

Jane Werry

What are Do Now activities, and what are they for?

A Do Now activity (sometimes called Do It Now) – as its name suggests – is an activity that students do as soon as they enter the classroom.

Their two main purposes are to settle the class, and to provide some meaningful thinking and learning for students as quickly as possible. They can be very useful for music teachers, as long as you've planned what you want to achieve, and have some good routines in place.

Done well, Do Now activities provide real purpose to the start of each lesson, creating a sense of the subject's identity ("We're definitely in music now!") and anticipation of what's to come later. They can get students straight out of the corridor and into your room doing something musical, and mop up some of the dead time that can occur if your students tend to arrive in dribs and drabs. They can also give you a few minutes to clear your head and get everything organised for the lesson – especially useful on those days where you teach back-to-back lessons.

What sort of Do Now activities work well in music?

Before getting started, there are a couple of things you'll need to decide on:

- ▶ Will your Do Nows be practical, listening or written activities?
- ▶ Will the Do Nows tie in directly to the rest of the lesson content, or be completely separate from it?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. There are many variables that you'll need to consider depending on your school context and departmental setup. It may be that the students you teach need a very calm start to the lesson, in which case listening and/or writing activities may be the way to go. Perhaps your students need enlivening, and practical activities will be best to get them going and engaged with the music straight away.

Does your school have movement time between lessons, or 'Star Trek' lesson changes where students are expected to teleport instantly from one end of school to the other? Do students tend to arrive all at once, or in a steady dribble? Does your school have an immaculate corridor discipline system, or does it work better for students to spend as little time as possible in a chaotic corridor?

Beyond these practical considerations, the relevance of the Do Now to the rest of the lesson is more of a philosophical question. A non-related Do Now can be a great opportunity to revisit prior learning, or embark on a programme of wider listening. A related Do Now can work wonders in immersing students straight away in the lesson content, catapulting them straight back into their learning journey.

A potential spanner in the works might be your school's policy regarding the beginnings of lessons. Some schools require that Do Now activities are silent, meaning that not only must students be silent, but also the whole activity should not make any sound, ruling out any listening to music. I know of some schools who have a policy of five minutes of silent (non-subject-related) reading at the start of each lesson.

If this is the case, you will need to decide how to respond. Where there is a 'silent Do Now' policy, think about whether it would be appropriate to approach your SLT with your reasons why this is not appropriate for music. Ofsted have repeatedly stated that they want to see and hear music in music lessons, and for students to be actively engaged with music. If students are to spend the first ten minutes writing *about* music without directly experiencing it, that takes away valuable time from the very thing that the lesson is supposed to be for. Question why the Do Nows need to be entirely silent: if the main purpose is to settle students and get them engaged with the subject, then surely listening to music is the perfect way to approach this. What will PE and drama departments do? Can you present a united front with other like-minded subjects? The 'silent reading for all' policy is harder to tackle, since the school has clearly decided that promoting literacy needs to take up each subject's time equally, and to demand to be an exception on the grounds of your limited timetable time may fall on deaf ears.

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Establishing routines

Whichever style of Do Now you go for, you'll need to establish and reinforce routines about how the activities work. These routines need to tie in with your room setup and any other requirements that your school has about lesson beginnings (lining up outside, greeting students at the door, and so on).

Students need to know exactly what they're expected to do at the start of each lesson. This will be made much easier if it's exactly the same each time. What do they do with their coats and bags? Where do they sit? Do they need to get anything out? Should they be in silence?

The first couple of lessons will need to start with explicit instructions on these things *before* the Do Now activity, so that the seating plan is established and your expectations are made clear.

After that, the setup should allow for you to greet students at the door and deal with any admin tasks (report cards, individuals who need to leave early) or other issues (uniform, behaviour) while students simply come in and get on with the Do Now. Any reminders about what to do and how to do it can be given verbally or be up on the wall.

If the Do Now is to involve writing or practical work, students will also need routines about how those are done. Practical work, in particular, relies on students having a very strong grasp of exactly how they go about things, and will take some training to make efficient.

Once all the students are in the room and busy with the Do Now task, you will then have a couple of minutes to take the register, organise resources for the lesson, or (if you have a particularly busy day) consult your planner to remind yourself about the class and what you have planned for them.

