

# Yes, You Can!

## THE BAND DIRECTOR'S GUIDE TO TEACHING CHOIRS

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# Foreword

As my college career came to a close, I reveled in every moment leading up to the completion of my bachelor's degree in instrumental music education. I enjoyed writing marching band drill, teaching beginning band, fixing instruments, teasing saxophonists for playing such a simple instrument (just kidding). I loved concert band season but definitely did not look forward to convincing students to play French horn instead of percussion.

My student teaching experience made me even more excited as my cooperating teacher Bonnie Kimbrough, to whom I am forever grateful, was excellent. I was not relegated to just running sectionals and making copies but she allowed me to be fully immersed in all aspects of teaching instrumental music (I even taught the flag line!). I knew I was destined to teach high school band because that is where I thought the most fulfilling musical experiences would be fostered. I focused my efforts and got to work on my job search checklist:

Resume updated - CHECK

Licensure exams – PASSED

Job postings – COLLECTED

References – Compiled

Wardrobe – UPDATED TO REFLECT ADULTHOOD

Interviews – SCHEDULED

Job – I GOT ONE!

Fast-forward a few months: I walked into my first job with mostly fear in my eyes, a faux confident smile and inadequate piano skills and started my journey as a **JUNIOR HIGH CHOIR DIRECTOR!!!!** No longer was I concerned with converting percussionists to French horn players but convincing sopranos to be altos. This job marked the beginning of my total immersion into the choral music education experience.

Focused on building a choral pedagogy, rehearsal techniques and repertoire, this book outlines pedagogical practices that bridge the gap between choral and wind band pedagogy for those who find themselves in this new reality. Understanding how your teaching in the band room can translate into the unfamiliar world of the choral rehearsal will be your life line to successfully navigating this new musical landscape.

Yes, you can be successful in the choral classroom!

— Dr. Derrick Fox, 2018

# Instruction

Stepping into a choral classroom with a band director's background can be daunting. However with the right tools, you will find that building your program into one that serves the vocal needs of your students is possible.

Throughout this book, there are reminders of what you already know about teaching band and how they will successfully transfer to teaching choir, referred to as YES YOU CAN moments. More specifically, you are reading this book because you need valuable “what must I know to be successful” information in order to navigate these uncharted waters.

Definitions for the terms in **bold** throughout the book can be found in the glossary in the Appendix.

As a band director you know that nothing prepares you for teaching except the act itself. While it is very helpful to read about how to teach choir, until you stand in front of them, hear them and try to problem solve, it may seem abstract. This book bridges the path between abstract knowledge and practical application with practical pedagogical tools that are supplemented with listening and visual examples.

Will it be easy? Absolutely not. But with the help of this book.....YES, YOU CAN!

—Derrick Fox, 2018

# **UNIT A – Choral Methods Overview**

# Chapter 1:

## *Vocal Classification and Voice Change*

We learn the following in our instrumental methods courses:

- A good reed is essential in developing a characteristic clarinet tone.
- We are trained to inspire a “low breath” or “warm breath” before the onset of playing because of its benefits towards producing good tone.
- In order to support endurance and extend range, we are encouraged to teach brass players to warm-up their embouchures using a careful and systematic method.

These nuts and bolts of instrumental technique are easily adaptable to the choral classroom. In order to set your students up for a successful choral experience, it is important that you:

- Develop an understanding of characteristic vocal tone
- Are able to teach a “singer’s breath”
- Are able to properly warm-up voices

## Vocal Classification

Why is the sound of a flute different than the sound of a clarinet?

Why is the sound of a trumpet different than the sound of a tuba?

Why is the sound of a soprano different than the sound of a bass?

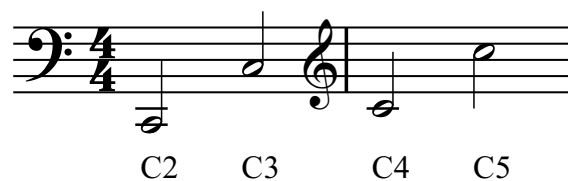
To answer these questions, one must only have an elementary understanding of the physics of sound. As teachers of instrumentalists or vocalists, we must be able to articulate and demonstrate to our students how to produce a good quality and characteristic sound with their instrument. Just as a horn must be assembled and held correctly, singers must “assemble” their voices correctly.

