

17 Tips for Giving a “Killer” Demo Lesson

by Adam Paltrowitz

If you've made it past the interview round, there's a good chance you may be asked to give a choral demo lesson. With so many unknown variables, running a demo rehearsal can be super hard to plan for:

Who will be observing in the room?

How are the students expected to behave?

How prepared with the music will the students be?

What does the current teacher expect from the students in their rehearsal?

How many different demo lessons have these same students already sat through?

With all of these variables, there are a few things that you do know:

- someone other than the students will be observing you
- how the students respond to you will determine how successful you are

It is important to understand that at your Demo Lesson, all observers will see things precisely how they are; what they see and hear is all they will evaluate. In one rehearsal, you must start strong, build momentum while developing rapport with the students and finish with a clear improvement, closure and a positive connection; there is no yesterday, no tomorrow, no other teacher and no upcoming performance.

You must bring both the students *and the observers* on a journey. We must set and accomplish short-term goals, demonstrate varied activities and levels of student engagement. At the end of the rehearsal, we must tie up all loose ends.

Here are 17 Tips for giving a "Killer" Demo Lesson/Rehearsal:

1. Greet students personally as they enter

When students enter early, it's important to gain one-on-one interactions with them. You can opt to greet them at the door, or stand at the piano/podium and interact with each passing student. You may introduce yourself and ask them for their names; you may want to shake their hands. It's important to look every student in the eye and smile, even if you don't get the chance to speak with them.

2. Utilize the board to start the class (chalkboard/smartboard)

Have your name written on the board, and what you wish to be called (if it is different) along with a nice welcome message. "Thank you for having me here today!" or "I'm so excited to work with you!"

I personally don't like "objectives" listed on the board for a demo rehearsal because we don't truly know what the students are going to accomplish; yes, we will have a clear plan, but we

won't know the level of their technique, reading ability, or how far along they will be on any given piece of music.

<https://www.choralclarity.com/11-things-avoid-first-rehearsal-high-school/>

3. Start the class Immediately

It is super important that YOU dictate the start of the rehearsal. Do not wait for the students to get situated. Your starting will let them know that they must join you.

In the event that an administrator or current teacher begins the class and then introduces you, skip to the next tip.

4. Begin with a 'brief' introduction about yourself

Keep it short and pertinent to what you believe will engage the students (and observers). Be sure to begin with your name, said slowly and clearly, and how you would like to be addressed.

Here is what I would say:

"My name is Mr. Paltowitz. You can call me 'Pal'. I don't mind if you call me Mr. Pal or Pal."

After that, I recommend giving a quick background about where you come from and/or why you are excited to be working with them.

Here are some different approaches:

"I'm currently finishing up my masters degree at xxxxxx university, and I'm so excited to use my skills as a singer, pianist, and conductor to make music together with you today."

or

"I recently graduated from xxxxx university, and am currently teaching in the xxxxxxxx school district. I'm so excited to work with you today"

or

"I am a huge fan of Mrs. xxxxxxxxx and the fine work she's done over the years, and have been looking forward to working with you today!"

5. Keep your rehearsal structure simple

Do not reinvent the wheel or try to be super-cute with your structure.

I suggest giving a brief introduction (30 second max) followed by vocal/physical warm-up, sight-singing, choral repertoire, and ending with positive words of encouragement AND gratitude.

6. Address body alignment/posture from start to finish

Addressing how singers should stand or sit while singing will show your awareness of what they look like. Every time you begin an exercise, give a gentle reminder of how they should be aligned. All observers will recognize your ability to affect change and gain focus.

7. Make sure every warm-up has a simple and specific purpose

Explain (or ask the singers) the purpose of each exercise AFTER they've learned it and sung it. Keep the exercises simple and easy to learn. When choosing each exercise, be sure to focus

on one specific goal at a time. (body alignment, vowels, articulation, breath support, etc.) Limit the warm-ups to no more than 3 exercises.

8. Do not talk when they are talking

Students will likely be on their best behavior since observers, possibly administrators, will be in the room; you need to show the observers that you expect all students to be listening. I wouldn't recommend reprimanding students, but I would recommend glancing at students with a smile when they are talking and waiting until they are done before continuing with your lesson. Administrators want to see that you have awareness of what's happening throughout the entire room.

9. Pose one open-ended question in the middle of the rehearsal

Have this question prepared and be sure to look around the room and wait for multiple students to raise their hand before calling on a student. An open-ended question does not require a "right" response, and therefore allows multiple students to express themselves. What's super important about this is the fact that you are potentially challenging all students to think (and engage), AND individually validating several students with a positive response along with a warmth and personal interaction. Here are some examples of questions:

- "Who can raise their hand and share with the class where they believe the peak of that phrase is?" (have the ensemble try the phrases as suggested)

- "Who can raise their hand and share with the class what they personally feel the most meaningful line of the text is, and why?"

- "Who can raise their hand and share with the class what they are thinking about when singing this phrase?"

Do you notice a pattern in the way the question is presented? This in itself shows the class, and our observers, that we have certain behavioral expectations for our students.

