instant the timer went off, rehearsal began. Any student not in their seat was counted tardy, which was noted in their attendance. Students earned 5 daily preparation points as part of their overall grade. One point for each: having their instrument in proper working order, method book, repertoire in folder, pencil, and being on time (ready when the timer went off). With my classes, I was able to easily keep track of everyone. As students were setting up and getting seated during the three minutes I walked around with the gradebook and marked points in their daily slot, from 1 to 5. If I didn't get everyone before the timer went off, I could check students in between pieces or activities. It was not uncommon for me to walk around during rehearsal anyway. As for tardy students, if I were singing or using Curwen hand signals to begin rehearsal I could easily write names. If I were playing an instrument I made mental notes and jotted names in between pieces or activities. For larger classes perhaps an assistant or a student leader could be in charge of noting preparation points, should you choose to include them in your grading system.

Like with any change, consistency and repetition are key. I inherited a program with little structure or routines in place—time not well-managed. When we first began this exercise I heard complaints, mainly griping about not enough time to get ready, but once they saw it could be done with time to spare, things began to move smoothly. I used positive reinforcement (verbal praise or high-fives) with those who were ready to participate with time to spare, and it really didn't take long for all students to settle in to this routine. Many times, I was able to stop the timer because everyone was ready before three minutes was up, and we began even earlier. Regardless, I continued using the timer because I didn't want to lose our established routine or change expectations.

The time it takes to make this a habit may vary depending on class dynamics, but just keep at it. Focus on the positive, ignore the negative comments or complaints, and enjoy a smoother start to each rehearsal. ■

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