Production of beautiful, resonant singing comes from the placement of sound within the head. Often it helps to use imagery to explain vocal placement:

- Suggest they imagine that all singing takes place above the cheekbones.
- Picture the throat as a hollow tube, and the head as a hollow cavity where the sound resonates.
- Allow the tone to feel as if it is coming from the forehead, directly from behind the eyes in a cone shape.

The result will be a beautiful, resonant, natural tone quality.

Use the following system to reference notes within the vocal ranges of your singers:





# Individual Section Characteristics

Each instrument in an ensemble has a tone that distinguishes it from the other instruments. We, as directors, must be familiar with the tonal and mechanical challenges of each instrument in order to effectively address and correct them in rehearsal.

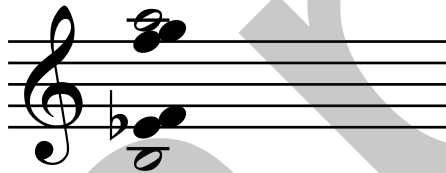
## Sopranos

Sopranos are like the flutes or first trumpets in the band. Choirs rarely have a shortage of sopranos, similar to percussionists in many bands. One of the contributing factors to this popularity is that the prepubescent singing range corresponds to that of the soprano range. Successful singing experiences for young singers generally involve performing unison melodies, most often located in the soprano range. Directors often place a disproportionate number of singers in the soprano section, overbalancing the rest of the choir; therefore, careful attention should be given to balancing all vocal parts. This will also discourage over-singing in the other sections in order to balance.

### TYPICAL SOPRANO RANGE AND THE **PASSAGGIO** OR BREAK

Whole notes indicate range and quarter notes indicate passagio

(Every voice is unique, and therefore may not conform to each of the passaggi points listed below)



### CHARACTERISTIC MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL SOPRANO TONE

**AUDIO:** MS Soprano *America*

**AUDIO:** HS Soprano *America*

## Altos

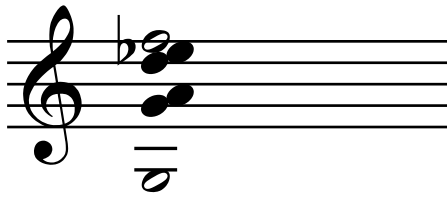
Altos are like the French horns in the band. They often have good musical ears and excellent literacy skills because much of the alto part is usually non-melodic musical material. Choir directors may inaccurately assign singers to the alto part because of their strong literacy skills. It is important to note that placing singers on a voice part that requires pushing or straining may cause significant vocal damage. Much like continually tightening the head of timpani and striking it full force, the outcome can only lead to trouble.

The first passaggio in the alto voice usually occurs between G4 - A4. Negotiating these pitches is not unlike playing across the break on a clarinet. You can help altos negotiate singing through this passaggio by having them sing with a more slender vowel and encouraging the use of a lighter, softer tone. The aforementioned techniques will also help discourage the use of chest voice in the higher vocal range. Carrying the chest voice too high results in what is popularly known as “belting”. Though this technique can be achieved successfully with proper training, most choral music does not require belting. Since belting is commonly found in popular music and musical theatre, you will encounter it in your young singers.

## TYPICAL ALTO RANGE AND THE PASSAGGIO OR BREAK

Whole notes indicate range and quarter notes indicate passagio

(Every voice is unique, and therefore may not conform to each of the passaggi points listed below)



### CHARACTERISTIC MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL ALTO TONE



AUDIO: MS Alto *America*

AUDIO: HS Alto *America*

## Tenors

Tenors are like the double reed instruments in the band - they are often few in number, hard to recruit and their instruments must be handled with care. Middle school tenors often have a light quality with easy access to high notes; however, this can rapidly change at the onset of the voice change. Much care should be taken to monitor the vocal progress of tenors, particularly young tenor voices, to ensure they are never forcing the tone or straining to access high notes. Monikers of these problems creeping into their voices are “yelling,” or over-singing on high notes, and raising the chin (“reaching”) while singing in the high range.

