

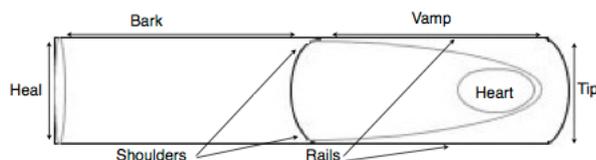
Clarinet Reeds 201

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You don't have to talk to a clarinetist long before the subject of reeds comes up. In fact, "Clarinet Reeds 101" is by far the most popular article on the Grant Clarinet Studio website. In that mini-course, we discussed the basics of reed selection, storage and maintenance. In this article, we'll dig just a little deeper, further enabling the reader to take control of his or her playing.

Reed anatomy

Before we go any further, we need to clarify a few terms. The diagram below shows a typical French cut reed. Please note the names of each part of the reed.



American clarinetists will almost exclusively play on American or French cut reeds. American reeds (most notably Rico reeds) have a softer curve to the heart of the reed, with the thin portion of the tip starting substantially lower on the reed's vamp. The lack of material at the tip of the reed limits its life expectancy but this cut allows for much greater consistency from reed to reed; this largely explains Rico's popularity with young players.

Most intermediate to advanced players prefer manufactured French cut reeds



(Mitchell Lurie and Vandoren). The heart of French reeds is shaped like an upside down "V" and the heart gets much closer to the tip of the reed. Because of the greater thickness at the tip of the reed, the reed will last longer and have a fuller sound. Unfortunately, because any reed must vibrate perfectly evenly from side to side, any variation of the placement of the heart of the reed can cause inconsistency in quality. This is where the clarinetist's reed knowledge really comes into play.

Straight out of the box

For the sake of convenience, the vast majority of of clarinetists play on precut, boxed reeds. This saves a great deal of time but, because we relinquish control of the aging and cutting process, we have to accept that within that box there may only be a few really high quality reeds. Here are some shortcuts to identify the best of the box.

A good reed is almost always light yellow or tan in color with little to no spotting on the bark. Variation from those rules indicates that the cane was not aged

properly. When you hold the reed up to the light and look at the vamp, you should see the heart of the reed centered and no thick veining in the cane. The surface of the reed should feel smooth to the touch. Of course any chips or cracks in the tip of the reed mean that it is unusable.

Follow the reed break-in process described in "Clarinet Reeds 101" to ensure your reed has time to slowly adjust to the humidity and vibration demands it will face. The more slowly you break in your reed and the better care you take of it throughout its life, the better your reed will serve you.

But that's not all

We clarinetists spend our time dreaming about that "perfect reed." But because synthetic reeds are in some ways, arguably, still inferior to natural cane reeds and because anything natural derives part of its beauty from inherent imperfection, our "perfect reed" quest may be a journey that has no end. We should therefore channel our efforts into adjusting a reed so that it best meets our musical needs. Here is a list of the supplies you should obtain to begin experimentation with fine-tuning (ha!) store bought reeds:

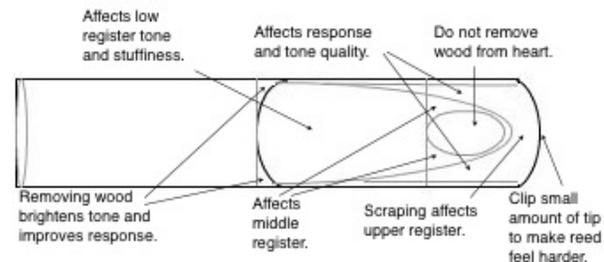
- 400 and 600 grit waterproof sandpaper
- A very flat work surface; glass or polished tile are good choices.
- A reed trimmer. Cordier is my preference.

More advanced clarinetists will find themselves wishing for a reed knife or ReedGeek.

You can't put it back

You must become accustomed to determining which side of the reed is too hard and which is too soft if you hope to be able to balance a reed so that it vibrates evenly. You are already experimenting with shifting the reed to the left and right of the center of the mouthpiece window, as suggested in the last article. If you shift the reed to the right and it feels better, the left side is too hard, and vice versa. Your teacher can show you additional methods to confirm your suspicion.

Once you have identified the harder side, you need to lightly sand or scrape the affected area to make it identical to the opposite side. This can be achieved under the watchful eye of a good teacher and with lots of patience from the student. Keep in mind the golden rule of reed working: once the wood is removed, it is impossible to replace.



Balancing the reed is an important first step but certainly not the only helpful modification that an experienced reed worker can make to his or her reed. After substantial time experimenting with balancing your reed, experiment with making other changes using the template above.

Warpage

Besides imbalance, the other common reed problem faced by clarinetists is reed warpage. As the reed wets, vibrates and dries, the thicker center of the reed is prone to expansion. This prevents the reed from laying perfectly flat against the table of the mouthpiece. When a reed is warped it will sound stuffy or fuzzy, feel especially resistant and be more likely to squeak.

There is an easy way to check if your reed is a victim of warpage. Remove the assembled mouthpiece and barrel from your clarinet, press the bottom of the barrel against your palm, making a seal, and suck the air out of the mouthpiece. If the reed is flat against the mouthpiece this will create a vacuum and the reed will remain stuck to the rails of the mouthpiece. If the reed is warped, it will be unable to create a good seal against the mouthpiece and your reed will immediately rebound away from the mouthpiece.

If your reed is warped you can make some progress restoring it to its original, flat state. Place a piece of fine grit, wet/dry sandpaper on your flat surface. Lay the flat side of the reed on the paper but overhang the tip of the reed so that you do not sand the tip and affect the strength of the reed. Hold the paper very flat with your left hand and gently place three fingers of your right hand on the vamp, middle and bottom of the reed. Sand the reed in a figure eight pattern with the grain, being careful not to apply too much pressure. This process should remove a tiny bit of wood in a stipe down the center

of the reed. If you hold the reed up to the light at an angle, the sanded portion of the reed will appear shiny; you can also check the improvement by re-administering the suction test.



Proper reed storage in a case with adequate air circulation will help prevent warpage by allowing the thick center of the reed to dry at almost the same rate as the thinner rails. Unfortunately, almost all reeds warp during their playing career. And when your reed is too warped, too old cracked or otherwise unplayable, send it to the reed graveyard.

