

# Playing the Trombone: The Primer

Walter Barrett, Hoff-Barthelson Music School

What most other wind instrumentalists refer to as “slurring” from one note to the next, trombonists call legato. This is because where a trumpet player can slur by just blowing and moving the valves, a trombonist must often make use of a light tonguing motion, called legato tonguing, to avoid “smearing” from one note to the next.

Trombone players often use the terms legato and slur to mean the same thing. Indeed, the goal for both is the same—play two or more notes with a seamless connection, and free of smears. In fact, trombonists have many options when it comes to playing slurs.

Most trombonists at one time or another have trouble executing a clean, singing legato. Beginners have the hardest time of it, due to

the fact that almost every method book on the market introduces slurs very early, before the young trombonist has developed the coordination necessary to achieve results gotten much more easily on other wind instruments.

There are five possible ways to slur on the trombone:

**Lip Slurs.** This is where the slide stays in one position, and the embouchure does the work, slurring either up to a new note, or down to one.

**Cross-Grain Slurs.** These are used when the slide is moved in the opposite direction from the new note. No tongue is needed, just a quick smooth slide motion and supporting air-stream.

**Tongued Slurs.** When the slide and the new note move in the same direction, the trombonist must lightly tongue (legato tongue) to avoid a smear from one note to the next.

This slur is the hardest one to coordinate.

**Valve Slurs.** Only possible with an F attachment, these work just like slurs for valved brasses.

**Glissando.** This is simply playing a note and moving the slide in or out, also called a

“smear.” No attempt is made to articulate any pitch after the first one, they just all run together.

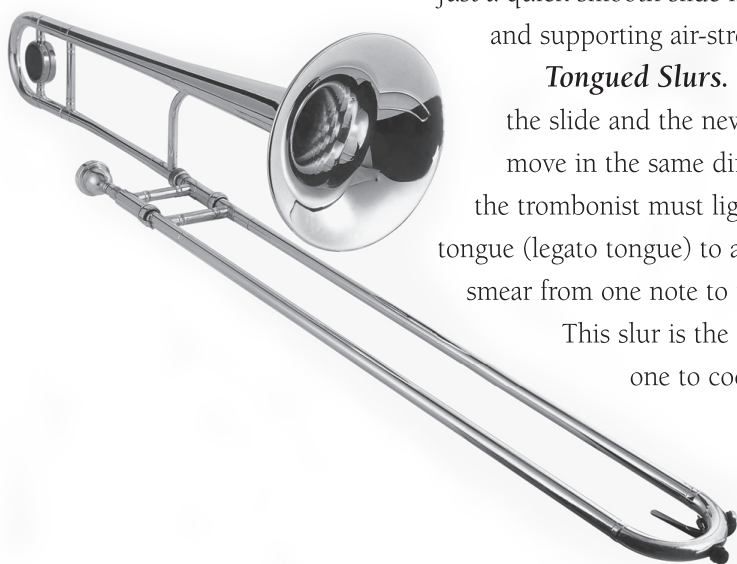
Of the five types of slurs, the first three are the most important in everyday playing. However, they are best learned in sequence, so that the beginning player builds upon a previously learned skill, rather than the

attempted mastery of three distinct elements at once.

**...real improvement comes when you have a live person giving you personal feedback on all the aspects of your playing. There is no substitute for studying privately with an accomplished player and teacher.**

## Three Steps to Better Slurring

The first step to a great legato is air! There needs to be a continuous, unbroken, smooth and plentiful supply of air from the beginning of the slur to the very end of the last note. The “Harmonic Series and Flexibility Studies” from Emory Remington’s *Warmup and Daily Routine* is excellent for lip slur practice. Try singing or buzzing the



## Playing the Trombone: The Primer

mouthpiece as a way to visualize that smooth airflow.

Once lip slurs feel and sound good, the next step is a smooth, fast slide motion. (No tonguing allowed yet!) Practicing cross grain slurs will help you to improve this technique. Keep the air going like you did with the lip slurs, only now we're adding the slide. Make sure that your slide is aligned and is a dent-free zone. It is very difficult to play smooth lines with a dented or dirty slide.

Check your hand position, and stop holding up the horn with your right hand, okay? Your left hand is for holding, your right as a way to visualize that smooth airflow.

Check your hand position, and stop holding up the horn with your right hand, okay? Your left hand is for holding, your right is for sliding! The slide has to move just as quickly going from 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> position as it does from 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> position. That takes a good bit of practice. Once you've mastered lip and cross grain slurs you're ready for the tongued slurs!

Tongued slurs use the air from lip slurs, and the fast slide from cross-grain slurs, with a wee bit of tongue (the third step) to disguise the slide change. That's a lot of balls to juggle all at once, but if you've put in the time, you won't have to think (so much) about the air and fast slide stuff, and you can contemplate your tongue. Here's the sequence of events:

You play the first note, and now it's time for the next note. Your tongue comes up to put a dent in that big fat stream of air, you move the slide and/or

change your lip for the next note, and then your tongue comes down out of the way. Timing, in legato and life, is everything! If you got it all right, you've slurred! HUZDAH! Watch out for too heavy a tongue stroke, try a syllable like "dah" or "lah" or "rah", and never stop the air! Just dent it.

Tongue with just your tongue, not your whole jaw. (Try this: Say "dah-dahdah". Now touch your finger to your chin and do it again. It moved, am I right? Keep your finger there, and do it without moving your jaw.) Some people prefer to tongue on cross grain slurs to make them match the other slurs; it wouldn't hurt to be able to do it both ways. Keep singing and buzzing to remind yourself how the air needs to flow. There are lots of good etude books out for working on legato; I like the ones by Reginald Fink, Alan Raph, and of course, Johannes Rochut.

### Some Words of Wisdom

Legato study should be part of your daily routine. I've been working on *Rochut Study #2* since I heard Charlie Vernon play it in 1983, and I'm still learning stuff from that one exercise!

And, as always, be sure to work with either your school music teacher or a private trombone teacher on slurring; real improvement comes when you have a live person giving you personal feedback on all the aspects of your playing. There is no substitute for studying privately with an accomplished player and teacher. You will improve much faster, and be a more solid player if you take just one lesson a week!

*Walter Barrett performs as a free-lance musician throughout the New York area on Alto, Tenor & Bass Trombones, Bass Trumpet, Euphonium, and Tuba. He is a Yamaha Performing Artist/Clinician, is on the faculty of Hoff-Barthelson Music School, and is listed in "Who's Who in American Music."*

*This article is part of the Yamaha Educator Series, Yamaha Corporation of America, [www.yamaha.com](http://www.yamaha.com).*