

# Switching to Oboe: Getting a Good Start

## How to teach Oboe Embouchure:

1. Discuss the qualities of a good embouchure BEFORE giving the student a reed
  - Protect the reed from the top and bottom teeth.
  - Funnel the air to the center of the mouth with your cheek muscles.
  - Hold the reed gently with the lips - too much pressure up/down causes sound to stop!
  - Blow straight ahead, across the reed. NOT DOWN.
  - Put the top 1/3 of the reed in the mouth.
2. How to teach embouchure:
  - Soak the reed in water for at least 30 seconds before trying to teach embouchure. Water should come up to the thread
  - Always hold the reed by the cork.
  - With student(s): inspect the reed first. Notice how tiny the opening is. If you squeeze with your lips the opening will be squashed and no sound will come out!
  - Before using the reed, practice blowing through a small aperture. Blow straight ahead without puffing the cheeks.
  - Next, add the reed: make sure to mention that if the reed is gripped too firmly the opening will be squashed and no air will come out.
  - Adjust the shape inside the mouth so the air is more funneled towards the tip of the reed by the inside of the cheeks. This will also help students avoid excessively tucked under lips.
3. Troubleshooting Embouchure
  - Pinky Check: This step helps students squeeze the reed less, it's especially helpful for single-reed players who are more likely to have a too-firm embouchure.
    - Make your embouchure on your pinky. Observe your mouth pressure and shape. Remember that you want to use even pressure around the circumference of your pinky (and the reed). Once you've achieved even pressure around your pinky, go back and make that same embouchure on your reed, then try playing again.
  - Air issues: It takes higher air pressure to create sound on oboe, but I suggest NOT using the words "higher air pressure" with students because they only hear the word pressure and then end up pressing on the reed. Work on producing a narrow, cold, fast airstream.
    - Work on a narrow, cold, fast airstream: Raise a hand in front of your face with the fingertips at eye level. Blow into your hand, shaping the airstream so it's hitting one tiny spot on your hand and feels cold. Try using this kind of airstream while playing on the reed.
  - Soaking issues (too wet or dry): There is a "Goldilocks" amount of time to soak the reed, and this changes based on humidity, temperature, and density of the cane used to make the reed. A good rule of thumb is to soak the reed for 30-60 seconds.

## Playing Position:

- Only the tip of the reed should enter the mouth. aim to be able to see 1/3-1/2 the reed outside the mouth. Students may use a mirror or selfie-cam to observe how much reed is going into their mouth.
- The head should sit neutrally on the shoulders while playing. Help students keep their head neutral by giving them something at eye level to look at as they play or raising the stand higher.
  - A subtle chin tuck is OK, but avoid playing with the head looking down or eyes looking at fingers.
- The oboe should balance between the upper lip/reed, right thumb/thumb rest, and left first finger/B key.
- The thumb rest should be lined up so the center of the thumb rest sits on the right thumb where the thumbnail meets the flesh of the thumb. This helps the right hand have clearance around the side key, and helps the right pinky reach the pinky keys properly.
- The left thumb may be at rest until needed. It should hop on and off the thumb octave key. If students need a left thumb anchor point, they may anchor their thumb below the thumb octave key.
- Ideally beginning oboists will play the the following first 7 notes to develop their confidence and basic air, embouchure, and playing position for a week prior to playing the D, Eb, F that most band methods use: C, B, A, G, F#, E, D.

### Troubleshooting:

- The student can't play below G or above C in the staff:
  - Check their right hand position. They may be pressing the side Ab key with the side of the right hand. Their thumb may be placed too far left under the thumb rest.
  - Check that the right first finger presses the F# key and keeps it down as they play. If this key doesn't stay down, they won't be able to play lower than G.
  - Provide the student with a thumb rest cover - often the odd right hand position is from discomfort of the thumb.
  - Try a neck strap. Most students will develop the thumb strength to hold the instrument properly over time, but may need assistance in holding the weight at first. This is an especially common need for students with small hands.
- The student struggles with thumb octave notes:
  - Most band method books introduce the thumb octave too early, so students learn to rely more on pressing the reed with the mouth to play in that range rather than use their airstream to support the note.
  - Check that their reed isn't too open, if the opening is bigger than 2mm, squeeze it gently closed with the fingers (while wet enough to play!) and try again.
  - Help the student explore using more intense air (playing louder) when playing higher notes. Squeezing inward towards the reed with the corners of the mouth and/or raising the back of the tongue a bit may help as well.

