

# University Interscholastic League



# Music Theory Handbook

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Prepared by the UIL Music Office for the TSSEC Theory Test.  
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## INTRODUCTION

Each year there is evidence of increasing interest in the State Music Theory Contest. The purpose of this booklet is to provide background and preparation guidelines for this event.

This publication is not intended to be a theory textbook. Rather, an attempt has been made to define areas that should be addressed by both students and teachers in preparation for the competition. In addition, copies of the previous year's exams, including contest answers, are available upon request by simply contacting the UIL Music Office.

Teachers preparing students for the State Music Theory Contest are encouraged to regularly consult the UIL Music webpage and music page of the Leaguer for contest revisions and updates concerning contests for the current year.

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University Interscholastic League  
P.O. Box 8028 – University Station  
Austin, Texas 78713-8028

## UIL STATE MUSIC THEORY CONTEST

### Q & A

**1. *What is the theory contest?***

The State Music Theory Contest is a part of the Texas State Solo and Ensemble Contest (TSSEC) sponsored by the University Interscholastic League.

**2. *When and where is it held?***

The contest takes place during the last weekend in May each year on the campuses of The University of Texas at Austin and Hendrickson High School, Pflugerville ISD.

**3. *What students are eligible to enter the theory contest?***

Any student who was in senior high school and otherwise eligible to participate in University Interscholastic League contests during the school year immediately preceding the contest is eligible to enter the State Music Theory Contest.

**4. *There are restrictions on soloists and ensembles that come to TSSEC. They are required to have received a Division I rating on Class I music at the regional contest. Are there any such restrictions on theory contestants?***

None at present.

**5. *How much does it cost to enter?***

The entry fee for each theory contestant is the same as that for a soloist. For the exact amount, check for information about TSSEC online.

**6. *What will the theory contestant be expected to know and do?***

The remainder of this handbook is devoted to that. Because different people make up and administer the test over a period of years, there will be variations in details. The information given here will be general and should apply regardless of variations in exact form and content of the contest from year to year.

## A GUIDE TO PREPARATION FOR THE STATE MUSIC THEORY CONTEST

### General Considerations

**Music theory defined** – A better name for music theory would be “comprehensive musicianship.” It is a complex of knowledge and skills concerned with melody, rhythm, harmony, and musical terminology. At every level it involves the ability to translate written symbols into musical sounds, the reverse process of listening to musical sounds and transcribing them into musical symbols, and ultimately, the vocabulary which enables one to describe a musical experience to another.

**Knowledge of skills** – Theory is partly knowledge and partly skill. The knowledge must be “internalized,” i.e., become largely automatic, but it consists of elements that can be learned and understood through a purely intellectual process. The skills, however, concern perception of musical sounds by the human ear. They must be developed, step-by-step, through a process of ear training.

**An important fact of life** – So far, nobody has invented a way to test large numbers of people on sight singing or playing in a short period of time. For this reason, most music theory tests, including the State Music Theory Contest, deal with the process of listening to musical sounds and transcribing them into symbols. To put it more simply, the contest is concerned in large part with the contestants’ *ability to listen and then write it down*. The wise theory teacher will make plans accordingly.

**Standard notational practices** – Contestants will be expected to write musical notation within the bounds of accepted practice. Some common mistakes are incorrectly drawn clefs, misplaced accidentals, stems on the wrong side, and stem pointing in the wrong direction. Wherever there is room for doubt, the students will be given the benefit of the doubt. However, when the notation is clearly wrong or illegible, points will be deducted.

**Musical Memory** – A crucial factor in the preparation for theory contest is the cultivation of the students’ musical memory, especially for melodic dictation. Many people can take dictation well if it is presented in small segments: but when longer examples are used, these individuals quickly become lost. The last half on the example tends to erase the first half, panic sets in, and little gets written. Memory spans can be increased through practice, however, and it is important that this be done as a part of contest preparation.

### Written Skills

**Clefs** – The student should be able to identify or write any note in the bass and treble clefs up to and including four ledger lines above and below the staff and be familiar with the grand staff.

**Meter** – Meter signatures are often called “time signatures.” The contestant should be able to look at a meter signature and tell the following things:

1. Whether it is duple, triple, quadruple, or quintuple meter.
2. Whether it involves a simple or compound beat.
3. The time value of any note or rest in that meter.

For contest purposes, 6/8 is duple compound meter, with two counts to the measure.

The student should be able to see rhythmic notation and determine what meter signature it suggests.

**Key Signatures** – The contestant needs to know the major and minor keys identified by any key signature through seven sharps and seven flats. In addition, the contestant must be able to write the key signature correctly and place the correct sharps or flats on the proper lines and spaces.

**Scale construction** – It is necessary for the contestant to understand the construction of the major, pure minor, harmonic minor, melodic minor, and the whole tone scales well enough to recognize or write any given scale, using accidentals instead of key signatures.

**Intervals** – The theory contestant will be expected to recognize and/or write any interval of any type and size up through the octave.

**Triads** – The contestant should be able to recognize and/or write any type (major, minor, diminished, augmented) in root position or in either inversion.

**Seventh chord** – The students should have the ability to recognize and/or write any of the five common seventh chord types (dominant, minor, half-diminished, diminished, or major) in root position.

**Functional harmony** – It is expected that the contestant will be able to do functional (Roman numeral) analysis of diatonic four-part chorales, indicating inversions and identifying non-harmonic tones.

**Musical terminology** – The student should be prepared to define those expressions and tempo markings which are in common usage. These may include Italian, French, or German terms.

## Listening Skills

Listening skills (ear training) require time and drill. Each contestant will need to be able to do the following things to the best of his/her ability:

1. Listen to a scale, and then identify it as major, pure minor, harmonic minor, or melodic minor.
2. Listen to a melodic interval (i.e., each pitch sounded separately), and then identify it according to type and size.
3. Listen to a harmonic interval (pitches sounded simultaneously), and then identify it according to type and size.
4. Listen to a triad in root position or inversion, and then identify it according to type.
5. Listen to a root position seventh chord, and then identify it according to type.
6. Listen to a musical excerpt and determine the beat type and meter type.
7. Listen to a short (4 to 8 measures) melody several times and write it out on the staff in treble or bass clef.