Listening Do Now activities

If you decide to go for listening Do Nows, these may either be related to the current topic you're teaching, or explore a programme of wider listening aimed at exposing students to a range of unfamiliar music to increase their cultural capital. Putting together such a programme of listening examples can be a lot of fun, and something that could be done in a department meeting or CPD session. It will, of course, be a subjective list. Think about the order in which students will hear the pieces, and try to mix up styles. Have a rationale about the extent to which the pieces will be (probably) unfamiliar to students: there's a good argument for keeping the emphasis on things that they are not likely to have previously heard.

Whatever pieces you choose, it works really well to present them in video format. This is partly because it is engaging for students, but also because they will be able to make links between what instruments sound like and look like, and how musicians go about the business of performing. There are so many performances to choose from on YouTube: have a good look through and choose ones that not only show excellent performances, but also give the best view of individual instruments and performers. Lyric videos can be very useful for songs, and rolling scores can also be interesting even if students do not yet read music fluently. Anything that gets them linking musical sounds and symbols has got to be a good thing.

If you embed a video in a PowerPoint slide, you can also include your questions, together with some crucial information, in the same place for students to take in while they are watching:

This week's piece: Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor, written 1845

How are the dynamics used in this piece?

DYNAMICS

- Pianissimo
- Piano
- Mezzopiano
- Mezzoforte
- Forte
- Fortissimo
- Crescendo
- Diminuendo
- How do the dynamics change?

- What is a **concerto**?
- Try to follow the notation of the violin part. Do you have any questions about what you see?

The PowerPoint containing these slides, and many more, can be found at <https://werryblog.com/do-now-activities/>

This slide includes the title and composer of the piece so that students can, if they are interested (and more will be interested than will admit to it publicly), find the piece in their own time to listen to again. The year of composition is also included so that discussions can include how the piece fits with historical events or periods of musical history. A particular musical dimension is also the focus here: you can rotate around the elements to reinforce terminology and provide a starting point for discussion, in which students can be encouraged to use musical terms correctly.

This particular slide features a video from YouTube that shows the violin soloist in close-up, together with a rolling score of the violin part. Even if your knowledge of music notation is rudimentary, the sheer quantity of notes that she's playing should be enough to induce a 'wow' response. As an insight into the virtuosity of a concerto soloist, this works really well, and should provoke some worthwhile discussion.

Encourage students to ask questions as much (or even more) than they answer them. Sometimes students' questions can be extremely perceptive and uncover all sorts of interesting facets of the music that you may not have considered yourself.

This week's piece: *Blowin' In The Wind* by Bob Dylan, written 1962



How can you describe the harmony in this song?

HARMONY

- Major or minor?
- Consonant or dissonant?
- Key change?
- Harmonic rhythm: how often chords change
- Drone/pedal note

- This song is in was adopted as an anthem for the civil rights movement. What was/is the civil rights movement? Why do you think this song suited them?

This example links a song to politics and history, as an example of a piece of music that shows the intimate connections between music and the time and place of its creation. Having the lyrics in the video, in this case, helps to scaffold the subsequent discussion.

You will need to consider how students respond to the music, and the questions you ask. If they're writing answers, how will you assess what they've written? If you have six KS3 lessons in one day, marking written answers could add an unmanageable marking burden to your week. Will written answers form some sort of 'listening log' that will build up over the year? How will you validate the quality of their answers?

If students' responses will be verbal, think about strategies for ruling out passivity or 'switching off'. These might include:

- ▶ Have some questions that can be answered with an opinion rather than a factual answer. These might include questions along the lines of 'What do you think this music is about?' or 'What gives this music a feeling of building emotion?'. Warn students that you're going to pick people randomly to answer, and then give them some thinking time before selecting a student (this can be done with a random name-picker).
- ▶ For more knowledge-based questions, like the one above to do with the civil rights movement, give students an opportunity to have a quick 30-second discussion with their neighbour about what they know already. Perhaps give them a couple of hints, for example here you could give them the names Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks as a starting point. After they have had an opportunity to discuss, then pick students to give answers.
- ▶ Bounce questions: rather than giving a teacher response after a student's answer, bounce it straight to another student, by saying: 'Johnny, do you agree with what Ismath just said?'
- ▶ Think about having either/or questions that can be answered with simple whole-class responses. With 'Blowing in the Wind', for example, you could ask students to give a thumbs up if they think it's in a major key, and thumbs down if they think it's minor. Questions involving 'how many' (beats in a bar, layers of sound, instruments playing) can be answered by holding fingers up.