- There may be water in the octave key. You may or may not be able to see it under the pad, but you will be able to hear that it's there when the octave key notes gurgle or refuse to play in the correct octave.
  - Remove the top joint of the oboe from the instrument and swab it. Then, with a clean/dry piece of cigarette paper under the pad, blot the pad to absorb any standing water. Finally, move the cigarette paper to a dry spot under the pad and hold the top joint as if you're going to play: close the holes of the keys with the left hand and anchor the top joint on the fleshy part of the right thumb. Seal the lips over the top of the oboe and blow hard - as you blow, press the octave key to open and close the pad 3-4 times. Move the paper to a dry spot and repeat the blowing process until water stops coming out onto the paper.
  - Check all octave keys (thumb, side, and 3rd if applicable) - if one octave has water, it's likely that they all will.
- The student struggles with half hole notes:
  - Check that their first finger has fully uncovered the half hole AND that the half hole key is pressed down. Make sure students don't combine the thumb octave key and the half hole key.
  - Look in the half hole itself. You may find years of grime in the hole preventing air from coming out of the diamond. CAREFULLY use a pin to scrape out any debris. It is safe to clean the key and the inside of the hole with a tiny wad of paper towel doused in isopropyl alcohol.

## **Cleaning and Disassembly:**

- Start by putting the reeds away. A reed case is required - the plastic shipping container doesn't allow the reeds to dry out well and encourages mold growth.
- Make sure the swab doesn't have any knots, then drop the weight through the bell, shaking the oboe if the weight doesn't automatically drop through the top of the oboe. Pull the swab gently until you feel resistance, then pull it out through the bell.
  - Some swabs are small enough to go all the way through, but I encourage programs to invest in comically large swabs so they won't get stuck in the top joint! If the swab feels stuck, STOP PULLING and try to remove it from the other end.
  - Silk swabs are better than cotton: fewer fibers fall off and get stuck in tone holes to collect water. The best swabs are the big Yamaha brand ones that don't go through the whole oboe - this way there's no chance of getting the swab stuck!
- When disassembling, be careful not to allow the metal parts to touch each other to avoid bending keys.
- If the oboe came with tenon caps, those should be placed over the tenon corks. Their job is to hold the oboe firmly in the case so it doesn't bounce around.
  - Oboes that aren't held securely in the case are more likely to have their keys bend during transportation to/from school! You can add a piece of flannel/fleece over the case (an oboe blanket) to cases that aren't tight enough, and/or purchase new tenon caps.

## Oboe Reed Troubleshooting

1. Soaking problems: Soak reeds 30-60 seconds. Ensure that water covers the whole reed, and some of the thread.
  1. Under-soaking means the reed hasn't absorbed enough water to be flexible. An under-soaked reed can:
    - feel hard
    - sound very bright/not characteristic
    - play sharper than normal
    - can crack easily if mouth pressure is applied to it.
  2. Over-soaking makes the reed swell. This results in:
    - the reed feeling very hard/resistant
    - playing flatter than normal
    - the opening being super large and uncomfortable.
2. Age of reed: Student reeds last anywhere from 2-4 weeks, longer with proper care and storage. Students should break in reeds BEFORE using them in a lesson, rehearsal, or concert. Breaking in a new reed takes 3-4 30 minute practice sessions.
  1. CliReeds that are too old will:
    - Respond poorly (take a long time for sound to come out), and be hard to play during fast articulated passages,
    - Lack reliable intonation and full dynamic range.
  2. Reeds that are new will:
    - Feel hard/resistant until broken in.
    - Lack reliable intonation and full dynamic range (specifically soft will be hard)
3. Hardness: All new reeds are hard at first, they need to be broken in. Upgrading to a harder (and often more costly) reed is appropriate as students age and their playing skills advance.
  1. Students playing too-hard reeds tend to:
    - Play quite loud and struggle to play softly.
    - Use a lot of embouchure pressure.
    - Play flat.
  2. Students playing too-soft reeds tend to:
    - Struggle with playing loudly.
    - Use a lot of embouchure pressure.
    - Play sharp.
4. Storage: Always store reeds inside a reed case.
  - The tubes/boxes that reeds are shipped in are NOT adequate storage boxes. They don't allow moisture to evaporate, frequently break apart if dropped, and aren't made to withstand a lot of pressure.
  - In very dry climates or when the heat/AC is on a lot, I recommend keeping reed cases in a DIY humidification system. You can find a how-to document on creating a humidification system on my website!

## Reed Sources (Annotated)

Note: "Medium Soft" reeds are only for beginners/small statured students for the first 2-3 months of playing. Encourage students to develop their air by upgrading to "Medium" reeds around October

**Beginners** have played oboe for under 1.5 years, AND/OR haven't established a regular weekly practice schedule AND/OR do not play any other wind instrument. Some students who have been playing oboe throughout middle school may be considered beginners if they don't practice at home.

1. Chemical City Handmade Reed (Beginner/Middle School): Medium
  - These are consistent handmade reeds that my beginners have been having success with for the last year or so. They are typically easy enough for students to play them right out of the box, or with minor tip thinning which could be done with fine sandpaper.
  - These reeds are rarely out of stock, and the company is quite responsive to messages via email and/or Facebook.
  