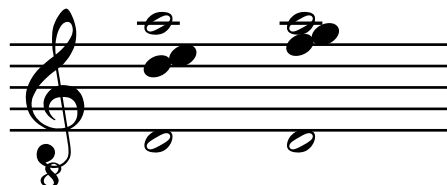
The use of **false** **setto** is acceptable and oftentimes necessary for younger tenors; however, if it is used frequently to produce high notes then you may need to reclassify the voices or choose literature with more appropriate ranges. (A more in-depth discussion about appropriate choral literature and how to find it can be found in Chapter 7, Choral Repertoire).

Though the tenor voice takes many years to reach maturation, you will find that a well-trained young tenor voice can produce the most beautiful and versatile tone in the ensemble. Avoid the practice of having altos sing tenor to supplement or add volume. This practice could prove harmful to the altos if the notes are too low and it does not allow your tenors to develop independence. Lastly, the alto voice, when singing tenor, cannot produce a characteristic tenor tone and it will not be an appropriate model. If you are not a tenor, invite a quality tenor vocalist with experience singing in choirs into your classroom to sing for and with your tenors. In my own practice, I found this to be invaluable.

## TYPICAL TENOR RANGE AND THE PASSAGGIO OR BREAK

Whole notes indicate range and quarter notes indicate passagio

(Every voice is unique, and therefore may not conform to each of the passaggi points listed below)



### CHARACTERISTIC MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL TENOR TONE



AUDIO: MS Tenor *America*

AUDIO: HS Tenor *America*

# Chapter 2:

## *Warming Up the Voice*

Just as brass players buzz into a mouthpiece in order to warm up the embouchure before playing, singers must warm up their instruments to prepare for healthy singing. Warming up the voice does not have to be a lengthy or intricate process but it must be well planned in order to avoid damaging the vocal cords. A thoughtfully designed vocal warm-up process includes exercises that stimulate the voice, ear, body and mind.

## Energizing the Voice

Singing can be characterized as dynamic speech yet it requires the vocal cords to be more flexible or elastic than everyday speech. To encourage this elasticity in a healthy manner, initial vocal warm-ups should start in the middle of the voice and move up and down throughout the range. It is important that you **vocalize** students at least one step above the highest note they will be required to sing during rehearsal and one step below the lowest note they will sing during rehearsal. Moving up and down the range of the voice should be done gradually until the notes in the exercise are out of their comfortable range. Clues that the exercises have moved beyond the singer's comfortable range are chin lifting and/or overly loud singing on high notes, chin lowering and/or vocal fry (growling) to sing low notes. Most novice singers will not be truly aware of their full vocal range and you will need to encourage them to sing one or two notes beyond their comfort zone. Great vocal warm-ups will improve your singers technique and foster balanced and supported tone throughout their range (much like the Stamp exercises help brass players). If you can make a tuba sound great, you can develop a wonderful soprano voice! YES, YOU CAN!

## Sample Exercises (Sing all exercises in appropriate octave)

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### Happy-Go-Lucky



## Implementation and Benefits

Teach slowly on solfege first. Make sure all steps are in tune.

- Sing on “ee” or “oo.”
- Modulate up by no more than a whole step for each repetition.
- Play the piano in the appropriate octave to support your singers.
- As your singers gain more confidence and ability, only play the I and V chord in each key.
- Helpful for teaching treble voices how to transition between vocal registers
- If sung up the octave in falsetto, this exercise helps tenors and basses navigate the passaggio or vocal break.

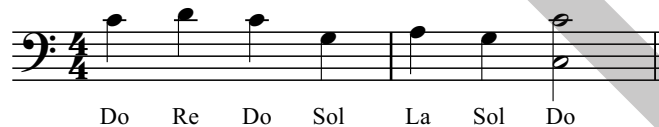


# Lip Trills

## Implementation and Benefits

- Buzz up and down a five-note scale.
- Do not carry this exercise into the extremities of the vocal range as it will become counterproductive due to increased tension.
- Encourages consistent airflow throughout the range

## Borrowing from the Brass



## Implementation and Benefits

- Used by brass players for the unification of registers, this exercise serves the same purpose for singers.
- Useful for helping singers lessen heavy or weighted singing as the voice descends
- Teach on solfege first, using hand signs. Make sure all intervals are in tune.
- Varying the rhythm will increase the difficulty level of this exercise.
- The last note may be sung up the octave to accommodate young singers or changing voices.

