

Improving Beginner Woodwinds

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Overall Concepts for Beginners

- I. Have a routine for everything
 - A. Have a routine for entering, exiting room.
 - B. Carry cases with latches facing leg.
 - C. Place cases in specific spot (right of chair, etc.).
 - D. Use of binders with a place for everything.
 - E. Do all “steps” in same order (e.g., instrument assembly the same way every time).
 - F. The beginner book you use is only a tool—YOU teach, not the book.
 - G. Good beginner teachers supplement a great deal.
- II. Say little, do much
 - A. Avoid giving too much information at once.
 - B. Use short phrases for “steps.”
 - C. A teacher demonstrating something is FAR more valuable than all the explanation in the world! Good teachers demonstrate (model) frequently.
- III. Posture
 - A. Sit as you stand; teach posture from standing position.
 - B. Address and quiz posture components frequently.
 - C. Emphasize freedom from tension.
 - D. Body soft and relaxed, head floats above shoulders, shoulders down, feet flat.
 - E. Insides of arms never touch sides of trunk.
- IV. Breathing/airstream
 - A. Visualize with hand, do with metronome to build rhythmic awareness.
 - B. Address and quiz frequently.
 - C. Emphasize freedom from tension.
 - D. Air intake—tongue does not go back in mouth.
 - E. Air is fast, concentrated and steady.
- V. Instrument assembly
 - A. Teach early, since students are going to assemble at home whether or not you want them to!
 - B. Strive to use the same language every time.
 - C. Do steps in same order every time.
 - D. Have students take a photo on their phone of what the instrument looks like in the case for disassembly reference.
 - E. A case (or instrument) cannot fall off the floor. It can fall off a lap, chair or table. Try to use the floor space for instrument assembly if possible.
- VI. Instrument playing position
 - A. It is linked to body position (posture).
 - B. Holding the instrument in playing position should not create tension.
 - C. The instrument comes to the body, the body does not lean in to the instrument.

- D. Teach “home keys,” finger patterns on full range even though they will not be playing these notes for some time.
 - E. Use “hamburger hands” rather than “pizza hands.”
 - F. In finger drills during first days, teach that the fingers close to keys/holes when not operating any given hole/key.
- VII. “Pre-instrument” routines, used while brass instruments are on mouthpieces
- A. Flute on headjoint.
 - B. Clarinet on mouthpiece and barrel.
 - C. Saxophones on mouthpiece and neck.
 - D. Bassoon on reed and bocal (not quite as effective as above).
 - E. Oboe on reed alone—NOT effective, but might be used in a mixed woodwind class.
 - F. Pre-instrument routines allow for teacher to observe all fundamentals and work on airstream without encumbering the hands (and mind) with the entire instrument.
- VIII. Make tone a priority
- A. All breathing drills lead toward upper level performance .
 - B. Help students understand tone is a developing thing—it must be addressed DAILY. The sound made today will need to be a little better tomorrow—it is a process of gradual development.
 - C. Work toward daily drill concepts that will be used in performing ensembles (such as 2nd year band classes) onward.
 - D. First step is to get one good sound and work outward from there.
 - E. Teaching three parts of the note: start-middle-ending.
 - F. Use models of good tone for students, live or using a recording.
- IX. Articulation (not necessarily in first week of making sounds)
- A. Brass and flutes, say “tip of the tongue to the top of the teeth.”
 - B. Reeds say “tip of the tongue to the tip of the reed.”
 - C. Tip of tongue drops down; the whole tongue should not move.
 - D. Minimize tongue, maximize tone.
 - E. Draw visual representation for visual learners.
 - F. Have reed instruments touch one or two taste buds—build concept of refining the place on the front of the tongue that is used.
- X. Teach without stands for beginning weeks (unless using for mirrors)
- XI. Maximize sponge time
- A. As students are disassembling instrument, quiz them over theory elements, posture checklist, hand position traits, practice record due dates, etc.
 - B. Can be used for lesson closure on new concepts.
- XII. Use EYES and EARS when teaching, especially beginners
- A. Look!
 1. Posture
 2. Instrument position
 3. Finger placement
 4. Lack of tension
 - B. Listen!

