

Flute is Not a Four Letter Word

Tips for instruction in the classroom setting and beyond

Whether you are an experienced band director or a young teacher, you will benefit from reading these tips on flute pedagogy from **Helen Blackburn**. To print the complete handout from her TBA clinic, which includes several exercises and music examples, go to www.texasbandmasters.org, click on the *Resources tab/Publication Archives/Convention Handouts*.

FLUTE ASSEMBLY/ALIGNMENT

1. Align the outside edge of the embouchure hole with the outside edge of the first key on the body of the flute.
2. Align the rod of the foot joint with the middle of the last key on the body of the flute.
3. Be sure to pull the headjoint out a bit. (A nickel's thickness is a good starting point. Teach this to beginners from Day 1!)
4. Mark with FINGERNAIL POLISH!!!! (I promise this won't hurt your flute—this is one of the best things you can do for development of good tone and hand position! **Consistency** is a beautiful thing!)

HAND POSITION

Left Hand:

Rest the flute against the “fleshy” part of the first finger (between the base of the finger and the 1st knuckle.) Curve the remaining fingers and keep them hovering just above their respective keys (pinky, too!) Finally, push the wrist (or palm) gently towards the footjoint. (This will enable the ring finger to curve.)

Right Hand:

Shake your arm to relax, and then let the hand relax naturally at side of body. Raise hand so thumb and first finger form a natural “C” (as if holding a big orange.) Place thumb under the first finger or the 1st trill key. Curve fingers up and over the rods (so they form three “T”s with the rods.) Finally, align pads of fingers in center of keys.

GOOD HAND POSITION = GOOD TECHNIQUE

(Therefore, bad hand position = bad technique and often bad tone/intonation!)

Watch Out For the Following:

- Don't let fingers lop off over the edges of the keys.
- Don't let RH fingers rest on the rods.
- Keep fingers relaxed and curved (watch out for fingers bending backwards like “Bambi legs”.)
- Keep pinkies hovering just above their keys (don't let them stick up toward the ceiling.)

Highly recommended to reinforce good hand position: Runyon Non-Slip Flute Cushion (\$2.99 for two at www.fluteworld.com)

Teach the full range of the flute as early as possible. Practice with a tuner, but be sure to play a good sound, in tune—not an in-tune, bad sound.

POSTURE

Lift from ribcage (chest stays expanded on inhale and exhale.) Keep head balanced (balance a bean bag on top of head.) Turn head slightly to the left— point chin toward left elbow. Shoulders should be relaxed and down (watch out for left shoulder)...shrug shoulders to the ears, and then let them drop.

Easy Posture Exercise: Squat down, put elbows on knees, bring flute into position without moving elbows, then stand up and VOILA! Perfect flute position!

When seated, “stand while seated.”

Marching band position (with the flute parallel to the ground and right arm pulled back/left arm pulled across the body) is NOT a viable flute playing position! It's OK for the flute to droop a bit...and it should be a slightly “forward” instrument.

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SETTING UP THE EMOUCHURE

Suzuki-influenced Method:

Without the flute, spit an imaginary grain of rice (with tongue in lips—use a quarter note, half note rhythm: “hot dog”):

- a. down onto plate (low register)
- b. across table onto brother’s plate (middle register)
- c. over brother’s head at mom...all the way across the kitchen (high register)

Next, the teacher moves the headjoint in and out of position, then the student helps, and finally the student does this by himself. Teach low, middle, and high on the headjoint. Teach regular tongue NOW. (Tip of tongue touches roof of mouth—scratch the tip to sensitize it.)

Another Method of Teaching Embouchure:

First, place index finger in the dent of chin. Have student say “pure” and blow fast air on their finger. Then replace finger with the headjoint.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR (Good Things vs. Bad Things):

- Approx. 1/4-1/3 of embouchure hole covered by lower lip vs. Tight corners and lips (“smile” embouchure)
- Embouchure plate nestled in dent of chin vs. Embouchure plate sitting on red part of lower lip (too high)
- Corners relaxed (lips relaxed) vs. Embouchure hole almost totally covered by lower lip (rolled in too far)
- Inside edge of embouchure hole where the pink part of lip meets the chin vs. Clenched teeth, tight jaw

“But Helen! Isn’t ‘Kiss-n-roll’ a great and easy way to start the embouchure?!?!?”

The horror!!! “Kiss-n-roll” causes a thin, putrescent tone (big, rich tone is virtually impossible) AND it creates even worse intonation tendencies than usual! Please...DON’T EVER TEACH “Kiss-n-roll”!!!