When you call on any student, make sure to thank them for raising their hand and ask for their name first. This shows that you care WHO they are prior to their response.

If no student answers a question, pause for a few seconds, and then repeat the exact same question. If there is still no response, rephrase the question to further engage them.

"How can raise their hand and share with the class where they believe the peak of the phrase is?"

no response

"Where is the peak of the phrase?"

no response or one hand up

"How about this.....in the phrase, from measure 40-47, what is the most important word that we empathize?"

no response or one hand up

"Raise your hand if you believe it is in measure 40? Measure 41? etc"

There is always a way to make this open-ended question successful, even if it feels like a major flop in the onset; follow-through with student engagement and use their response to direct the music-making, but keep this limited to 2-3 minutes max.

10. Let them sing.....(and keep them singing)

Too often, teachers want to prove that they heard something wrong and jump the gun. Let your singers sing through a passage that they already know. If this music is brand new, have them all read the melody together and run through a sizable section before stopping. The key is to get them singing. The more they are singing, the better you will look. The more you are talking, the less engaged the group will be, and the less impressed your observers will be.

11. Enlighten instead of correcting

Correcting final consonants or a few wrong pitches will be far less impactful than focusing on big picture music-making elements such as dynamics, phrasing, and general texture/articulation. If you are teaching a brand new song, you can do so by working on just the melody. By guiding big picture stuff, you will remain positive and connected to your ensemble.

12. Provide musical closure

It's important to close the musical portion of the rehearsal with a run through; prior to the run through either remind the students or ask the students to share what they should be focused on or what they have learned.

13. Knowing precisely what time the rehearsal ends

Time your ending to the bell. I'm not saying to sing to the bell. I'm suggesting you must be fully aware of when the period ends, when they should pack up, and when you should give a closing remark. Do not let the bell surprise you.

14. End the rehearsal with a positive message/personal closure

Show gratitude to the students for their hard work, focus, and positive attitude. You may even want to stay around as the students leave, and interact further.

<https://www.choralclarity.com/power-positive-planning-choir/>

15. Be Complimentary from start to finish

The more you compliment (legitimately), the more likely the singers will want to sing for you. In order to effectively compliment your ensemble, ask your singers to do something and then thank them/commend them for doing it. It's that simple. Here are some varied examples:

"I would like everyone to please stand up with your feet slightly apart, your chest high and shoulders back. Thank you all. You all look ready to sing!"

"Who can share with the class what they believe is one purpose for this exercise? Thank you for raising your hand. What a great response. That is certainly something I never thought of, but it is definitely useful in that way."

"Thank you for giving such a great effort during our first run through."

"Thank you for watching me at the ritard!"

16. Do not Divide if you aspire to Conquer the job

Avoid sectional work, unless you are using a section to demonstrate a concept for another section - keeping all singers actively engaged. By focusing on only one section, the other sections will disengage; this will not look good to an observer. If you want to correct something within one section, have the entire group learn that part.

17. Provide a copy of your lesson plan for every observer

A lesson plan that is handed out should serve as a guide, not a minute by minute logistical account of everything that you plan on doing. In many cases the observers will not be choral experts, so it's especially important you view your lesson plan through the lens of the type of people who will be observing.

I've provided some ideas for a lesson plan that you can hand to an administrator. I urge you to allow wiggle room and flexibility in your written plan in order to allow for responsiveness to any unknown variables. Remember, the purpose of a written lesson plan for them is to see that you have a beginning, middle, and end, with clear goals. Beyond that, the more you write out, the more they can find fault with. (You didn't make it to the end of your lesson plan, the specific goal you had was attained too quickly, or the goal was not attained at all, etc). Keep the structure tight and the specifics of moment-to-moment more vague.

Here is a general idea of what I recommend putting on your demo lesson plan:

Put your personal info on top (Name, address, phone number, email, etc)

Lesson Plan for Mixed Choir Lesson - March 1st at xxxxxxxx High School

1. Brief Introduction about myself (don't write anything other than those words)
2. Warm-up (3 warm-ups that will focus on specific things: breath support, vowels, and articulation) - 5-7 minutes
3. Sight-singing (written on board) - speak the pitches in rhythm first before attempting to sing it - 5-7 minutes
4. Specific piece(s) of music - 25 minutes
 1. Run-through from start to finish (this could be a section in the music or an entire piece depending on the level of preparation. If this is a brand new piece, have everyone sing through the melody)
 2. Focus on aspects of the music dynamics/tone/phrasing/texture based on the needs of the group
 3. Ensure specific adjustments have been made
 4. Recap the growth (asking students what they need to focus on/what they have learned before the final run through)
 5. Final Run-Through
5. Closure to the lesson - express appreciation to the students

Last words:

You must remember that your primary goal is lead an effective and engaging lesson, and build a personal connection with the group. Remain on task, keep ALL students active all of the time, and do not give any moments of down time. Don't try to do too much. The more they sing, the better the rehearsal will go. They must remain in action and you are the facilitator of their action.