1. Even, concentrated airstream
2. Articulation (once that has begun)
3. Three parts of the note
4. Center of tone

Beginner techniques on specific instruments

I. Flute

A. Instrument assembly

1. Assemble instrument vertically to avoid damage.
2. I recommend beginning assembly with the body and foot, then add the headjoint.
3. Align far side of embouchure hole with outside of first key on body.
4. Align rod on foot with center of last key (D) on body.

B. Hand position

1. Right hand relaxed, drop to side.
2. Room for a “red rubber ball” in right hand.
3. R. pinky on Eb key, then work backwards 3, 2, 1.
4. R.h. fingers arch over long rod.
5. R. thumb under 1st finger (or close to that).
6. R. thumb supports near base of thumbnail, does not extend past the flute.
7. L.h. contacts flute at base of index finger, on the side of the hand.
8. L.h. arches slightly so pinky can reach Ab key without tension and index finger can toggle to open and close the C key.
9. L. Th. Bb key (in my opinion) to begin.
10. Teach home keys.
11. Fingers curved, naturally free from tension.

C. Sit at 45° toward the right corner of chair, upper body turned forward

D. Instrument position

1. The forehead should be parallel to wall.
2. Place headjoint in the natural curve most people have between bottom lip and chin.
3. Place the near edge of embouchure hole 1/16” below where lip/skin meet (may adjust for thicker and thinner lips).
4. Be sure the embouchure hole is parallel to floor (at least while using just the headjoint).
5. Bottom lip will cover 1/4 to 1/3 of embouchure hole.
6. NEVER “kiss and roll.” This always places the embouchure plate too high on the lip.
7. Align the headjoint 90° to centerline of head.
 - a. “Marching band position” would have the head erect.
 - b. Concert flutist may tilt head slightly to right to decrease arm/hand tension, but keep the embouchure plate in position so air goes directly across the hole (90°).
8. Flute playing is about “out and up.”

E. First sounds on head joint: beginning an embouchure

1. Sure “pure” with corners closed—closed but not pinched—to form embouchure shape.
 2. Blow lips apart right in the center.
 3. Blow across the hole, aiming the air at far edge of the hole.
 4. Bottom lip is soft and relaxed.
 5. Top lip is flat against teeth.
 6. Find “sweet spot” by adjusting headjoint in small increments.
 7. Another option is from the Suzuki influence: “spit a grain of rice on your plate,” then “spit a grain of rice on your brother’s plate,” beginning the process of aiming air up/down with corners.
 8. Closing end of headjoint with hand: pitch goes down (air aimed slightly downward), pitch goes up (air aimed slightly upward)... personally, I would not start this step until week two of making sounds.
 9. If making higher/lower sounds on headjoint (closed and even open), it is time to stress that flutes do not just “blow harder” to get the upper note. Flutists use the corners of the embouchure to raise the air to go up, lower the air to go down (also vowel sound: “eu” for low, “ooo” for high).
 10. Work toward refining the aperture to refine sound on headjoint.
- F. First notes on the flute
1. If starting flutes alone, start with low B-A-G.
 2. Some students need an intermediate step if they get a great headjoint sound but nothing on the flute—hold flute with no keys: l.h. at barrel, r.h. at end of foot, return to the step of finding the sweet spot.
 3. Remember to train “home keys” concept if playing B-A-G exercises so r.h. position is reinforced.
- G. Adding articulation after first sound is centered and steady
1. “Tip of the tongue to the top of the teeth.”
 2. Draw diagrams for visual learners.
 3. Syllable feels like French “tieu.”
 4. I advocate using “tieu” on flute, even when stressing a “doo” syllable for brass beginners—“doo” is mushy on beginner flute.
- H. Start vibrato during first year (probably second semester)

II. Oboe

- A. Instrument assembly
1. Soak reeds in water while assembling.
 2. Be sure corks are greased.
 3. Teach students to assemble vertically to avoid damage.
 4. Assemble bell to lower joint first, then add upper joint.
 5. Watch bridge keys while adding upper joint.
 6. Add reed last.
- B. Hand position.
1. Right hand relaxed, drop to side.
 2. Room for a “red rubber ball” in right hand.