2. Forrest Green Label Oboe Reed: Medium
  - These reeds are reliable, inexpensive, and play fairly in tune right out the box. The openings tend to get smaller over time, so these reeds are inappropriate after the first few years of playing when students will need a more reliable opening.
  - These are very popular, so they go out of stock around typical concert times: December, March, May.

**Intermediates** can play all their major scales fluently and without mistakes. They can play the full range of their instrument (low B/Bb to high D or Eb) easily. They are working on expanding their dynamic range without squeezing, and starting to incorporate vibrato.

1. Bocal Majority Intermediate Oboe Reed: 4, 5, 8, 9, 10
  - These reeds are made by oboists and checked for intonation before being sent out. They are generally consistent between batches and play mostly in tune right out of the box. They are harder, but provide a greater depth of tone quality because of the resistance.
  - These are very popular, so they go out of stock around concert times: December, March, May.
  
2. Chemical City Handmade Oboe Reed (Intermediate)
  - This line of reeds is also quite consistent. They tend to be easy-blowing, so perfect for middle school students and beginning high schoolers. Students should switch to a harder reed after 1-2 years of playing this reed.
  - They have been sold out around early December, so students should purchase in advance of typical concert times: December, March, May.

**Intermediate cont'd:**

3. Forrest Black Label Oboe Reed: Medium
  - These are a pretty reliable step-up reed from the Green Label. They are hand finished, and fairly consistent.
  - These are very popular, so they go out of stock around typical concert times: December, March, May.

**Advanced** students can play major and minor scales in different subdivisions fluently with few mistakes. They play up to high E or F with little difficulty, have full control of their dynamic range, and play in tune consistently once their reed is broken in and/or adjusted. They incorporate vibrato into their repertoire.

1. Reeds that I make and sell
  - My reeds are best suited to students who can adjust their own reeds. I prioritize response and stable intonation which requires a consistent and supported airstream.
  - Staple return discount available. Orders filled in 1-2 weeks.
2. Wildflower Reeds Oboe Reed: medium (Either Intermediate or Pro)
  - These reeds are quite consistent, and close to the reeds I make myself, so are easy for my students to adjust. They are made of high quality cane and have a longer useful lifespan. They have a lovely, consistent sound, and offer slightly more resistance than the Intermediate reeds listed above.
  - These reeds typically ship in 1-2 weeks but can be delayed or backordered around typical concert times: December, March, May.
3. Bocal Majority Intermediate Oboe Reed: 10, 11, 12, 13
  - These reeds are made by oboists and checked for intonation before being sent out. They are generally consistent between batches and play mostly in tune right out of the box. They are harder, and provide a greater depth of tone quality because of the resistance.
  - These are very popular, so they go out of stock around concert times: December, March, May.

**English horn reeds**

Generally students should purchase English horn reeds from the same maker they purchase oboe reeds from. Wildflower, Bocal Majority, and Forrests RSB reeds have performed well for my students.

## Beginning Oboe supply list

- 2 reeds
- Reed case (5-reed with humidifier, 3-reed fits in most cases, item U-15)
- Silk swab (large Yamaha swab or Hodge double-ended silk swab)
- Cork grease
- Reed soaking cup (1 for at home, 1 for at school)
- Opt: neck strap with leather adapter (item P-40), thumb-rest squishy

## Supplemental repertoire for beginning oboists

- Classic Festival Solos books 1 and 2
- Oboe Music to Enjoy by Vera Gray (living composer/educator)
- Learn to Play Oboe method book by MacBeth
- Fairground Fun solos by Rachel Broadbent (living oboist/composer) - I recommend the digital download option.

## Supplemental repertoire for intermediate oboists

- Concert and Contest Collection ed. by Voxman
- Gekeler Method Book One by Kenneth Gekeler
- Oboe Solos collection ed. by Jay Arnold
- 20 Character Pieces by Rachel Broadbent (living oboist/composer) - I recommend the digital download option.

## Additional Resources:

- Oboe 101 Newsletter: Biweekly newsletter written by Alli Gessner, on topics of playing and practicing oboe. Includes occasional download/printable resources.
- Oboe 101 Blog: Newsletters compiled into short blog posts. Great to send to parents/students on topics like Long vs Short scrape reeds, how to make a good recording, dynamics, intonation, and tone improvement.
- Switching to Oboe the Online Course: by Alli Gessner: provides 8 weeks of private instruction to help musicians learn to play oboe. Interactive video course, covers tone production, reed care and troubleshooting, simplifying parts for the beginner to play with a higher level ensemble, dynamics, intonation, and more! Free monthly office hour call with Alli available by appointment.
- Oboe for Everyone: Free online oboe resources covering basic techniques and connecting students to online private teachers. Faculty-student project from the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire
- The Oboe Path: Online learning community for educators and adult amateurs, with Canadian oboist and educator Erin Brophy