



II. BUILD PROPER TECHNIQUE

CLARINET

BREATHING & AIR SUPPORT

Proper breathing and good air support are absolutely essential to all clarinet and saxophone playing.

BREATHING

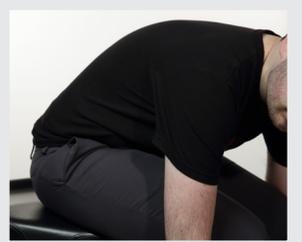
In addition to being the foundation of a beautiful, focused tone, good air support also improves legato, articulation, and range.

- ◉ If done correctly, a good breath should cause the stomach to expand first, rather than the chest or shoulders. A good breath should fill the lungs from bottom to top, similar to how one would pour a glass of water.
- ◉ Posture is extremely important when breathing. To fully open up your chest, sit up straight with your shoulders back. Always breathe through your mouth.



EXERCISE #1

Place a hand on the stomach and take a deep breath. You should feel your hand move as the abdominal region expands. Also, try bending at the waist and breathing. If there is no abdominal expansion, the breath is likely too shallow or too high in the chest. Work for expansion in the entire abdominal region, including the sides and back.



- ◉ Listen carefully to the noise the breath makes. A proper breath should make a soft, relaxed, deep “ooo” sound on the inhale. If the sound of the breath is high, tight, or wheezy in any way, it may be an indication that the breath is happening too high in the chest, or that there is tension in the throat.



EXERCISE #2

Make the mouth tall and narrow. Bring the fingers of one hand together and tuck the thumb in. Place the hand in the center of mouth and breathe in. A good breath in this exercise will be fast, loud, and long. After the inhale, form an embouchure and blow on the palm of the hand for various counts. Practice inhaling and exhaling for 1, 2, 3, and 4 counts (♩ = 80).



AIR SUPPORT

Once you have the solid foundation of a good breath, playing with proper air support comes incredibly naturally. As with breathing, good air support comes from your stomach.

- ◉ Your abdominal muscles should remain constantly firm as you blow air through your instrument. To simulate this, take the instrument out of your mouth and yell something.



EXERCISE #3

Imagine your hands are cold and blow on them to warm them up. Now, imagine that you have a spoonful of hot soup that you need to cool down quickly. This exercise immediately shows the physical difference between “hot” and “cold” air.

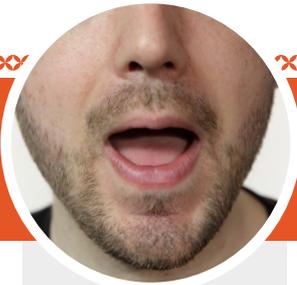
- ◉ Remember that you need to get your air stream all the way **through** your instrument, not just **to** it. Imagine pushing your air through your instrument and out the bell as you play.

CLARINET EMOUCHURE

The embouchure (the way the lips are formed on the mouthpiece), in combination with a supported air column, is the foundation of a good sound.

First, practice making the embouchure away from the clarinet using a mirror. Then, practice keeping the embouchure completely steady while playing.

Follow these steps when building the embouchure:



LIPS

- 1 Roll the bottom lip over the bottom teeth and keep the lip firm.
 - Avoid taking too much bottom lip, which can result in a dull sound.
 - The top lip should stretch against the top teeth.



INCORRECT
Too much bottom lip



CHIN

- 2 The chin should be long and flat. To achieve the correct position, imagine there's a string attached to the bottom of your chin that's being pulled down toward the floor. You can also think of "pointing" your chin toward the floor.
 - Avoid bunching the chin, which makes the sound less focused.
- 3 Slide the mouthpiece in the mouth along the bottom lip while maintaining the firm bottom lip and long, flat chin.
- 4 Take a deep breath through parted lips.



CORNERS

- 5 Bring the corners of the mouth in toward the mouthpiece and make them firm. The lips should gently hug the mouthpiece.
 - Avoid "smiling" as you play (having the corners of your mouth turned upwards).



CHEEKS

- 6 Be careful not to puff the cheeks. Keep them flat and direct the air forward through the embouchure.
 - Keep the corners in and chin pointed at all times when playing.

TEACHER TIP
Students often don't take enough mouthpiece. Taking more mouthpiece is a quick remedy for a small, pinched sound. To determine how much mouthpiece a student should take, drop a piece of paper between the mouthpiece and the reed. The contact point where the paper naturally stops is where the bottom lip should be placed. Cut a mouthpiece patch in half or move it further down the mouthpiece as a tactile reminder of how much mouthpiece to take.

TEACHER TIP
Have students produce a sound only on the mouthpiece and barrel together. The proper embouchure and tongue position will produce a concert F#. Make sure the tone is centered and doesn't waver and the embouchure and tongue don't move.

CLARINET ARTICULATION

ARTICULATION STEPS

- 1 Form the embouchure.
[Review the Embouchure sheet for more information]
- 2 Insert the mouthpiece by sliding it against the firm lower lip. 
- 3 Breathe with the lips parted while maintaining a firm bottom lip and pointed chin. [Review the Breathing/Air Support sheet for more information]
- 4 Place the top of the tip of the tongue lightly on the reed, just below the tip. 
- 5 Build up the air behind the reed (there will be no sound).
- 6 Release the tongue from the reed to start the sound, moving it quickly but keeping it close to the reed (use syllable “dee” or “tee”). Be sure to keep the corners in and chin pointed and firm at all times.
- 7 Place the tongue back on the reed after the duration of the note, but keep the air stream constant.



