

Setting the Foundation for Good Embouchure

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Pre-Band class

In order to get band students started on fundamentals correctly, it is recommended that there be a certain amount of time teaching rhythm, note recognition, fingering charts, discipline, posture, etc. before actually starting on instruments. A pre-band class of some sort is highly recommended. Many band directors use a Recorder Class to prepare students for going on to the real instruments. During the Recorder Class, introducing the instruments, giving students a chance to play them and working toward a balanced instrumentation are also important aspects of getting the fundamentals going.

Embouchure Practice

During the days before the delivery of instruments, spend time teaching “embouchure steps” to enable students to get a better start on embouchure. It is my hope that these steps will help you get a consistent habit going in each student.

The goal in teaching embouchure is to get the most students started as correctly as possible. Good tone quality is dependent on the outcome of the embouchure, so a great deal of attention should be focused here.

If you have a different embouchure that you wish to teach, please teach it, but use these concepts of “embouchure steps” to have a routine that will get kids practicing embouchure correctly. If there is one thing we’ve all noticed, it’s that many different teachers have various ideas about the best embouchure to teach. This is not a treatise on what to teach as much as how to teach it. Do what you think is best, but use the routine offered here.

I teach students that there are three things that produce a good tone quality. Embouchure, Air and Tongue. The acrostic, E-A-T is easy for them to remember and will help you when you are discussing tone production problems. In this section we will discuss embouchure development. My goal is to describe things in a way that you will easily understand the concepts and pictures that I am relating to you.

Each different type of embouchure should be taught in a three step routine. **Instruct the students to go home and practice the steps in a mirror, so they will see the correct embouchure before they get the instrument.** Check them daily in class during the interim between *Recorder Class* and *Beginning Band Class*, and for several months during the *Beginning Band* phase. Later, when you practice putting the instrument up to the students’ mouths, ask them to do embouchure step one, then step two, then step three.

Embouchure Steps Description Chart

Instrument	Step One	Step Two	Step three
Flute	Roll head joint up over lips	roll head joint down	firm up corners
Oboe	place reed on bottom lip	close top lip over the teeth	firm up corners
Clarinet	place reed on bottom lip	place top teeth on top of mp	firm up corners
Saxophone	place reed on bottom lip	place top teeth on top of mp	firm up corners
Bassoon	place reed on bottom lip	close top lip over the teeth	firm up corners
French Horn	place shank between teeth	place mp on flat platform	firm up corners
Trumpet	place shank between teeth	place mp on flat platform	firm up corners
Trombone	place shank between teeth	place mp on flat platform	firm up corners
Euphonium	place shank between teeth	place mp on flat platform	firm up corners
Tuba	place shank between teeth	place mp on flat platform	firm up corners

Flute Embouchure

During the transition period, these exercises will be practiced on the side of the recorder, or on a pencil to get the routine down pat. Actual sounds will not be made.

Before teaching the embouchure steps, students will learn how to blow. Have them say “hopfffffffff” and blow a steady airflow with firm lips. Analogies that will help the student understand are to get the sound of air leaking out of a tire that is going flat. Have the students place their hand in front of their mouth and blow into the palm of their hand. Teach them to blow out and not down. Later, on the head joint, the goal will be to blow to the opposite edge of the mouthpiece opening rather than down into the hole.

The flute may be the most difficult instrument in achieving the first sound. There will be some students that go a long period of time without getting the first tone quality. Be patient and encourage them while they are encountering the frustration.

The embouchure steps on flute are to be done on the head joint only (during the transition on the side of the recorder or on a pencil). Make sure that the open end of the head joint points to the right, just as the flute will when assembled.

Step one is to place the head joint up over the aperture of the mouth and make sure that the lip plate is centered over the mouth and below the nose. Consider the following:

- It is important that the lip plate be lined up in the center of the mouth.
- The edge of the lip plate hole should be lined up with the bottom lip.

