

Clarinet Embouchure Refresher Course



This picture is one of my favorites. I've used it numerous times as a game for students to find everything that is **WRONG!** It's actually the cover to a really good ensemble book. I will just never know why-oh-why they used that picture! But we all know that you're probably going to see a lot of that in just a few weeks - especially this year.




Remediating beginners after the summer off is a daunting, but extremely important task. And when that summer has lasted 5 months (and counting!)???? Anyone trying to provide music education without seeing students in person has got to be a super hero. But no matter how “super” you are, things probably went backwards, right?

I've compiled some information from several different workshops I've done for TMEA, university methods classes, and clarinet master classes that I hope will give you a place to start. I'm going to begin with embouchure and tone production, and in other posts I'll address hand position, articulation development, and reeds. There are other articles already on my website that deal extensively with crossing the break, so check those out, too.

Tone Development must be part of a daily practice, especially when those new 7th graders that didn't get to really finish beginners' band class. I'm a strong believer in long tones. Nearly every band book has something you can use, but you can always just play scales in whole notes @ 60 bpm. Practice low octave and upper octaves as they are learned. **FOCUS** on correct embouchure characteristics at this time.

The following are solutions to common embouchure/tone concerns that just don't seem to go away in young clarinet players. And when it comes time to reach those higher notes, (ledger line A and above) they are especially important. One of the best ways to diagnose and improve embouchure is to play register slurs. Don't even bother to read them right now. Just play them! The embouchure needed to play the high C is “**THE**” clarinet embouchure.

All the following ten issues usually result in a flat, dull, sometimes spread clarinet sound and the inability to reach the upper register notes. The solutions discussed will hopefully help you diagnose and improve the problems.

1. <i>Slow air speed</i> - Speed it up!	
2. <i>Reed is too soft</i> – Trim or replace (See my article about matching the correct reed to the mouthpiece)	
3. <i>Mouthpiece not pushed firmly against the top teeth</i> – Back to mouthpiece and barrel! Hold just the mouthpiece and barrel using only the thumb and ring finger. The thumb pushes up, ring finger pushes down, and the mouthpiece is “clicked” firmly against the top teeth.	
4. <i>Corners are too loose</i> . Firm the corners in toward the center of the embouchure. Occasionally a student will need to be told to pull the corners SLIGHTLY back in order to achieve the correct firmness.	
5. <i>Too much bottom lip over the teeth</i> . The bottom lip must simply form a cushion for the reed. Buzz a concert D to get a feel for how much lip should go over the teeth. Many clarinet students won't be able to buzz (that's why you put them on clarinet, right?) but <u>you</u> can buzz it and get a feel and look for what is optimum.	
6. <i>Too little mouthpiece in the mouth (or sometimes too much)</i> . The portion of the reed that does not touch the mouthpiece should be in the mouth. This will vary with different mouthpieces. Use this “paper trick” to determine how much reed should go past the bottom lip. Gently slide a piece of paper between the reed and mouthpiece until it stops. Draw a line on the reed at that point. Place your thumb on the line as a guide for the correct amount of mouthpiece. After a few days of doing that, most students will get the correct “feel” and do it correctly.	
7. <i>Back teeth that are too far apart</i> can cause too little pressure on the reed from the bottom lip, and the player will be flat or have a “spread” sound. Bring the back teeth closer together. This brings the jaw up and will put more pressure on the reed. You can use register slurs (up to leger line A, B, and C, or altissimo if you are brave) to test this. The pressure should be sufficient to produce the higher notes without producing a thin, constricted sound.	
8. <i>Tongue is too low in the mouth</i> . Use an EEE tongue rather than an AAHH tongue. This gets the tongue higher in the mouth. Upper notes won't happen if the tongue is too low.	
9. <i>If the top notes don't respond, the bottom teeth may be too far back</i> . (more common for students with an overbite.) Push the bottom teeth forward slightly. This also pushes the bottom jaw forward and puts more reed in the mouth and lets it vibrate more freely. Combine this with fast air speed to reach the higher notes.	
10. <i>There must also be sufficient pressure from the top lip</i> . It's difficult to tell if a student is using sufficient pressure from the top lip. Have the student put their finger against the top teeth and the push the finger down with the top lip. This will give a feel for the needed pressure.	