EXERCISE #1

tongue: on reed - off - on
air 

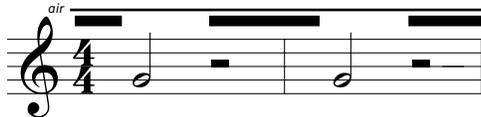
Practice making an attack on an “open G.” The sound is produced by releasing the tongue from the reed.



EXERCISE #2

Place the tongue back on the reed during the rests. Be sure the air pressure is constant at all times.

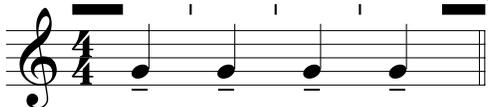
tongue: on reed off on off on
air 



EXERCISE #3

In this example, the end of each quarter note essentially becomes the beginning of the next quarter note. “Flick” the tongue while keeping the air constant. Keep the tongue close to the reed and work for a smooth legato quality.

tongue: on reed off on off on off on off on
air 



Basic Rules of Articulation:

- Keep the tongue close to the reed, relaxed, and light at all times.
- The back and middle of the tongue should be arched and relaxed. Use an “ee” vowel for ideal tongue position.
- Only the front portion of the tongue moves when articulating. The motion of the tongue is up and down, not back and forth.

CLARINET HAND & FINGER PLACEMENT

HAND & FINGER RULES

Fingers should be gently curved and relaxed at all times.

- Avoid collapsing the first joint of each finger, which should just be gently bent.



CORRECT

INCORRECT

- Avoid resting the right hand index finger underneath the side Eb/Bb key to support the instrument.
- A neck strap can be used to support the weight of the clarinet, if the student is struggling with holding the instrument.



Keep fingers close to the keys and tone holes when not in use.

- Fingers that are too far away from the keys inhibit good technique.
- When not in use, the pinkies should rest on the pinky keys. “Home base” for the right pinky is typically the F/C key and “home base” for the left pinky is typically the E/B key.
- Lift from the back knuckle, keeping each finger curved. Avoid straightening or lifting the fingers too far away from the clarinet. Be sure to not keep the fingers too close to the clarinet, which will cause flatness in pitch.



CORRECT

INCORRECT

Cover each tone hole completely, but keep finger pressure light.

- Use the pad part of the finger, not the tip.



Correct Hand Positions:



RIGHT HAND

LEFT HAND

BACK

- Keep left hand thumb on a slight angle (30°).
- Left hand first finger should rest on the side G#/A♭ key.
- Left hand position should be gently angled.

CLARINET WARM-UPS

A daily warm-up plays an important role in improving tone, technique, and articulation.

Remember that a warm-up is not a time to worry about impressing anyone, but rather an opportunity to listen and focus on the fundamentals of playing the clarinet.

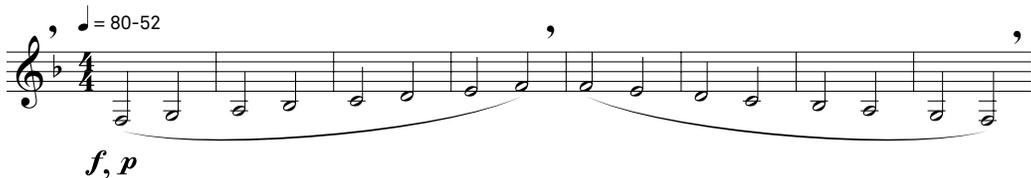
Be sure to have a metronome and tuner on hand for warm-ups.

LONG TONES

Warm up the embouchure and air column first. Focus on keeping the air low and continuously supported and the embouchure firm and stable. Listen for good connections, even volume, and matching quality from note to note. Start the first note of the first and fifth measures with the tongue.

Be sure to breathe only where marked. Push yourself by gradually lowering the speed, forcing yourself to go longer and longer between breaths.

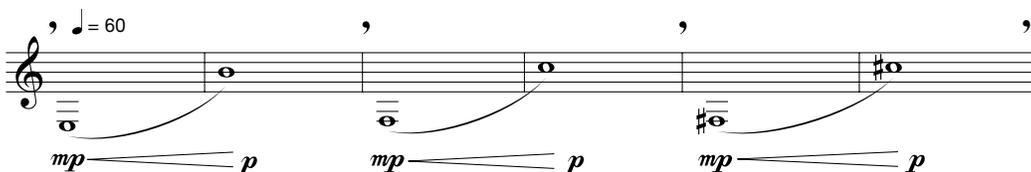
This exercise can be done in various keys.



REGISTER LEAPS

An exercise based around register leaps is a great addition to any clarinetist's warm-up.

Work for a clean connection and clear, focused sound on both notes. Maintain air support and a firm embouchure.



SCALES AND ARTICULATION

Scales are a vital tool for every musician. Younger students can play through two to four major scales (in one or two octaves) each day. Older students can incorporate minor scales and/or extend the range to two to three octaves per scale. Scales can be slurred or articulated in various patterns, as seen below.



A warm-up routine doesn't need to be set in stone – it can change depending on problems you've recently noticed in your playing, difficult music you're working on in band, etc. If something is giving you a lot of trouble, design a warm-up exercise around it. If you make the effort to incorporate it into your daily practicing, you will see results!