

Beginning Group Piano I

Sample Undergraduate Syllabus

Instructor: Dr. Gretchen L. Hull

Email: _____

Office Hours: _____

Class Location: Keyboard Lab

Class Schedule: _____

Course Philosophy

This course is designed for music majors and non-music majors with little to no prior formal keyboard instruction.

The keyboard provides an unusually concrete means of understanding music. Intervals can be seen as physical distances; major and minor keys can be visualized as scale patterns and experienced kinesthetically through the distinctive topography of the black and white keys. Chords and harmonic progressions can be seen and felt as shapes as well as tactile patterns, while the ability to play bass, harmony, and melody simultaneously offers a particularly satisfying level of creative freedom.

For this reason, the course aims to develop an integrated awareness at the keyboard: students will learn to recognize what they are playing, understand how it is organized, hear and diagnose inaccuracies, and acquire practical strategies for improving independently. Technique, reading, aural awareness, and tonal understanding will therefore be developed not as isolated skills, but as mutually reinforcing aspects of functional musicianship.

For music majors whose primary instrument is not piano, keyboard study offers a range of practical and artistic benefits. It can support future teaching and accompanying beginner students, strengthen fluency in both treble and bass clefs, make harmony and harmonic progression easier to visualize, and deepen understanding of musical texture, particularly the relationships between bass lines, accompaniment figures, inner voices, and melody.

For non-music majors, beginning piano study can provide an accessible entry into musical literacy and creative exploration. The skills developed at the keyboard can form a foundation for continued piano study while also enriching future engagement with other instruments, ensemble participation, composition, or music more broadly.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students should develop the following skills:

Keyboard Orientation and Technique

- Demonstrate healthy sitting posture and efficient hand position.
- Identify notes across the keyboard quickly and accurately.
- Follow fingering accurately and choose sound fingerings for simple patterns.
- Perform five-finger patterns in several major and minor positions.
- Play selected scales hands together with appropriate fingering.
- Demonstrate developing independence and coordination between the hands.
- Demonstrate a variety of articulation in the context of their repertoire.

Reading

- Read elementary music in treble and bass clefs.
- Recognize notes through landmarks, intervals, direction, and patterns rather than relying exclusively on note-by-note identification.
- Perform common rhythmic values and patterns with a steady pulse.
- Read simple hands-together textures.
- Sight-read short elementary examples while maintaining continuity.

Harmony

- Identify half steps and whole steps at the keyboard.
- Construct major five-finger patterns.
- Understand the basic structure of a major scale.
- Identify scale degrees and tonic/dominant relationships in selected keys.
- Construct major triads in root position.
- Recognize I, V or V7 harmonies in elementary contexts.
- Transfer simple melodic or rhythmic patterns to another starting pitch.

Repertoire and Musicianship

- Prepare short works in varied musical styles demonstrating rhythmic and note accuracy.
- Apply appropriate articulation, dynamics, phrasing, and fingering.
- Listen critically to one's own playing.
- Identify and correct recurring errors.
- Apply instructor feedback in subsequent practice.
- Demonstrate increasingly effective independent practice habits.

Required Materials

Primary text:

E. L. Lancaster and Kenon D. Renfrow, *Alfred's Group Piano for Adults, Book 1*, 2nd edition.

Additional repertoire, sight-reading exercises, or technique exercises will be provided as needed. Students should bring assigned music and a pencil to every class.

Course Format

Class meetings will ordinarily incorporate several kinds of activity:

- whole-class demonstration
- brief exercises (rhythm, basic patterns, musical excerpts, or sight-reading)
- individual keyboard work
- instructor monitoring and individual feedback through the keyboard-lab system
- repertoire
- paired or small-group work
- short playing assessments (skill checks)

Practice Expectations

Students should practice **frequently rather than relying on one or two long sessions each week**. For beginning pianists, regular repetition across several days is especially important for developing reading fluency and physical coordination.

A productive practice session should ordinarily involve:

1. identifying the specific skill or passage to be improved
2. recognizing its musical or technical pattern
3. practicing hands separately
4. practicing slowly enough to play accurately
5. practicing small sections at a time rather than running the piece beginning to end
6. correcting errors rather than repeatedly reinforcing them
7. gradually increasing the tempo
8. performing the passage again in context

Assignments

Weekly work may include:

- five-finger patterns and scales
- technical or rhythm exercises
- sight-reading
- short repertoire excerpts
- harmonization or transposition exercises

- short video submissions
- longer-term repertoire pieces

Video assignments are primarily diagnostic rather than polished performances. They allow the assessment of posture, fingering, rhythm, coordination, and the application of previous feedback.