## Engaging the Ear

Pitch matching is related to a singer's ability to reproduce a pitch while tonal memory refers to a singer's ability to remember a series of pitches over a period of time. Tonal memory plays a major role in your choir's ability to sing in tune and hinges upon each singer's ability to sing "in tune with themselves," meaning they should maintain the intervallic integrity of pitches in the key in which they are singing. Singers who do not excel in these areas are often labeled as "tone deaf."

Healthy, age appropriate vocal modeling is one of the most efficient ways to develop your singers' ears. Singing for your students not only provides a demonstration, it affords them an opportunity to hear you doing what you ask of them. Singing is a very personal experience; a singer's body is their instrument and it cannot be put in a case and stored until the next rehearsal or performance. This provides an extra challenge for teaching singing because:

- The techniques are not always tangible.
- To the singer, sometimes criticism of the voice is equated to criticism of their whole person.

## Descending Scale

Soprano

Do Ti La Sol Fa Mi Re Do

Bass

## Benefits and Tips for Implementing

- Sing **solfege** syllables using hand signs. Make sure all steps are in tune.
- This is helpful for unifying vowels. It is important that all vowels are sung the same way by all singers.
- Encourage your choirs to sing lighter as they descend to reduce the heavy and weighted singing that can develop in downward moving passages.
- Sung 'AH' and 'EH' vowels are often spread horizontally resulting in poor tone. Students will encounter this spreading on the solfege syllables La, Fa and Re in this exercise. Eliminating the spread vowels in this exercise will readily translate to your choir's repertoire.

## Bop Exercise

1

Do do Re Do Re Mi Do Re Mi Fa

5

Do Re Mi Fa Sol Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti

8

Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti Do Do etc...

12

15

# Chapter 3:

## *The Singer's Breath*

The breath is a requirement for woodwind instruments and vocalists but we also know that pianists and string players use the breath as inspiration for connecting to the music. As choir directors, it must be our goal to teach our singers the technical and musical benefits of an effective breath. Establishing a consistent method of engaging the breath is essential as the breath is connected to tone, phrasing, rhythm and intonation.

### Pedagogy Tips

1. Singing with or from the diaphragm is an inaccurate description of how the breath works.
  - a. The brain sends a signal to the diaphragm to contract once inhalation begins.
  - b. This process is similar to how the heart knows when to beat.
  - c. Breathing model: You can easily locate videos on YouTube that accurately demonstrate how the breathing process works.
2. When singers inhale, be sure the shoulders are not rising significantly. When singers exhale, make sure the chest does not collapse and shoulders do not roll forward.
3. Use caution when instructing your singers to “use more space” and “raise the soft palate,” both concepts often heard in the context of choral singing. While singers need adequate resonant space, to overdo these actions could inspire too much space and a dark tone because the tongue may pull back, generating tension in the vocal production. I also advocate the usage of imagery in connecting pedagogy to activities in daily life to inspire an effective breath in your singers.

### Inspiring an Effective Singer's Breath with Imagery

1. Hot mashed potato breath (learned in my low brass techniques class) – singers should inhale as if they trying to cool hot mashed potatoes on their tongues. This will encourage the low breathing necessary for singing.
2. Visualize pouring water into a pitcher. Fill the glass up from the bottom to the top. Imagine this same process when breathing.
3. *The Breathing Gym (Exercises to Improve Breath Control and Air Flow)* by Sam Pilafian & Patrick Sheridan offers many useful exercises that work for instrumentalists and vocalists.  
NOTE: The exercises that require tension to be present in the breathing are less applicable to singing.
4. Avoid using the term breath control. Breath management or breath support foster an understanding that is less likely to encourage your choral singers to use “muscle” in the healthy production of tone.

# Chapter 4:

## *Foundations of Successful Choral Rehearsals*

It is a basic tenet for all disciplines: daily rehearsal planning is essential for success, both for the singer and the teacher. Sight singing, rehearsal pacing, vowels, diction and piano proficiency are foundations of the choral world that will pose unique challenges to instrumentalists who teach vocal music.