Practical Do Nows

Practical Do Nows can work tremendously well, but require your class to have extremely well set-up routines. The simplest form of practical Do Now is literally 'do this', and involves students copying whatever you are doing. This can evolve into a rhythm game, a vocal call and response, or a body percussion pattern. The disadvantage here is trying to deal with other issues that might crop up at the start of the lesson: you may have to train students to give in report cards or tell you important information, and deal with uniform infringements and so on, after the initial activity. Trying to lead a cumulative body percussion activity while simultaneously getting students to tuck their shirts in might be more multi-tasking than even a music teacher can handle!

If students are well-drilled in instrumental work, and can be trusted to get themselves going with their instruments quite independently, then a practical Do Now can take the form of a 'Show Me'. Give a time limit (two minutes, five minutes, eight minutes) as appropriate for the task, and require that they use their instruments either individually or in pairs/groups to prepare a mini-piece that puts a previously learnt concept into action. Examples could include:

- ▶ Show me two ostinato patterns that fit together. Use the notes E,G and A in any way you like. Use a xylophone.
- ▶ Using only your voices, show me a crescendo followed by a diminuendo, at the same time as a diminuendo followed by a crescendo.
- ▶ Show me the use of ternary form in a very short piece.
- ▶ Using voices or instruments as instructed, show me a drone held against an ostinato pattern.
- ▶ Using drums or body percussion, show me a steady pulse in one part, with syncopated (off-beat) notes only in another part.
- ▶ Show me a regular pulse in one part against an ostinato rhythm in another – then swap the parts around.
- ▶ Use an instrument to show me a rising scale, with each note of the scale played four times.
- ▶ Make up a very short piece to show me the difference between unison and harmony.
- ▶ Make up a very short piece to show me the difference between the intervals called 3rds and 4ths.
- ▶ Make up a very short piece to show me two different tempi (plural of tempo) with a gradual change between.
- ▶ Make up a very short piece to show me the difference between a rhythm and a melody.
- ▶ Using a xylophone, show me a rising sequence followed by a falling sequence.
- ▶ Make up a very short piece to show me the meaning of parallel motion.
- ▶ Make up a very short piece to show me the meaning of contrary motion.
- ▶ Make up a very short piece to show me the difference between a monophonic texture and a polyphonic texture.
- ▶ Make up a very short piece to show me the difference between a melody and chords.
- ▶ Using voices or instruments, show me a call and response.

This is another excellent way to reinforce understanding of musical terminology in a practical, musical way. It is, of course, dependent upon students understanding the terms, from having learnt about them previously. In whatever way this has been done, have a strategy in place for any students who simply do not remember. This might take the form of a 'cheat sheet' that they can ask to have a sneaky peek at so that they can then get on with the task.

Show Me! Cheat sheet

| Word | Meaning |
|-----------------------|--|
| Ostinato | A repeated pattern (melody or rhythm) |
| Crescendo | Gradually getting louder |
| Diminuendo | Gradually getting softer |
| Drone | Note(s) held or repeated on one pitch |
| Pulse | A regular beat that underlies the music |
| Syncopated (off-beat) | Between the main pulse/beat notes |
| Rhythm | A pattern of notes with mixed lengths |
| Scale | A pattern of notes falling or rising in steps |
| Harmony | Notes of different pitches sounding together |
| Ternary form | A 3-part structure where the sections are organised ABA, like a sandwich |
| Interval | The distance between two notes |
| Third | An interval of 3 steps from note to note, e.g. C-E |
| Tempo | The speed of the music |
| Unison | Notes of the same pitch sounding together |
| Melody | A pattern of notes with mixed pitches |
| Sequence | A small pattern repeated higher or lower in pitch each time |
| Parallel motion | Two parts always moving in the same direction |
| Contrary motion | Two parts always moving in the opposite direction |
| Monophonic | One note at a time |
| Polyphonic | Several different melodies or notes at a time |
| Call & response | A musical conversation |

