

Teaching the Fundamentals of Tone

UTM Clarinet Studio

Breathing

Posture

Posture is an important (and often overlooked) aspect of breathing. Check for:

- A relaxed, upright posture.
 - EXERCISE: You should easily be able to rock side-to-side & front-to-back when sitting or standing to find a stable position.
- Your shoulders should be rotated down your back, not curved forward.
 - IMAGERY: Rotate your shoulders (instead of pulling them backwards) & expand the hollow at the base of your neck.
- Your head should be upright, not reaching forward or tilted downward.
 - IMAGERY: A string/balloon gently pulling up on the top of your head.
- Keep both feet on the floor so your abs can focus on breathing instead of balancing.

Inhalation

When talking about breathing, we often hear “diaphragm breathing,” but this is a pretty abstract idea because our diaphragm is hard to locate and control. Instead, focus on how it feels to breathe correctly.

- Always begin with a full exhalation.
- Breathe in from your belly.
 - EXERCISE: Make the breath sound (and feel) deep & relaxed – not shallow & tense.
 - EXERCISE: Put your hands on your stomach & back push them apart.
 - EXERCISE: Use a pool noodle held under the arms (around the back & sides) to feel your stomach, sides, and back expanding.
 - EXERCISE: Feel for the muscles you’re using when you inhale. Develop an awareness of these muscles, as you’ll use them when exhaling (playing), too.
 - EXERCISE: Inhale through your nose to create a relaxed breath without disturbing the embouchure.
 - EXERCISE: Play lying down (we naturally breathe this way when supine).
- Note that your shoulders shouldn’t move much – but they aren’t completely immobile, as this creates tension and prevents you from accessing your entire lung capacity.
- As you get used to breathing in this way, you’ll be able to take larger breaths and to breathe more quickly – even if you need more time at first.

Characteristics of improper inhalations include inability to play long phrases, unfocused tone, and stale air.

Exhalation (Playing)

Use your abs to breathe out (while you're playing). Make sure you're always pushing the air out, regardless of register or dynamic. Remember: You should have fast, intense air all the time!

- EXERCISE: Feel for those same muscles you used when inhaling & use them to exhale.
- EXERCISE: Using a pool noodle, feel your back & sides pull away from the noodle.
- EXERCISE: Hold your hand in front of your face & feel for COLD, fast air (not hot air). Pretend you're blowing out a candle – not fogging up a mirror.
- EXERCISE: Try using a Breath Builder (\$18 on Amazon). The goal is to keep the ball at the top of the tube when exhaling. (Eventually, try to keep it there both while exhaling AND while inhaling.) You can work with a metronome to lengthen your phrases & work on fast inhalations.
- EXERCISE: Play on just your mouthpiece, using a tuner (you can download one for free) – using the correct air, it should register a concert Db. A lower pitch means that you're using hot air and/or your tongue is too low (see below).
- EXERCISE: “Play” a phrase on your airstream only to make sure the air is staying cold.
- EXERCISE: Play lying down.

Characteristics of poor or inconsistent air support include problems crossing the break, pitch issues, unfocused sound at soft dynamics, unresponsive notes, inability to play loud, and tonal inconsistencies in different ranges. You may also notice that you can play for a long time without breathing – and while this may seem like an advantage, your tone and technique typically suffer because of it.

Embouchure

Overall

The embouchure encompasses several parts of your body:

- Jaw
- Lips
- Chin
- Tongue
- Throat

Obviously, you can see some of these but not others; when you cannot see a part of the embouchure, you have to rely on your ears to ascertain whether your position is correct.

Before delving into the specifics of embouchure, you should make sure you have enough mouthpiece in your mouth so that your reed can vibrate freely. You should also experiment with instrument angle (use a G above the staff) to figure out where you have the best tone.

Visible Aspects (Jaw, Chin, & Lips)

The jaw, chin, & lips all work together to form the visible embouchure.