### Focusing Your RehEARSal

French horns searching for the correct partial, clarinets squeaking across the break, trumpets blaring in the back of the band with a few trombone glissandos to make your life complete! The glorious chaotic sounds of your first combined beginning band rehearsal will forever be etched into your musical memory. The brave soul who dares to stop these most dedicated musicians must have a clear rehearsal plan to lead them to success. Those same feelings of fear AND opportunity will most definitely rear their heads in your FIRST (and probably many more) choral rehearsal. Score study, error detection and correction, and a strong music literacy plan are essential elements for constructing a rehearsal that addresses the needs of your students.

### Score Study: Learning the Score

Since daily rehearsal planning is a must, it is a given that the score be learned in order to create sequential lesson plans. The following is a quick, easy process for learning the score and making musical decisions prior to your rehearsal.

1. Listen to several recordings of the piece to gather an aesthetic appreciation of various interpretations. We do not write research papers without consulting the writings of others in order to learn more about the topic. This research process is also valid in the music learning process.
2. You **MUST** sing through each part in order to familiarize yourself with the challenges your singer will encounter. Use whatever learning tool you will ask your choir to use, e.g. solfege, numbers, count singing. Make note of:
  1. Range
  2. **Tessitura**
  3. **Passaggio**
  4. Difficult intervals
  5. Rhythmic difficulties
  6. Harmonic/melodic concerns
3. Re-listen to the recording(s) and focus your EAR on one voice part at a time, thus training your ear to hear each part within the full performance texture.
4. Repeat step 3 closing your eyes while trying to hear one voice part at a time.
5. Recite the text of the piece out of rhythm (it may be helpful to type the text out in stanza form). Make note of:
  1. Text stress: both word and syllabic
  2. Vowels: **diphthongs**, modification, unification
  3. Consonants
6. Recite the text of each voice part in rhythm. Make note of:
  1. Difficult rhythms
  2. Meter changes
  3. Places where the rhythm does not match the spoken text stress
  4. Definitions and pronunciations of unfamiliar words

# Chapter 5:

## *Rehearsal Process*

A well-planned introduction and rehearsal of repertoire is crucial in setting your students up for successful performances. Each rehearsal must include a blue print to guide instruction but should not be so rigid that there is not opportunity to address unexpected rehearsal issues. The Whole-Part-Whole and Progressive Part methods are two instructional practices that can easily be implemented and will strengthen your choral rehearsal. Both of these methods are viable teaching approaches for the instrumental and the choral rehearsal.

### Whole-Part-Whole Rehearsal Method

In the whole-part-whole method, students are afforded the opportunity to experience rehearsing a whole section with instruction focused on improving the parts that comprise the whole before putting the entire section together.

**Choral Rehearsal Application (see score and video link below):**

#### WHOLE

1. Students should sight read the selected rehearsal section using solfege.
  - a. Scaffolding for Success: In order for your students to experience success, consider starting with chanting rhythms, and allowing students to write in the solfege under each note in the score before chanting the solfege in rhythm and finally singing the solfege in rhythm.
  - b. While the students are sight reading, listen for the essential elements of music: pitch, rhythm, balance and harmony. At this point, pitch and rhythm will most likely be at the top of that list.

#### PART

2. Begin reviewing the individual vocal lines. Start singing on solfege with the two most closely related voice parts (neutral syllables can be used for choirs that are in the initial stages of using solfege), while the other voice parts tap their rhythms on their shoulders or across their chest (this will allow you to readily identify who is on task).  
Other effective engaging activities include lip syncing solfege syllables in rhythm while using hand signs and/or humming while using hand signs.
3. Repeat step 2 with the remaining voice parts.
4. Model the melody or most important material of the section you are rehearsing.
5. Directed Listening:
  - a. Play a recording of the piece and ask students to listen for the musical material you utilized in step #4.
  - b. Students should listen and mark in their score where the melody happens in their own voice part. They should also write a softer dynamic in their score when important musical material appears in a different voice.



# Chapter 6:

## *Tackling Text*

Diction is defined as the style of enunciation in singing (or speaking). Vowels and consonants play a primary role in providing the clarity of text necessary for excellent singing diction and a successful choral performance. Building a working knowledge of diction fundamentals may seem intimidating initially but it is as important as building your resources to help navigate the individual intricacies of the instruments found in bands and orchestras.