Step two is to roll the head joint down until the lip plate is “level” to the ground and is in line with the aperture of the lips. Consider the following:

- The location of the edge of the lip plate hole should be firmly pressed into the bottom lip and in most cases on the edge of the bottom lip as it ends and the skin of the chin begins.
- In some cases, students with large lips will need to move the head joint up higher on the bottom lip and away from the edge where the skin begins.

Step three is to firm up the corner of the lips muscles while relaxing the bottom lip slightly. Consider the following:

- There are numerous variations on the actual embouchure and flute instructors are of strong opinions regarding their favorite embouchure. I recommend that you spend time talking with teachers who have a record of success and adapt the flute embouchure as you feel necessary.
- If a student is not doing any portion of the above routine correctly, you will ask them what is going wrong and tell they need to correct step one, two or three, in order to get it right.

When it is time to produce the first tone you will combine the air production with the embouchure steps to get the first sound. In the early stages, you will not teach the concept of tonguing. That will come later, when the routines of tone production are more of a habit.

Clarinet and Saxophone Embouchure

During the transition period, these exercises will be practiced on the recorder, or on a finger to get the routine down pat. Actual sounds will not be made. When beginning band begins and the real instrument is available, the exercises will be practiced first on the mouthpiece and later on the assembled instrument. For clarinet, practice with the mouthpiece and barrel, on the saxophone the mouthpiece and neck.

On the board draw a picture of a face with the lips and chin shown. Underneath the lips draw a picture of a canoe or canoe shape. For all of the embouchures discussing the muscle under the lips as the “**canoe shaped muscle**” will make the description easier for young people to understand.

The corner muscles of the lips will be described as “**plier muscles**”. Draw a picture of little pliers that squeeze together on the outside corners. Explain that the corner or plier muscles will not pull outward but squeeze together.

Probably the most important part of the single reed embouchure is the development of the “flat” chin while playing. Explain that the bottom lip is to be stretched out in front of the bottom teeth, without pulling backward or outward on the corners. The plier muscles will squeeze without pulling back while the chin muscles pull down and form the shape of a canoe.

Direct students to touch their chin with their finger to feel the firmness of the canoe shape muscle and the “pointed-ness” of their chin. The chin should be pulling or pointing down.

Step one for the single reed instrument is to place the mouthpiece (reed side down) on the bottom lip. Consider the following:

- The amount of bottom lip inside the mouth should be described as a sliver or molecule of lip, to keep the students from taking too much in and swallowing the bottom lip.
- The amount of mouthpiece to place inside the mouth can be most easily be determined by looking at the mouthpiece and reed sideways and finding where the reed pulls away from the lay of the mouthpiece. The reed should be placed on the bottom lip at the point where light can be seen between the reed and the mouthpiece.
- If the chin does not remain flat when you put the mouthpiece in the mouth, the student is taking too much bottom lip into the mouth. Remind them to take in only a sliver of the lip into the mouth, and to keep the chin “flat”.

Step two is to place the top teeth on the top of the mouthpiece. Consider the following:

- The amount of “bite” is important. Too much and the tone quality will not develop well and an abundance of squeaking will occur, too little and the tone will always be flabby.
- To test the firmness of the “bite” you should grasp the mouthpiece on either side and gently wriggle it to see if it will stay firmly in the mouth. It should not move when you do this, but the student’s head will move sideways slightly.
- The chin must stay flat during step two.

Step three is to close the lips firmly on the mouthpiece. Consider the following:

- The chin must remain flat and firm after doing all three steps. This is extremely important.
- The bottom lip should be thought of as a straight line with only a sliver of it inside of the mouth.
- The corner or plier muscle should be firm but not stretched outward.
- The teeth should still be firm on top of the mouthpiece so that the mouthpiece will not wriggle inside of the mouth when you “test” it.
- If a student is not doing any portion of the above routine correctly, you will ask them what is going wrong and tell they need to correct step one, two or three, in order to get it right.
- Students should be directed to touch their chin while practicing the steps and later when actually playing on the mouthpiece to see if the chin is still flat.

When the actual instrument is available and the first sound is produced, make sure that the steps mentioned above stay intact. Tonguing will be introduced at a later time.

