

Saxophone Embouchure Basics

by Dr. Bryan Utley, Stephen F. Austin State University

The saxophone embouchure must be thought of as “forward with downward pressure,” and not pulled back in any way. One of the main problems encountered with the embouchures of saxophone players at any level is a tightly pulled-back “smiling” formation with lots of pressure exerted by the lower teeth and jaw. This hinders the vibration of the reed, causing a thin, pinched tone, poor (often sharp) intonation and an ever-present “zing” in the sound created by the pressure of the lower teeth biting into the reed.

There are several facets of the saxophone embouchure that must be examined in order to ensure that you or your student is forming a satisfactory embouchure. Firstly, the embouchure must make contact with the mouthpiece at the point at which the reed and mouthpiece rails meet. This contact point can be found by inserting a piece of paper between the reed and mouthpiece. Push the paper downward until it comes to a comfortable stop; mark this with your thumb, pull the paper out, and form the embouchure at the point marked with your thumb. You will find most often, particularly on the bigger horns (tenor and baritone), that your students (or you!) have been taking too little mouthpiece in the mouth.

The corners of the embouchure should be focused inward, not pulled back in a smile. With inwardly focused corners, sufficient support is provided to the upper and lower lips so that they will not be too tense allowing for maximum vibration of the reed. Tightly drawn corners, as noted above, will hinder vibration of the reed possibly cutting it off completely and causing a pinched thin sound and poor intonation. A good mental picture for your students is to have them whistle, or to think of sucking a very thick milkshake through a straw.

Another consideration is that of an overbite or an under bite. For most of us, the natural alignment of our jaws is that of a slight overbite, particularly if we have had our teeth corrected by an orthodontist! A few of us have naturally occurring under bites. For purposes of playing the saxophone, we should strive for an even bite; that is, the jaw should be in complete alignment without an overbite or under bite. People with severe under bites may have trouble forming a correct embouchure.

A very bad habit that most students develop is biting into the lower lip with the lower teeth. Many think that the lower lip acts as a cushion into which your teeth can bite, and this again results in a hindrance in the vibration of the reed. The lower teeth should merely REST against the lip, not bite into it, and the chin muscles should be strong enough to support the lower lip (see exercises below) to prevent the lower teeth from biting into the lip. By the same token, the chin should not be bunched up but should remain in a firm but relaxed position.

There are a couple of good isometric exercises that can help to strengthen the embouchure muscles. The first begins by casually closing the jaw, allowing the bottom teeth and top teeth to merely make contact. It is very important to not clamp the jaw shut. Then push the upper and lower lips tightly against one another maintaining a straight line of the lips. Again, do not clamp the jaw shut! The chin muscles should be bunched as well. Hold this position for a set amount of time (5 seconds when you first start out, then increase to 10 seconds), rest, and repeat. The second exercise begins with the teeth together. Slowly open the jaw while keeping the lips closed. Open the jaw as far as you can while keeping the lips closed, hold this position again for a set amount of time, rest and repeat. Just like weight lifting, we are training muscles that are probably seldom-used, so take breaks often and don't overdo it. Happy exercising, but don't smile!

Dr. Brian R. Utley is Assistant Professor of Music at Stephen F. Austin State University where he teaches applied saxophone, sax-ophone chamber music, music theory, aural skills, and count-erpoint. The Owensboro, Ken-tucky native received the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in saxophone performance, with a minor in music theory, from Louisiana State University. He holds the Master of Music degree also from L.S.U. and the Bachelor of Music from Murray State University. Dr. Utley maintains an active performance schedule. Most recently, he participated in a series of concerts with the Stone Fort Wind Quintet, including a performance at the North American Saxophone Alliance 2002 Biennial Conference, held at the University of North Texas. In addition, Utley is co-founder of and soprano saxophonist with the Red Stick Saxophone Quartet, an award-winning ensemble that specializes in the performance of new music.

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