The lips, tongue, teeth and palate (roof of the mouth) play a significant role in enunciating good diction. Singers need to constantly be reminded how these articulators should be engaged in their singing.

### Vowels

Vowels are produced with an open vocal tract and the tongue does not usually touch the lips or soft palette.

The five primary pure vowel sounds (found in Latin) are:

A – AH

E - EH

I - EE

O- OH

U- OO

### Articulators:

**Lips** – The lips should be rounded/flared much like the bell of a brass instrument. This amplifies the tone and gives a roundness to the vowels that will improve intonation and tone quality.

**Tongue** – A relaxed tongue is crucial as it will move to change the length of the oral cavity (space in the mouth) for each vowel. Tension in the tongue should be avoided if it is allowed to move naturally for the production of vowels.

**Tip** – The tip of tongue should generally live in the lower front of the mouth where the teeth and the gums meet. Avoid pulling the tip of the tongue back in the mouth as it will distort the tone.

**Back** – The back of the tongue changes height and position as the vowel sounds move forward from AH to OO.

**Teeth** – The teeth should not be involved in the production of the vowels.

**Palate** – The anatomy of the palate consists of a soft and hard palate. These can be located by running the tip of the tongue from the back of the roof of the mouth to the front.

The soft section in the back is the soft palate and the hard section in the front is the hard palate. In general, the soft palate should be “raised” when singing but caution must be taken when asking students to manipulate the soft palate by simply instructing them to “lift” or create “more space.” These frequently used catch phrases may cause students to pull the tongue back which will distort the tone and vowel in an undesirable way.

# Chapter 7:

## Selecting Repertoire

Selecting the “perfect” repertoire is exciting and challenging for both choral and instrumental ensemble directors. Your repertoire choices function as the textbook for your classroom. They will enhance/develop vocal technique, serve as a gateway for discovering cultural connections, enhance understanding of music theory and history, and most importantly, develop personal musicianship through the exploration of the text-music connection.

There are numerous repertoire options for high school choral ensembles but there are fewer choices when searching for middle school/junior high ensembles due to the compositional challenges caused by the adolescent voice change. Fortunately, there are publishers, like BriLee Music, that are devoted to meeting the needs of the adolescent voice change. Later in this chapter, we will explore BriLee’s writing guidelines, which will prove quite helpful in guiding your choices for appropriate repertoire.

Thoughtful consideration must be given to the unique profile of your choral ensemble when selecting repertoire. Approaching this process thoughtfully and systematically will set you and your students up for a successful year of singing.

### I. Evaluate your Ensemble

Assessing your singers’ musicianship level and singing ability is vital to selecting repertoire that will provide a balance of both success and challenge.

Consider the following when assessing your singers’ musicianship and vocal ability:

- ***Does the range align with the vocal range of the singers in my choir?***  
Finding pieces written with appropriate ranges is critical to building your singers’ voices in the choral ensemble. Because of the adolescent voice change, it is important to frequently assess where your students are in the voice change process and how this might influence their success. Testing the vocal range of all of your students all of the time may not be possible with large classes or mixed gender class. Feel free to test a few students at a time across a manageable period of time. Go at your own pace with larger or mixed gender classes!
- ***How many voices are assigned to each part?***  
It is not uncommon to find choirs with more sopranos and altos than tenors and basses. The traditional SATB voicing may not work for your choir and THAT IS OK! There are voicings available to fit the needs of imbalanced ensembles, i.e. Three-Part Mixed, SAB, SAT, TTB, TBB, SSA and SA.

### Common Choral Voicings

**Unison** – This voicing can be very useful for developing choral intonation, balance, vowel unification and tone development. It may be difficult to find a unison piece for middle/junior boys as the usage of a full octave may not be possible for their vocal development. Unison is excellent for treble choirs.

**SA – SA or Two-part** music that is written as partner songs or canons is useful for voice building and teaching part independence to young singers. This voicing can also be adapted for use with mixed gender unchanged voices. With a few modifications (key, octave displacement, re-harmonization) it can be used with young male choruses. SA is an excellent option for young high school choirs that are not ready to handle the divisi in SSA or SSAA repertoire. You may have to search diligently for challenging SA music for young high school women’s choir, but it is available.