Additional Embouchure Tips

- Drop jaw from hinge and glide forward and back to find the optimal position.
- Experiment with vowel shapes inside the mouth: “A, ah, E, eh, I, O, ooh, uh” to find optimal resonance.
- The wet part of the lip surrounds the air like 2 cushions (the lips cushion the air).
- Keep tongue relaxed (“AH”) and “down” (tongue should lie on the floor of the mouth like a blanket or rug).
- Keep jaw relaxed.
- AIM the airstream with upper lip (think of it as a beak). Aim down for low notes; more across for high notes (slide jaw forward, too).
- No stiff upper lip! Keep it supple & flexible... release it away from the top teeth so there is a cushion of air between the upper lip and teeth.
- Clarinet=Concrete; Flute=Jello



TONE

The basics of great tone are air speed (velocity), air volume, air direction, and size of aperture. To develop a great tone take a HUGE breath, open teeth up wide (1-2 finger widths) and drop jaw. Blow a super-fast airstream and blow down into the hole (use upper lip to aim air...think “beak”). Demonstrate air speed and direction by blowing on finger.

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Although flute requires a great deal of air, don't force too much air through the flute. Like Goldilocks you need just the right amount...not too much or too fast, not too little or too slow. Allow the air to flow unrestricted by the throat, the tongue, or the lips. Just use the lips to gently guide the fast, but unforced airstream.

Because of physical differences, not all flutists will look "right" in order to get their best sound (for example, a Cupid's bow almost always requires playing off to one side. If they sound good, but look funny—don't change anything! (If it ain't broke, don't fix it!)"

Watch and Listen for:

- Tense throat—often accompanied by throat noise. This is difficult to cure, but often is caused by too little air. Reinforce the idea of moving *lots* of air from the bottom of the lungs: freedom of air=freedom of tone. TENSION KILLS TONE!

- Flute drooping at angle not parallel to opening in lips—causes fuzzy, distorted sound.

- Common causes of thin, weak tone are poor support, too much embouchure hole covered, arched tongue, aperture too tight, and teeth clenched together. An unfocused tone is caused by embouchure hole too uncovered and/or aperture too big.

PLAYING HIGH AND LOW

To play low, keep teeth open and jaw relaxed. Aim the air more down into the hole (use upper lip "beak" to aim. Think "Ah". To play high, push lips forward (corners move forward toward from teeth). Aim air more across the embouchure hole. Think "Ooh".

The TWO BIGGEST NAUGHTY NO-NOS:

1. Never instruct students to pull corners of lips back (making embouchure tighter) to play higher. This makes 3rd octave thin, shrill, and extremely sharp—sometimes even causes lips to buzz.

Remember: push lips forward to play higher!

2. Don't try to make young players play softly in the 3rd octave. This causes the embouchure to tighten, air support to sag, teeth to clench, pitch to go even higher. Encourage them to play very strongly in the beginning! Control will come later.

Teach the full range of the flute as early as possible. A 3-octave chromatic scale (with all correct fingerings including lever Bb) should be attainable within the first year. The sooner the students are exposed to the lowest and highest notes, the easier it will be.

THE GREAT B-FLAT MYSTERY

There is no "RIGHT" or "WRONG" fingering for B-flat...it's a matter of efficiency! Teach all **three** (yes, three!) fingerings in the first year!!!

THUMB B-flat (TBb):

- Use **any time the key signature has 1 or more flats**. (exception: 6 or more flats: G-flat or C-flat Major)

- Do **not** use TBb in keys w/no flats or for the chromatic scale.

- DO NOT ROLL THUMB FROM Bb to B-natural (except in infrequent advanced passage)

LEVER B-flat (L):

- Introduce w/chromatic scale and B Major scale.

- Lever is almost **always** the best (most efficient) fingering for A#.

- Lever is great for G/B-flat/B-natural passages (& the enharmonic equivalent)

- Use for any chromatic scale or when B-natural and B-flat occur side by side.

ONE and ONE B-flat (1&1):

- 1&1 is great for F/B-flat/B-natural or any passage in which RH #1 is down preceding B-flat/B-natural.

- Use for any chromatic scale or when B-natural and B-flat occur side by side.

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IN GENERAL:

- **Thumb** should be on the **B-flat** side if key signature has **1-5 flats**.

- **Thumb** should be on the **B-natural** side if key signature doesn't have flats (or if the key sig. has 6+ flats.)

- I actually use

Thumb Bb and **Lever Bb**
MUCH more frequently than **1&1 Bb!!!**



INTONATION

CHECK FIRST:

1. Is the flute in good mechanical condition?
2. Is the headjoint cork nice and tight and in the right spot?
3. Is the headjoint lined up correctly?

TUNING:

1. Double check the cork setting.
2. Start with the headjoint pulled out about a nickel's thickness. (Pull out further for most "step-up" flutes which usually need to be pulled 2-3 times as far. This applies to all A-442 instruments.)
3. DO NOT TUNE BY ROLLING IN/ROLLING OUT or MOVING HEAD UP and DOWN!!!! This is the last resort!!!!...Instead, blow more down INTO the hole (to lower the pitch) or blow more across the hole (to raise the pitch.) (Aim by using upper lip & moving the jaw.)