Oboe and Bassoon Embouchure

During the transition period, these exercises will be practiced on the recorder, or on a finger to get the routine down pat. Actual sounds will not be made. When beginning band begins and the real instrument is available, the exercises will be practiced first on the mouthpiece and later on the assembled instrument. For oboe, practice with the reed, on the bassoon the reed and the bocal.

On the board draw a picture of a face with the lips and chin shown. Underneath the lips draw a picture of a canoe or canoe shape. For all of the embouchures discussing the muscle under the lips as the “**canoe shaped muscle**” will make the description easier for young people to understand.

The corner muscles of the lips will be described as “**plier muscles**”. Draw a picture of little pliers that squeeze together on the outside corners. Explain that the corner or plier muscles will not pull outward but squeeze together.

Probably the most important part of the double reed embouchure is the development of the “flat” chin while playing. Explain that the bottom lip is to be stretched out in front of the bottom teeth, without pulling backward or outward on the corners. The plier muscles will squeeze without pulling back while the chin muscles pull down and form the shape of a canoe.

Direct students to touch their chin with their finger to feel the firmness of the canoe shape muscle and the “pointed-ness” of their chin. The chin should be pulling or pointing down.

Step one for the double reed instrument is to place the reed on the bottom lip. Consider the following:

- The amount of bottom lip inside the mouth should be a small amount. The tip should protrude into the mouth, but no more than half of the reed should be in the mouth. This is an area of controversy for double reed musicians; check with someone you trust, to get the amount they recommend.
- If the chin does not remain flat when you put the reed in the mouth, the student is taking too much bottom lip into the mouth. Remind them to take in only a sliver of the lip into the mouth, and to keep the chin “flat”.

Step two is to place the top lip over the top teeth and hold the reed firmly with the lips. Consider the following:

- The student should not bite the reed closed, the lips should be firm, but the bite should not be strong.

- To test the firmness of the “bite” you can ask the student to place their finger in their mouth and do the embouchure. The amount of firmness or bite should not hurt their finger.
- The chin must stay flat during step two.

Step three is to close the lips firmly around the reed. Consider the following:

- The chin must remain flat and firm after doing all three steps. This is extremely important.
- The bottom lip should be thought of as a straight line with only a sliver of it inside of the mouth.
- The corner or plier muscle should be firm but not stretched outward.
- If a student is not doing any portion of the above routine correctly, you will ask them what is going wrong and tell they need to correct step one, two or three, in order to get it right.

When the actual instrument is available and the first sound is produced, make sure that the steps mentioned above stay intact. Tonguing will be introduced at a later time.

Brass Embouchure

There are some variations regarding different brass instruments, but the similarities are easier to teach than differences can be taken into consideration as needed. The following explanation will work with all brass instruments with some adjustments as necessary.

During the transition period, these exercises will be practiced on the recorder, or on a finger to get the routine down pat. Actual sounds will not be made. When beginning band begins and the real instrument is available, the exercises will be practiced first on the mouthpiece and later on the assembled instrument.

Use the same picture of a face with the lips and chin shown that is already on the board. For all of the embouchures discussing the muscle under the lips as the “**canoe shaped muscle**” will make the description easier for young people to understand.

Once again the corner muscles of the lips will be described as “**plier muscles**”. The concept of the plier muscle squeezing together on the corners is the same for the beginning brass embouchure.

Once again the importance of the development of the “flat” chin while playing must be stressed. Explain that the bottom lip is to be stretched out in front of the bottom teeth, without pulling backward or outward on the corners. The plier muscles will squeeze without pulling back while the chin muscles pull down and form the shape of a canoe.

Direct students to touch their chin with their finger to feel the firmness of the canoe shape muscle and the “pointed-ness” of their chin. The chin should be pulling or pointing down.

Step one is to hold the mouthpiece backwards and place the shank (or finger during the transition) between the teeth. Consider the following:

- The bottom jaw must push forward so that the bottom teeth are even with the top teeth.
- Explain that step one teaches them to keep their teeth open while playing on a brass instrument.
- Explain that the distance between the teeth needs to be the same as the distance of when the shank is between their teeth.

