

Clarinet Reeds 101

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Clarinet reeds are partly responsible for the uniquely beautiful tone we can produce, and largely responsible for our frustrations with the instrument. A basic knowledge of the reed, how it works and how to take care of it will go a long way toward alleviating a clarinetist's headaches. This crash course on reeds will help beginning or advanced clarinet students.



What is a reed?

Clarinet reeds are made from the cane of a giant grass called *Arundo donax*. The cane is cut by machine to a standard size, packaged up and sent to musicians throughout the world. Most clarinetists use these manufactured reeds. Reeds are labeled numerically (1 through 5), with harder reeds receiving higher numbers. This system is not standardized between brands, though, so a strength 2 Rico reed may feel significantly different than a strength 2 Vandoren. To further complicate matters, there are so many brands and styles available that a search on Woodwind & Brasswind's website for "Bb clarinet reeds" yields four pages of results. I strongly recommend that students get personal advice from a private teacher or band director to help get started with optimal reed selection, but here are some general recommendations of historically high quality reeds.

What should I use?

Beginners almost always start with a strength 2 reed and can quickly move up to a 2.5 or 3 to improve tone and response. Rico reeds, Mitchell Lurie and Vandoren reeds are classic choices. Try to buy at least 3 or 4 reeds at a time for beginners, as the fragile tip of the reed is prone to chipping (and then the reed should be thrown out) and all clarinetists should have a few good reeds handy.

Intermediate clarinetists should be using a strength 3 or 3.5 reed as muscle strength improves and the student gains control of his or her air stream. Stronger reeds help us reach higher notes, focus tone and direct intonation.

Advanced students will most likely benefit from a 3.5 or 4 strength reed of high quality. Classic Vandoren reeds (in the blue box) or Vandoren "V12" reeds are usually what I recommend for my

students but by the time clarinetists are playing at a high level there are many determining factors when it comes to good reed selection. Mouthpiece and ligature, tongue position and especially the student's desired optimal tone will effect the reed choice and students of this level should consider occasionally experimenting with different brands and strengths to familiarize themselves with the options available.

Brands are always changing, models being introduced and even variations in the year's cane crop can affect a reed enough for a serious student to notice the difference.

Why does this reed sound bad?

Check the reed's tip. If you've cracked or chipped the reed, it's time to throw it out. As clarinetists, our goal is to maximize and control the vibration of the reed against the mouthpiece and only an equally balanced reed will vibrate evenly. If a piece of the reed is missing, there's no way it can vibrate optimally. If the tip of the reed seems to be in tact, make sure that the reed is positioned correctly on the mouthpiece and that the ligature is low and tight. When you look straight at the reed, can you see a slight crescent of the top of the mouthpiece over the top of the reed? The reed should neither be pushed up and overhanging the tip of the mouthpiece nor so low that the mouthpiece is clearly visible above the reed. Ask your band director or private teacher to double check the reed placement if you're unsure.

Despite the high tech machinery that reed manufacturers use to make their product,

the tip of a reed is so thin that some variation is inevitable. As an intermediate or advanced player, you should never be satisfied to just put the reed on the mouthpiece, screw down the ligature and play. Try positioning the tip of the reed just slightly to the left of the mouthpiece's center; then try shifting the reed slightly right. Does one side sound freer than the other? Is one side clearer or one side easier to play? Does one side just sound better? Experimenting with the reed's position on the mouthpiece will teach you how to determine which side of the reed is softer and which side is harder, an unfortunate discrepancy almost certain among manufactured reeds. If you can become confident determining which side is softer, you will be ready to work with your private instructor on actually sanding or shaping the reed to allow it to vibrate more evenly. And in the mean time, playing with a slightly off centered reed may allow an otherwise mediocre piece of cane to shine.

How should I care for my reeds?

There are as many ways to care for reeds as there are clarinetists. Here are some basic principles on which most of us will agree, and some suggestions that are good places for a student to start.

Reeds need to be broken in and the more gradually, the better. Wet the whole reed (top to bottom!) with saliva or water, rub your thumb across the cut front surface then play on it for a few seconds. Put it away. Each day that you get the reed back out, increase the playing time until it's ready to vibrate for a full thirty minutes and remember that no reed should ever

be played much longer than thirty minutes at a time. You may need to switch reeds several times during a long rehearsal or practice session. The more gently you can introduce a reed to its new career as a musical instrument, the more consistently it will play through your entire practice session and throughout the course of its life.

Store your reeds in a proper case. Due to space constraints within clarinet cases, we're often tempted to store reeds in those little plastic sleeves in which they're originally packaged. While those cases protect the reed from chipping, they don't allow for adequate air circulation or a good surface on which the back of the reed can rest, increasing the likelihood that the reed will warp. Similarly, storing the reed on your mouthpiece is an unsatisfactory solution. When shopping for a good storage solution, look for cases that have a flat surface for the back of the reed and, because Virginia is so humid, a little space for air circulation. Cases that help keep reeds organized are also useful. There are dozens of options available so ask your teacher for specific recommendations or have fun experimenting to find a system that works for you.



How long do reeds last?

That depends. If a reed has been properly broken in, safely stored and used in conjunction with other reeds, it could last several weeks. The more slowly the reed is broken in, the longer it will last. If you rotate between four reeds instead of only two, each reed will last longer and if you limit a reed's playing time to thirty minutes a day you'll be greatly extending its life over a reed that has to vibrate for two hours at a time.

But despite our best efforts, even an excellent, pampered reed slowly deteriorates due to weather changes and its exposure to vibration and the enzymes in our saliva. An old reed sounds dull or fuzzy, doesn't have the same consistency in tone and doesn't easily produce tone through the full range of the instrument. If you allow yourself to play on only one reed you may not notice its gradual decline and, of course, the worst time to try to find a new reed is when you really need one. Always have multiple reeds in rotation and date the back of each reed so you can easily determine if it may be reaching the end of its life expectancy. I start breaking in new reeds every few weeks so I always have fresh reeds ready to perform. And when a reed is no longer producing satisfactory results, it's time to toss it and move on to the next volunteer.