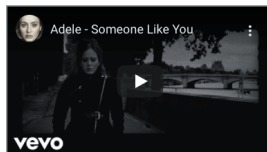
Another form of practical Do Now is simply to resume whatever was being done the previous lesson. This can be very effective where students are engaged in ongoing performing or composing work. You can put a reminder of the task on the board, and give students ten minutes to get set up and get back to where they were, before stopping them to give feedback or add to the task in some way. If your lessons are short, this can be a way of cutting to the chase and maximising the time available.

Knowledge-based Do Nows

If you use written work in your lessons, any short written task can be used as a Do Now: a listening task, a theory quiz, questions on musical terminology. If this is your approach, plan these tasks so that you can go through the answers straight away: doing this will benefit students' learning of the material, and take away the possibility of you having to do any marking later.

Another approach is to use multiple-choice questions that students can answer very simply by holding up their fingers:

DO NOW:
Have your answers ready!



Which is the correct notation for the chorus?

1. Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes on a line with a fermata over the final note.

2. Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes on a line with a fermata over the final note.

3. Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes on a line with a fermata over the final note.

4. Treble clef, 4/4 time, notes on a line with a fermata over the final note.

What instruments can you hear?

INSTRUMENTS

Strings: violin/viola/cello/double bass/harp

Woodwind: flute/oboe/clarinet/bassoon/piccolo

Brass: trumpet/horn/trombone/tuba

Percussion: timpani/snare/cymbals/xylophone (and many others)

Voices: soprano/alto/tenor/bass

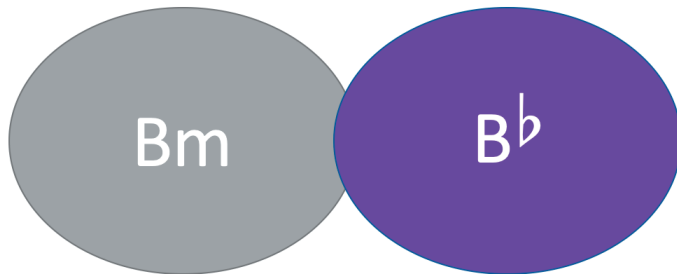
Keyboards: piano/harpsichord/organ/synthesiser

Rock/pop: electric/acoustic guitar/bass guitar, drumkit, loops/samples

This requires everyone to give an answer – even if their answer is a guess. Supplementary questions can be asked to get students to explain how they arrived at their answers. With this particular question, you could examine how the crucial thing is to hear when the pitch changes in the first part of the phrase, with it falling on 'find'. This way, the students who are less confident in interpreting the notation will gain confidence and begin to make connections between the melodic shape and the notation.

Other knowledge questions might take a common misconception and ask students to explain. Here is an example:

What is the difference between...



DO NOW:

Have your answers ready!

Be prepared to answer when your name is called

You could give students the option of discussing in pairs before giving an answer to the class. This can be a good confidence-booster for those that may be unsure, and eases the way for random name picking rather than eliciting hands-up answers, which will tend to come only from the most knowledgeable and confident students.

You may decide to have questions where you present a range of different things for identification, and then choose multiple students – perhaps even all of them – to give answers. Here are two examples:

DO NOW:
Have your answers ready!

Identify the notes

DO NOW:
Have your answers ready!

Identify the pitches

In both of these slides, the colour coding of the questions shows their difficulty. As students enter and take their seats, they can try to work out all of the answers. You can then use a random name picker to choose a number of students to give answers. Each student chosen can choose either a green, amber or red level question. You can then tell them which number you would like them to do.

If you know your class extremely well, you may be able to choose a question level for them, or at least push students who you know are capable of more than the green question they might have chosen. If a student chooses a red or amber question but answers it incorrectly, you can throw it open to the class, and then return to the original student and ask them to do an easier question. Success leads to motivation, so aim to coax even the weakest or most resistant students to correct answers.