

Top 10 (+) Things That Beginning Clarinet Players Do Wrong and How to Correct Them

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Preface

1. Why did I develop this clinic? A couple of years ago I worked with a student teacher who played oboe, but was faced with teaching beginning clarinet class in his first teaching assignment. He asked for a couple of lessons, and as I worked with him, I realized that things that were obvious to me were “revelations” to him. So I decided to organize some ideas and share. Hopefully you will find at least one new idea, or at least confirm some things that you already do.

2. So what makes me such an “expert?” - Been there, done it, many times. I have done the same things you do year after year, just probably a few more years! And I have had successful results with many, many students.

3. What teaching materials do I use? I accidentally wrote a book. I never found a beginning band book that contained everything that I felt my beginning students needed, so I have developed my own. What started out as supplemental pages in a folder has now been compiled into my own clarinet book for my beginning students. I mention it here because this clinic has reference to “what I use.” It is currently in very limited publication, but I can make it available to you if you are interested. To view samples of the instructional materials I use, go to www.matteimusicervices.com and click on [For Clarinets Only](#).

Equipment Set Up

Mouthpiece	Try to eliminate all stock mouthpieces. Encourage quality student mouthpieces.																				
Ligature	<p>Try to eliminate all stock ligatures. A cloth ligature gives more control than a metal one. (As students advance, I like to move them to a metal ligature to open up the sound.)</p> <p>Make sure each student knows how his own ligature should go on the mouthpiece. Is it standard or inverted? One guideline is that the screws point to the right. BUT – it’s possible to point the screws to the right with the ligature upside down. Take time to check each one, and check several days in a row.</p> <p>Ligature placement is sometimes an overlooked detail. If it’s too high it will be hard to blow and sound stuffy. If it’s too low it may squeak.</p>																				
Reeds	<p>The strength reed used should be determined by the mouthpiece. A “3” is not the best choice for every student and every mouthpiece. The strength of the reed will vary with the tip opening and facing of the mouthpiece.</p> <p>IN GENERAL Larger tip opening = softer reed Longer facing = harder reed. All Reeds are not created equal.</p> <table border="1" style="margin-left: auto; margin-right: auto;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: left;"><i>Examples:</i></th> <th><i>Tip opening</i></th> <th><i>Vandoren Blue Box</i></th> <th><i>Mitchell Lurie or Rico</i></th> <th><i>Leblanc</i></th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Fobes Debut</td> <td>100</td> <td>3 - 3 ½</td> <td>3 ½ - 4</td> <td>Med – Med Hard</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Vandoren 5RV Lyre</td> <td>109</td> <td>2 ½ - 3</td> <td>3 - 3 ½</td> <td>Medium</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Vandoren B45</td> <td>119.5</td> <td>2 - 2 ½</td> <td>2 ½ - 3</td> <td>Medium Soft</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	<i>Examples:</i>	<i>Tip opening</i>	<i>Vandoren Blue Box</i>	<i>Mitchell Lurie or Rico</i>	<i>Leblanc</i>	Fobes Debut	100	3 - 3 ½	3 ½ - 4	Med – Med Hard	Vandoren 5RV Lyre	109	2 ½ - 3	3 - 3 ½	Medium	Vandoren B45	119.5	2 - 2 ½	2 ½ - 3	Medium Soft
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Reed placement	This is another often overlooked detail that needs daily attention. The tip of the reed should be perfectly centered with only a “sliver” of the mouthpiece showing above the reed. A reed that is too high, too low, or off center will be hard to blow and sound stuffy.																				

Visible Embouchure Problems

Corners	Sometimes not as firm as they look.
How much bottom lip over teeth?	Buzzing a “D” will give the right amount AND create firm corners and a flat chin.
How much mouthpiece in the mouth?	<p>Use the “paper trick” to guide students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insert paper between reed and mouthpiece until it stops. • Draw a line on reed at that point. • Place thumb on line as a guide for the correct amount of mouthpiece

Invisible Embouchure Problems
(These produce a flat, spread, or dull sound.)

Mouthpiece not pushed firmly against the top teeth	Hold mouthpiece and barrel using only the thumb and ring finger. Thumb pushes up, ring finger pushes down, and mouthpiece is “clicked” firmly against top teeth.
“Wimpy” top lip	Push top lip gently down against mouthpiece.
Bottom jaw too low/ open	Bring back teeth closer together. Only open them far enough to get a “baby” carrot between the teeth.
Tongue too low	Use the syllable “hee” to start air. Once tonguing begins, use the syllable “tee”. “Hah” and “tah” put the tongue too far down in the mouth.
Tongue too far back	Keep the tip of the tongue forward, toward the teeth. When tonguing, only the tip of the tongue should move, not the entire tongue.
Air speed too slow	“Fast air” “Warm air” “More air pressure” “Push the air to the bell”
Reed is too soft	Trim or replace

Other Embouchure/Air Speed Issues

No sound and no air is getting past the reed	Too little mouthpiece Reed too soft Too much pressure from bottom lip/teeth /jaw
No sound, but air is getting past the reed	Slow air speed Reed is too hard or placement on the mouthpiece is incorrect. (too high, too low, or off center) Ligature too high
Squawk (sounds like a duck call)	Too much mouthpiece Too much air – Use a STEADY stream of air, not a quick “blast” Too much lower lip over teeth Cheeks puffed Ligature too low
High squeal	Too little mouthpiece Bottom lip/teeth/jaw pushing up and closing reed
Fairly decent sound on mouthpiece and barrel, but pitch is sharp.	90% of the time – LEAVE IT ALONE! There are several student line mouthpieces/barrels that are pitched to A442. Unless the pitch is REALLY sharp, just have your students pull out when they start playing on the whole instrument if they are still sharp. If the pitch is excessively sharp, the student is probably biting. Try dropping the jaw, or a softer reed to encourage less pressure on the reed. *(Note played on the mouthpiece and barrel should be concert F sharp)

Other tips for embouchure development:

Spend a LONG time on mouthpiece and barrel before moving to clarinet. Revisit mouthpiece and barrel daily, even after you are playing on the entire instrument.