- Your jaw should fall open naturally.
 - Know that the jaw begins by the ears, and this is the hinge that needs to move.
 - Be aware of tension in the lower half of the face & back by the ears.
 - IMAGERY: Picture a skeleton & how the jaw hangs open. Let gravity do the work, not your muscles.
- Your lips should cushion the mouthpiece/reed and push into them.
 - Be aware of the bottom lip in particular: many students let it fall into the mouth, but it should actively push up above the bottom teeth, forming a cushion for the reed. Use “above” instead of “over” when talking about the bottom lip.
 - IMAGERY: Use “milkshake” (or smoothie or frappuccino) lips.
 - EXERCISE: Whistle. This is GREAT lip position! Now, just roll the bottom lip back slightly so that it’s above the bottom teeth.
 - EXERCISE: Play double-lipped (with your top lip between your mouthpiece & teeth). This is wonderful for biting!
 - EXERCISE: Use your lips to push your mouthpiece/reed away from your teeth.
 - EXERCISE: Use Michael Lowenstern’s Q/T exercise to create awareness of & strengthen the muscles at the corner of the mouth.
 - EXERCISE: Use the Facial Flex or the Wind-O to create awareness of & strengthen the muscles at the corner of the mouth.
- Together, the open jaw & cushioned lips produce a “pointed/flat chin,” or smooth skin on your chin.

Hidden Aspects (Tongue & Throat)

Because you can’t see the tongue or the inside of the throat, you’ll need to listen for some of the telltale signs of tonal problems; if the visible parts of the embouchure are correct, then work with the hidden aspects.

- Your tongue should be high, like when you say “key.”
 - Your tongue is actually a group of A LOT of different muscles, so be aware of different parts of your tongue (front/back, sides, middle).
 - EXERCISE: Use different vowel sounds (Key, Kay, Koo) to feel how your tongue moves in your mouth.

- Keep the throat open.
 - EXERCISE: Yawn. This is what we want when playing. (It also facilitates a relaxed, open, low inhalation.)
- Proper tongue position will help keep your throat open, and vice-versa.

Most (all?) other instruments change tongue position in different registers, so many students have been told to do this, often by referencing different vowel sounds (hee, ha, huh). Let students know that clarinets don't change tongue position but others do, so when their band director says to use a different vowel, (s)he is talking to all the other wind instruments – but not clarinets.

Characteristics of a Poor Embouchure

Visual characteristics:

- Wrinkled or bunched-up chin (work on jaw AND lips)
- Tendons standing out in the neck (work on throat AND relaxed jaw)
- Movement of the jaw, throat, or under the jaw, esp. when changing register (work on jaw AND tongue position)

Aural characteristics:

- Bright tone above the staff & in the altissimo (biting – work on jaw AND lips; double-lipped embouchure is GREAT for this!)
- Generally sharp pitch (biting – work on jaw AND lips; double-lipped embouchure is GREAT for this!)
- Uncontrolled tone (work on lips AND tongue position)
- Tone that changes in different registers (work on tongue position)
- Difficulty playing above the staff or in the altissimo (work on tongue position)
- Flat throat tones (work on tongue position)
- Unfocused tone (work on tongue position)

Tools & Resources

Exercises

The key to changing breathing or embouchure is everyone's favorite exercise: long tones. You need to play something that's easy & slow so that you can focus on what's new. Make sure to cover the entire range of the instrument so that you reinforce correct breathing & embouchure in all registers, including the altissimo & the throat tones.

- Begin with conjunct exercises (chromatic scale or any other scale) because the embouchure tends to change when larger intervals are introduced.

- Once the embouchure & breathing are comfortable in a stepwise exercise, begin using smaller intervals (chords or 5ths).
- Eventually, move to larger intervals (octaves and 12ths) to unify tone over the entire range of the instrument.

Once this new way of breathing is comfortable in your long tones, you'll likely have already started using it in band music & other music without even realizing it! But make sure to check in, particularly on lyrical pieces (where you usually don't have as much other stuff to think about) and any time you're having a problem with articulation, dynamics, tone, connection, etc...

Teaching Tools

- Breath Builder – breathing & embouchure
- Pool noodle – breathing
- Facial Flex (cheaper; stroke recovery) – corners of lips
- Wind-O (more expensive; for instrumentalists) – corners of lips

Resources

The following resources are all available through the UTM library:

- Larry Guy, *Embouchure Building for Clarinetists* – MT385.G88 2011
- Howard Klug, *The Clarinet Doctor* – MT380.K58 1997
- Thomas Ridenour, *The Educator's Guide to the Clarinet* – MT380.R53 2002
- Keith Stein, *The Art of Clarinet Playing* – MT382.S74X
- Michael Webster, "Teaching Clarinet" column in every issue of *The Clarinet* (journal of the International Clarinet Association) – ML1.C787