NEVER, ever, EVER MOVE THE CORK IN THE HEADJOINT TO FIX PITCH PROBLEMS!!! This is treating the symptom, not the disease. Also, BE VERY WARY OF PULLING HEADJOINT TOO FAR!!! You will change the scale of the flute (again...you're

treating the symptom, not the disease). (Work on tone production problems instead!)

Flute placement on lip really, REALLY affects tone and intonation—the lower the better! Practice with a tuner, but be sure to play a good sound, in tune... not an in-tune, bad sound. If the flute is in good mechanical shape (no leaks, tight headjoint corks), and the headjoint is pulled-out properly and lined-up correctly: "In Tone=In Tune".

NATURAL PITCH TENDENCIES:

- Low register (low G-low C/B) – tends to be FLAT
- Middle C# – tends to be SHARP (learn to play in tune by adjusting the embouchure...adding right hand is a crutch)
- High register (E-flat-High C) – tends to be SHARP

MAINTENANCE

Unlike many other instruments, the flute is best maintained without any special oils, powders, salves, polishing cloths, etc. To clean inside I prefer a handkerchief (or other lint-free cloth) and the cleaning rod. To clean outside a clean, damp cloth is best (just barely wet with water—alcohol works well, too.) Fancy silver polishes aren't necessary. Liquid silver polish is NOT GOOD! Residue may gunk up mechanism and/or damage pads.

HEADJOINT TIPS:

(Once a month or so...)

- Clean embouchure hole w/toothpaste and a Q-tip.
- Rinse headjoint well with water (you may clean with a mild dish detergent.)
- Soak headjoint overnight in a sink full of water (Actually—only do this **in case of emergency**...it's MUCH better to replace the cork regularly...I know it sounds crazy, but it's a "band-aid" if the cork is loose and you can't get it in to the repair shop.)

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Teach students to check cork placement and condition from time to time—this affects not only intonation, but also TONE!!!

Teach students to practice “PREVENTIVE MAINTENANCE”:

- Take care not to grab keys when assembling/ disassembling flute.

- Rest flute with keys up (whether in lap, on table, etc.) Keys down causes bent rods and adjustment nightmares.

- Inspect flute for “fuzzy” or split pads. This is a sign that it is past time to have those pads replaced. (Usually it’s a sign that the other pads are soon to follow, so a full repad may be in order.)

- Encourage students to take flute to the shop at least once a year for a “check-up”. Leaks and adjustment problems often happen gradually and the student compensates by pressing harder and harder, which develops bad technique, hand position, etc.

You’ll be AMAZED by the number of “tone, intonation, and technical problems” that are MIRACULOUSLY CURED when the flute is in perfect condition!!!

NAUGHTY NO-NOS:

- Do not use Vaseline, cork grease, slide oil, or anything like this to make joints fit together more easily! Clean the tenons (connecting joints) with a damp cloth until they are “sparkling” and have no black or green residue. If there is still a problem, take it to the repair shop. (The residue from lubricating materials will end up on the pads and cause them to have a shortened lifespan.)

- Rubbing the joints with pencil lead isn’t advised, either—if the joints are clean they should work smoothly.

- Do not use any kind of powder on pads to prevent stickiness! This only gums up the pads and makes things worse! If you’re desperate, use a piece of cigarette paper (or a dollar bill if you’re really desperate) and tap (don’t drag) to clean the pad. But use this method as infrequently as possible since it causes the pads to wear out faster.

Highly recommended to cure sticky pads: Pad Juice (\$13 available through J.L. Smith: www.jlsmithco.com)

Helen Blackburn is the newly appointed Yvonne Franklin Endowed Chair, Artist Teacher of Flute at West Texas A & M University in Canyon, Texas. Ms. Blackburn is also principal flutist with the Dallas Opera Orchestra and a core member of the nationally acclaimed modern chamber music ensemble Voices of Change. In 2012, Helen was invited to serve as principal flute with the Dallas Chamber Symphony for their inaugural season. Ms. Blackburn has numerous credits with major performing arts organizations—both as a featured soloist and as a member—including the Breckenridge Music Festival (where she is currently principal flute), Aspen Music Festival, the South Bohemia Music Festival, the Dallas Chamber Orchestra, the Brevard Music Center, and the Chicago Civic Orchestra. She appears frequently in recitals across the country and in Europe as a soloist and also with her husband, Drew Lang, in their flute/marimba duo. A prize winner of the Myrna W. Brown Artist Competition, the Ft. Collins Young Artist Competition, and the Aspen Wind Concerto Competition, Ms. Blackburn has previously served on the faculties of Texas Christian University, University of North Texas, Stephen F. Austin State University and McMurry University. Ms. Blackburn received her bachelor of music degree (summa cum laude) from West Texas State University and her master of music degree from Northwestern University. Ms. Blackburn is also the founder and director of WT’s Big, Fat Flute Shindig (an interactive workshop for flutists of all ages and levels—beginners through adult amateurs and professionals) which is held at WTAMU each June. For more info: www.helenblackburn.com or hblackburn@wtamu.edu.