Start register slurs sooner than most beginning band books do. Students can begin doing this as soon as they can play low Bb and A. It’s impossible to play higher notes with a good sound and up to pitch if the embouchure is not fundamentally correct. It’s a good point of reference for both the student and teacher.

Tonguing

Warning!! Students can forget everything they ever knew about a good embouchure when they start tonguing! Precede tonguing practice with long tones.

This is part of the first page of tonguing that I use with my students. I start my students tonguing fairly early. BUT I precede and follow it with an abundance of long tone, mouthpiece and barrel practice. Establish correct tonguing on mouthpiece and barrel before moving to clarinet.

Now we're going to play shorter notes. You will start each note with your tongue.

Say the syllable "TEE". Feel where your tongue touches behind the teeth.

Do the same thing on the **mouthpiece and barrel**. Say the syllable "TEE" and touch the **top-of-the-tip-of-the-tongue** to the **top-of-the-tip-of-the-reed**. The tongue will interrupt the air stream, but it will not stop the air stream. This will create four shorter notes instead of one long one. Always maintain a good embouchure as you tongue.

<p>Correct use of air</p> <p style="text-align: center;">T T T T</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Air continues as you tongue</p>	<p>Incorrect use of air</p> <p style="text-align: center;">T T T T</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Air stops as you tongue</p>
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Play 4 quarter notes and start each note with your tongue. Use the syllable "TEE". The notes should touch each other. Be sure to use a fast air stream to create strong air pressure.

T T T T

Tonguing Problem	Cause(s)	Solution
Tongue is sluggish	Tongue is too far back in mouth, which results in moving the entire tongue	Keep tongue up and forward and move just the tip
"Thoo" sound	Tongue is touching too low on the reed	Top of the tip of the tongue to the top of the tip of the reed.
<p>To help diagnose problems with tongue placement, ask students two questions:</p> <p>1) "Where is your tongue touching the reed?"</p> <p>2) "What part of your tongue is touching the reed?"</p> <p>A verbal answer to these two questions will help them and you determine if they are tonguing correctly.</p>		
"Loo"	Tongue not touching firmly enough	"Point" the tongue to make it firmer
"Chewing" while tonguing	The embouchure is moving with the tongue	Go back to long tones.

Additional Tonguing Tips:

Don't worry about starting the first note with the tongue at first. Add that later after the tongue learns what to do. BUT – don't wait too long, or the first note will always be "heee".

Play a whole note first, and then follow with 4 quarter notes. This establishes correct sound before the tongue is involved. Set metronome no faster than "66" at first.

Hand Position

Neck straps help solve all the issues below. There are 3 types: 1) Neck stretches, cord is stationary. 2) Neck is stationary, cord stretches. Either of these works well. The third type is all stretchy. This one is not as effective as the other two.

Areas of Concern	Comments
Right thumb slides too far under thumb rest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The goal is for the right hand to form a “c” shape, or as close as possible. • For most students, never slide the thumb past the first knuckle. • Make sure an adjustable thumb rest is in the top most position. • For students with very small hands, or those without an adjustable thumb rest, place the thumb on top of the thumb rest.
Left thumb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thumb should point at an angle between the register key and the post. • MANY students place the thumb on the body of the instrument when playing F#, G, and A. • Thumb moves too far from tone hole on F#, G, and A.
Right index finger hooks under the Eb key.	<p>This happens in an attempt to balance the instrument. NECK STRAP!</p>
Flying or curling fingers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finger drills. Move one finger at a time (ex. C to Bb). Then 2 at once (ex. C to A). • Emphasize “press, release” • Fingers not being used should HOVER over their home keys, especially pinkies.
Left index finger lifts when moving to the “A” key.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roll it. Touch A key with side of the knuckle closest to the finger tip. • Drill, drill, drill • Also work on right hand down for A, Bb, and possibly G.

This instructional sequence will help develop skills in an order which builds on each previous skill. I find it to be very successful in preparing students for going over the break, for reading the upper notes, and for learning enharmonic tones and alternate fingerings.

Early development
of right hand

1. 

Use register slurs before students actually see what they are playing, then use them to help learn the upper notes.

2. 

3.  Teach upper notes just like the first notes were taught. Start with 5 notes.

Slurs from above the break to below it proceed going OVER the break. Emphasize use of right hand down.

4. 

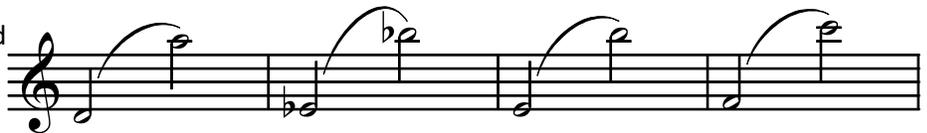
Teach going over the break with different fingering combinations. It's not always A, B, C!

5. 

Introduce chromatic scales in segments. Learn fingers for sharps and flats and teach enharmonic tones at this time.

6. 

7. These register slurs should be played before they are read.



8. Practice reading these upper note and learn the next segment of the chromatic scale.



9. Practice altissimo slurs before reading.

Add the last segment of the chromatic scale.