3. R. thumb supports near base of thumbnail.
 4. L. hand arches slightly over 2nd octave key, pinky reaches Ab key without tension and index finger can toggle for half-hole.
 5. Left thumb rests on wood close enough to operate 1st octave key.
 6. Teach home keys.
 7. Fingers curved, natural free from tension.
- C. Instrument position
1. Forehead parallel to wall.
 2. Instrument will be at 45° angle.
- D. Starting an embouchure
1. Make a circle with lips, corners forward.
 2. Place lower blade of reed on bottom lip.
 3. Slowly move reed into mouth, top lip naturally rolls small amount of lip inward.
 4. Corners closed, against teeth (“fangs” as guide).
 5. Strive for round embouchure—corners forward.
 6. Reed alone has almost no resistance so it is not quite as effective to do reed alone as a “pre-instrument” like other instruments.
 7. Reed crows a “C,” but it is done without normal embouchure—loose lips down to the wrapping.
 8. As you look at the reeds head on, one may be more bowed than the other. If so, place the reed with more bow on the bottom. The reed should be “smiling at you.”
- E. First notes on instrument
1. If oboes alone (or with flutes only) start with B-A-G in left hand.
 2. If you MUST start with mixed classes, use alternate F (not forked).
 3. Remember to train “home keys” concept if playing B-A-G exercises so r.h. position is reinforced.
 4. Oboists frequently use too much jaw pressure (top-to-bottom) so the teacher has to be vigilant, stressing a rounder embouchure, corners forward.
- F. Adding articulation after first sound is centered and steady
1. “Tip of the tongue to the tip of the reed,” technically, on the bottom blade near the tip.
 2. Draw diagrams for visual learners.
- G. Plan for teaching vibrato during first year (probably second semester)

III. Bassoon

- A. Instrument assembly and position
1. Soak reeds in water while assembling.
 2. Be sure corks are greased (if the instrument has corked joints).
 3. Place the seat strap on the chair, and sit on it, adjusting it to the proper length, and far enough back so that the weight of the bassoon naturally falls across the right leg to the left hand.

4. Get the boot and hold it vertically. Young students may want to begin assembly by placing the boot on the floor for stability.
 5. Insert the tenor joint first, then the bass joint. Some players get used to inserting both tenor and bass joints together, if the corks/strings are supple enough. Many instruments have a connecting device between the tenor and bass joints.
 6. Add the bell, taking care to watch the bridge key.
 7. Add the bocal, grasping it in the area just above the cork. REMOVING the bocal—be sure the whisper key pad is not damaged!
 8. Add the reed, then make the final seat strap adjustment.
 9. The bassoon should naturally enter the lips without manipulating the head to reach it.
 10. First portion of bocal (where the reed is attached) should have slight downward angle.
- B. Hand position
1. Right hand relaxed, drop to side.
 2. Because the thumb and all r.h. fingers operate keys, the r.h. must avoid resting against the side of the bassoon.
 3. Some bassoons have a crutch for the right hand. I do not like them, and I suggest you remove them. Any student who has a double-jointed thumb (like I do!), almost cannot get good hand position with a crutch.
 4. The l.h. is also relaxed, but the bassoon does rest in it, unlike the r.h. The l.h. index finger must be able to roll down slightly to perform half-holing.
 5. Fingers curved slightly, but pads of fingers must be able to seal open holes.
 6. Teach home keys.
- C. Starting an embouchure
1. Use reed and bocal first to set up routine of breathing and starting sound.
 2. Make a circle with lips, corners forward and jaw dropped.
 3. Place lower blade of reed on bottom lip.
 4. Slowly move reed into mouth, top lip naturally rolls small amount of lip inward.
 5. Corners closed, against teeth (“fangs” as guide).
 6. Strive for round embouchure—corners forward.
 7. As you look at the reeds head on, one may be more bowed than the other. If so, place the reed with more bow on the bottom. The reed should be “smiling at you.”
- D. First notes on instrument
1. If bassoons begin alone start with F-E-D-C in left hand.
 2. Remember to train “home keys” concept if playing F-E-D-C exercises so r.h. position is reinforced.
 3. Bassoonists frequently use too much jaw pressure (top-to-bottom) so the teacher has to be vigilant, stressing a rounder embouchure, corners forward.