Step two is to turn the mouthpiece back around and place the mouthpiece on their mouth. During the transition between recorder and instruments, you will place your finger on the chin, with the side of the finger on the lips and chin. Consider the following:

- The teeth must stay open when you do step two.
- The top and bottom teeth must stay even when you lay the mouthpiece (or finger during the transition) on your mouth to make a flat platform.
- The concept of a flat chin or platform on which to lay the mouthpiece is extremely important and must be practiced repeatedly.
- When using the mouthpiece, it should be directly under the nose and lined up with the center of the mouth.
- The canoe shaped muscle should be discussed and checked by either touching it or looking at it.
- Students should be directed to use a mirror to look at their chin.
- Problems occur when the chin becomes “bunched up”. I describe this as a “pin cushion”, and show the students what it looks like when the chin is not pointing down.
- Discuss the cartilage on the “point” of the chin, and how it must not get in front of your chin, but must stay on the point or bottom of the chin.
- Problems occur when the teeth close. Make sure that the teeth remain open during all three steps.

Step three is to firm up the corner muscles and relax the center of the lips so they can vibrate.

- During step two, the mouthpiece was placed on the front of the mouth, now direct the students to firm up the plier muscles at either corner of the mouth. Explain to them it should not be like smiling or pulling outward on the corners. The corners must remain in place and squeezed together like a pair of pliers.

- The corners should remain firm, while the center of the lips should not be too tight, but should have a certain amount of flexibility so they can vibrate.
- The teeth must remain open inside of the mouth with the jaw pushed forward so the bottom teeth are even with the top teeth.
- The chin must remain flat and pointed down.
- Blow air at this point, explaining that the chin and embouchure should remain motionless.
- Students should be directed to practice these steps in a mirror so that they know them well and they are able to keep their chin flat while blowing.

Percussion Hand Position Practice

While the wind instruments are practicing steps to develop their embouchure habits, the percussionists will practice holding their sticks/mallets. During beginning band, I teach students to use matched grip on both the mallets and the snare drum sticks. This is easiest because the grip is very much the same. If you wish to teach traditional grip, you can adapt the three step approach to that grip.

During the transition between *Recorder Class* and Beginning Band, students will use two pencils to get the correct routines down-pat.

Step one on percussion is to hold the mallets between the thumb and first finger. Consider the following:

- Have the students hold the sticks/mallets straight up in the air, placing the stick on the joint of the index finger and held with the thumb.
- Allow the students to wriggle the sticks/mallets up and down so that they can get the idea of a fulcrum that allows the sticks/mallets to move. The wriggle movement will come from allowing the wrist to be relaxed and the fulcrum firm but not too tight.
- The placement of the finger and thumb (fulcrum) on the stick should be in a location that will allow about 1-1/2 inches of stick to protrude below the hand when the grip is complete.
- The placement of the index finger and thumb should be such that the balance of the stick will allow it to freely move.

Step two is to gently close the remaining fingers around the stick. Consider the following:

- The fingers must be relaxed and not tight. The grip should be relaxed and not tense.

- The wrist must remain relaxed.

Step three is to turn the palms down, and make a ninety degree angle with the sticks.

- The main stroke movement in getting the correct stroke is to have a relaxed wrist. The movement is like knocking on a door, except that it is with palms down instead of up.
- Practice making the stroke even without an instrument, by turning the palms down and pretending to knock on a door.

Establishing Embouchure Habits

Every day for many weeks (6-8 weeks), spend time going through each section checking the embouchure of each student. As a group and individually, go over the three embouchure steps and play on the mouthpiece. A good exercise to practice (after you have taught tonguing) is to play 4 quarter notes and a whole note on the mouthpiece and then on the completely assembled instrument.

Students should be encouraged to practice every night for a short period of time on the mouthpiece in a mirror, to check their own embouchure development. Even with all of this effort, students will come to class with bad habits. A bad habit is difficult to break, so make every effort to catch them before they become cemented in the student's performance.