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Bassoon Troubleshooting

By [Elizabeth Rusch Fetters](#)

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“Sharpness is frequently caused by squeezing or pinching the reed. A good bassoon embouchure is best described as making a gentle cushion with the lips – with no teeth, pressure, or squeezing.”

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Young bassoon students face some common difficulties. Here are possible solutions.

A student has trouble keeping the seat strap on the seat. Students may not have the strap under the thighs or may be sitting improperly. Bassoonists should sit with their hips all the way back in the chair and feet flat on the floor. The bassoon seat strap should go under the thighs, right behind the knees. Young or small students can use both a seat strap and a neck strap at the same time until they learn how to balance the instrument or grow enough that their weight holds the instrument in place.

A bassoonist is playing flat. This is good news; a bassoon student playing flat has the right embouchure and mouth shape but is not using enough air. Extremely flat students may need a different bocal. The higher the number, the longer the bocal; if a student is flat on a 3, switch him to a 2. It is also possible the student is using a reed that is too old.

A bassoonist is playing sharp. This is a more serious problem. Sharpness is frequently caused by squeezing or pinching the reed with the mouth or lips. A good bassoon embouchure is best described as making a gentle cushion with the lips – with no teeth, pressure, or squeezing. Another possibility is that students have too much reed in the mouth. A student should be able to fit the tip of his little finger between their top lip and the first wire on the reed. Also, switching to a higher-numbered bocal may help as well; a 0 or a 1 bocal is typically too short for most bassoonists.

A student is having difficulty playing low notes. Similar to sharpness, this can be caused by squeezing the reed. Students may not have all the tone holes covered. Check fingerings and have students work their way down to the note, one finger at a time. Have the bassoon checked for leaks, especially in the boot joint. To check the boot joint, place the large end on your cheek, cover the open tone holes and close all the pads, and suck the air out of the smaller end. If it holds a seal, it's not leaking. The boot joint on old bassoons is most likely to sprout leaks – the largest pads of the instrument are there and they can easily become loose. The boot joint on wooden instruments is also the perfect location for dry rot or cracks. In addition, there is a small U-shaped tube in the bottom

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A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL BASSOON PLAYERS

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that is sealed with cork but can spring a leak.

A student is having difficulty playing high notes. The student may not be releasing the whisper key or using the correct half hole. Check the fingering to see if the whisper key, or a half hole is used. It is also possible a student is simply not moving air fast enough. Have students think of the syllable ee while they tongue.

No sound is coming out at all. First check the reed. It should be thoroughly soaked, but not water-logged. Check to make sure that there is an opening between the two reed blades. A very old or cracked reed may be so damaged that it will not vibrate. There may also be something stuck in the bocal. Clean the bocal with very hot water, a drop of dish soap, and a long pipe cleaner or bocal brush and watch what comes out. There may be something stuck in the bassoon, in which case the instrument may need to be taken in for repairs.

The instrument squeaks when played. This may also be the fault of the reed; check for the same things you would if there was no sound coming out at all. The student may not be covering the holes entirely, which can cause the air to break in an odd place. This frequently happens to very young students. The student may also be accidentally hitting a flick key (above the whisper key). Check the fingering and hand position.

Articulations are unclear. The part of the tongue immediately behind the tip (“to, to” or “do, do”) must contact both blades of the reed for a clear articulation. Students may be trying to tongue around the reed rather than on it – or might not be tonguing at all.



Elizabeth Rusch Fetters



Elizabeth Rusch Fetters teaches sixth grade general music and chorus for Harford County Public Schools in Bel Air, Maryland. She has been teaching bassoon and oboe privately for more than five years. She earned a master of music degree in bassoon performance from Kent State University and a bachelor of music degree from Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

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