- E. Adding articulation after first sound is centered and steady
 1. “Tip of the tongue to the tip of the reed,” technically, on the bottom blade near the tip.
 2. Draw diagrams for visual learners.
- F. Teaching good fingerings from the beginning
 1. Whisper key used on every note from top-line Ab downward. The first few notes a student usually learns have enough resistance that they will come out (sadly!) without the whisper key closed. Monitor this—look at the pad that closes on the bocal.
 2. Teach resonance Eb from the beginning. It is easy to teach “short” Eb (the usual one shown in charts) when they begin to build technique.
 3. Teach the addition of l.h. pinky on top key for resonance and intonation of G.
 4. Teach flicking in beginning year if possible.
- G. Plan for teaching vibrato during first year (probably second semester)

IV. Clarinet

- A. Instrument assembly
 1. Place reed in mouth to moisten while assembling.
 2. Be sure corks are greased.
 3. Assemble from the bottom up: bell to lower joint first, ending with mouthpiece.
 4. Teach student to assemble vertically so they avoid damage.
 5. Bell to lower joint, upper joint added, depressing rings on upper joint to open bridge key, add barrel then mouthpiece.
 6. Take extra time with adding upper joint: there is a small spacer cork under the upper joint’s bridge key and it is easily knocked off by careless assembly.
 7. Place ligature on mouthpiece.
 8. Slide heel of reed downward under ligature, lining up top of reed with top of mouthpiece.
 9. Tighten screws (but not too much). Tighten lower screw securely and upper screw less than that.
 10. Be sure clarinetists have a reed guard with 4 playable reeds, a plastic reed cap and a swab.
- B. Hand position
 1. Right hand relaxed, drop to side.
 2. Right thumb under thumb rest at base of thumbnail (r.h. “supports” the clarinet, does not “grasp” it).
 3. Fingers curved.
 4. Left thumb at 45° angle on thumb hole.
 5. Left hand arched slightly above G# key.
 6. Wrists should be down.
 7. Teach home keys.