Assessment and Grading

Skills Checks: 45%

Short playing assessments will occur throughout the term. Skills may include:

- five-finger patterns
- selected scales
- interval recognition
- basic chords
- basic accompaniment patterns
- technical coordination
- tonic/dominant understanding
- rhythm
- elementary sight-reading
- basic transposition
- progress in repertoire (excerpts or in whole)
- other recently studied material

These assessments are intentionally frequent and relatively low stakes so that you may receive feedback before misunderstandings or inefficient habits become established.

Assignments and Video Submissions: 20%

Evaluation of assigned exercises, repertoire preparation, and occasional video submissions.

Preparation and Class Participation: 25%

Evaluation of consistent preparation, attendance, active keyboard participation, constructive engagement in group activities, and responsiveness to feedback.

Benchmark Exam: 20%

An end-of-term assessment integrating the principal technical, reading, harmonic, and repertoire skills studied during the course.

10-Week Course Sequence

Weeks 1-2: Orientation at the Keyboard

- *Alfred: Chapters 1-2*
- Keyboard geography
- Finger numbers
- Posture and hand position
- Treble and bass clef
- Steps and skips
- Basic rhythmic values
- Five-finger patterns
- Articulation
- Sight-reading & repertoire

Skills Check 1

Weeks 3-4: Major and Minor Five-Key Patterns

- *Alfred: Chapters 3-6*
- Introduction to tonic and dominant
- Intervallic reading
- Recognition of melodic contour
- Hands-together coordination
- Dynamics and articulation
- Phrase structure
- Common five-key patterns
- Root-position major triads
- 16th notes
- Practice strategies and self-evaluation
- Sight-reading & repertoire

Skills Checks 2 & 3

Weeks 5-6: Chord Qualities, Larger Intervals, Scales and Triads

- *Alfred: Chapters 7-9*
- Major-scale construction (whole step/half step patterns)
- Selected one-octave scales
- Scale fingering
- Root position triads
- Simple melody and accompaniment
- Pattern transposition
- Sight-reading & repertoire

Midterm Skills Assessment (after week 5): technique, reading, simple harmonic progressions in multiple selected keys, sight-reading, repertoire

Video Assignment (after week 6): perform a short assigned repertoire excerpt and identify one successful element and one element requiring further work.

Weeks 7-8: New Keys, Inversions, and Dominant Chords

- *Alfred: Chapters 10-11*
- Expanded hands-together playing
- Additional scales and triads
- Chord inversion exercises
- Simple harmonization
- Transposition of short melodies or patterns
- Use of sustaining pedal
- Sight-reading & repertoire

Skills Check 4 & 5

Weeks 9-10: Subdominant Chords, Exam Review

- *Alfred: Chapters 12-13*
- Subdominant chords in harmonic progressions
- Review of primary chords in major keys
- Repertoire refinement
- Sight-reading & repertoire
- Preparation for final benchmark exam

Benchmark Exam

Assessment Philosophy

Students will be evaluated primarily on **demonstrated progress**, not on the amount of piano experience they possessed before entering the course.

Improvement is important, but improvement alone does not determine the grade. Assessments measure whether students can demonstrate specific skills with appropriate accuracy, understanding, and technical control.

Errors during the learning process are expected. Students are encouraged to regard assessment as diagnostic: it identifies what has become secure and what requires further practice.

Inclusive Learning Environment

Students enter group piano with widely differing backgrounds. Previous keyboard experience is neither assumed nor treated as a measure of musical potential.

This course maintains common learning objectives while allowing appropriate differences in pacing, explanation, and supplementary material. Students are expected to treat classmates respectfully and to contribute to an environment in which experimentation and mistakes are understood as normal components of learning.

Academic Integrity

Submitted assignments and performances must accurately represent the student's own work. Students may use authorized learning resources, but assessments and recorded playing must demonstrate their own understanding and performance.

Health and Technique

Piano playing should not cause pain. Healthy posture, efficient movement, relaxed shoulders and arms, and appropriate practice breaks help to prevent injuries or muscle strains.

Students experiencing persistent discomfort should stop repetitive practice and inform the instructor so that technique and practice procedures can be reviewed.

Accessibility

Students requiring approved academic or physical accommodations should work through the institution's designated accessibility services and communicate approved accommodations to the instructor.