8. Have students press fingers down on home keys, then remove and check the circular indentions left from the open holes—if they are not seeing a complete circle on their fingers, they will not be sealing the hole when they eventually play that note.
 9. Watch their pinkies—never under the instrument.
 10. Watch r.h. index finger, trying to prop up instrument under side key.
- C. Starting an embouchure
1. Use mouthpiece (with reed, of course) and barrel to begin, which will produce concert F# (top line of staff).
 2. Place index finger on top teeth, pushing down with top lip firmly as if trying to push the finger downward off the teeth. This should pull the facial mask downward, helping to establish the chin as flat and down.
 3. Top lip must be firm (feels like the step above).
 4. Corners in to third tooth (fang).
 5. Insert mouthpiece in under top teeth—anchor mouthpiece under top teeth.
 6. 30° angle (harder to monitor with just mouthpiece/barrel than with entire instrument—be vigilant!).
 7. Close lips around mouthpiece.
 8. Bottom lip is a firm cushion—not stretched (because corners are forward anyway!).
 9. Ideal place for bottom lip is where reed departs from lay of mouthpiece to form opening.
 10. Thumb anchor upward under top teeth.
- D. First sounds on mouthpiece/barrel
1. Aiming for concert F# (top line of staff).
 2. Tongue arched, as in “eee” vowel, or French “Eu.”
- E. Adding articulation after first sound is centered and steady
1. “Tip of the tongue to the tip of the reed,” technically, on the reed near the tip, not the edge (occasionally misunderstood by beginners).
 2. Draw diagrams for visual learners.
 3. “Dieu” or “thieu” syllable.
- F. First notes on the clarinet
1. If starting clarinets alone, start with l.h. G-F-E-D-C.
 2. Remember to train “home keys” concept in first weeks so r.h. position is reinforced (also, the “looking for the circles” exercise).
 3. To be sure the player is taking enough mouthpiece, try this. Have the student play an open G and move the clarinet into the mouth until the sound pops up a 12th (to a high clarinet D). Then back off just a bit.

V. Saxophone

- A. Instrument assembly
1. Place reed in mouth to moisten while assembling.
 2. Be sure cork is greased.
 3. Connect strap to instrument.

4. Add neck, taking care not to bend the neck key during assembly—this key is often bent out of adjustment by beginners.
 5. Add mouthpiece, then ligature.
 6. Slide heel of reed downward under ligature, lining up top of reed with top of mouthpiece.
 7. Tighten screws (but not too much). Tighten lower screw firmly, and upper screw a little less.
- B. Hand position
1. Right hand relaxed, drop to side.
 2. Right thumb under thumb rest at base of thumbnail.
 3. Strap supports almost all the weight of the saxophone, thumb only pushes forward slightly under thumb rest (pushing it all the way toward the knee mashes reed down onto lip).
 4. R.h. arched slightly over side keys, fingers curved. “Enough room for a red rubber ball.”
 5. Left thumb on thumb rest.
 6. L.h. arched slightly above palm keys.
 7. Teach home keys.
- C. Starting an embouchure
1. Use mouthpiece (with reed, of course) and neck to begin, which will produce concert Ab on alto, concert E on tenor.
 2. Make a circle with lips, like whistling, corners forward, Corners in to third tooth (fang).
 3. Insert mouthpiece in under top teeth—anchor mouthpiece under top teeth.
 4. Slight downward angle of first portion of neck (where mouthpiece is attached).
 5. Close lips around mouthpiece.
 6. Bottom lip is a firm cushion—not stretched (because corners are forward anyway!).
 7. Ideal place for bottom lip is where reed departs from lay of mouthpiece to form opening.
- D. First sounds on mouthpiece/neck
1. Produce concert Ab on alto, concert E on tenor (these pitches are “ballpark,” not absolute).
 2. Saxophonists might use too much jaw pressure (not as frequent a problem as double reeds) so the teacher has to be vigilant, stressing a rounder embouchure, corners forward.
 3. In second semester, teachers may advance to using the mouthpiece alone to develop embouchures. The alto mouthpiece plays a concert A, the tenor mouthpiece plays concert G.
- E. Adding articulation after first sound is centered and steady
1. “Tip of the tongue to the tip of the reed,” technically, on the reed near the tip, not the edge (occasionally misunderstood by beginners).
 2. Draw diagrams for visual learners.
- F. First notes on the saxophone

1. When the entire saxophone is assembled, remember that the r.h. thumb merely supports the instrument, it does not push it forward.
 2. Adjust neckstrap so instrument enters embouchure without having to move the head—the instrument comes to the head, not the head to the instrument.
 3. If starting saxophones alone, start with l.h. B-A-G.
 4. Remember to train “home keys” concept in first weeks so r.h. position is reinforced.
- G. Plan for vibrato to be addressed during first year of playing (probably second semester).