

# Eleven Thoughts on Beginning Clarinet

Dr. Connor O'Meara

With so many great resources on embouchure formation and clarinet basics, this article is meant to re-enforce traditional beginning clarinet pedagogy while offering different tools for fixing common problems with middle school clarinetists.



1. Exact reed placement matters! Always tip of the reed, tip of the mouthpiece. This is more about having a consistent reference point than anything else. As students advance, they can be introduced to playing the reed a little under the mouthpiece, however this is not suitable for day one—it often leads to students slowly playing the reed lower and lower each day as their perception of “a hair under the tip” turns into a significant gap under the tip of the mouthpiece.

2. Embouchure formation order:

1. T-Ooo embouchure shape.
2. Lower lip rolls over teeth
3. Open teeth slightly
4. Slide reed over lower lip
5. Gently angle barrel toward face allowing top of mouthpiece to rest against top teeth
6. Lips and corners hug the mouthpiece (never smile!)
7. Top lip gently pushes down on the mouthpiece

3. Keep that chin tall and flat! Students can always reference the shape of their embouchure with a mirror and also by using their right hand pressing on their lower chin. They should feel a flat surface that is stretched and firm against their lower jaw.

4. Mouthpiece and barrel sounds a concert F# in tune (or slightly sharp) at A=442. Tonal Energy/Tuner: Set to A=442. Most all beginner and intermediate clarinets come with short barrels, usually 64 millimeters long. This means that the instrument is designed to play sharper than a professional instrument which comes with a 66 millimeter barrel.

5. Students always reduce their air flow when starting to play with a tuner, causing the pitch to rise. Keep the air moving!

6. Start tonguing early! After students have successfully demonstrated assembly of mouthpiece, barrel, reed and have produced sounds, get them tonguing.

7. Clarinet is different than most other instruments with regard to articulation. The most common syllables used to start beginners with articulation are “Ta,” “Da,” “Ti,” and “De.” Of these four, “Ta” and “Da” are the least desirable and most often lead to the jaw moving while articulating on the clarinet in addition to excessive tongue movement at the back of the mouth. “Ti” and “De” are functional, but also have a tendency for students to associate these syllables with jaw movement. The ideal syllable for starting articulation on clarinet is “Ni,” similar to saying “knee.” Practice saying “Ni” yourself and note where the tongue touches inside of your mouth and what the back of the tongue feels like as you do so. Ideally, the tongue is touching the intersection between gum line and top front teeth while the back of the tongue is staying up and arched with little movement. Coincidentally, the tongue is contacting the gum line front teeth intersection precisely where the tip of the clarinet mouthpiece will be resting in a student’s mouth, with the back of the tongue staying high and arched preventing repeated articulated pitches from being scooped and increasing articulation speed.

8. When students are struggling with clean articulation, quite often too much of the tongue is moving. This is clearly visible when observing a student’s neck. A notable

## Eleven Thoughts on Beginning Clarinet

movement up and down can be seen just under the jaw and upper neck when a student moves too much of their tongue to articulate. One simple remedy is to have a student play repeated eighth notes on an open G while using their left hand to hold under the intersection of their jaw and neck to feel the excessive tongue movement. Students should quickly feel the excessive movement and work towards a “Ni” syllable articulation which employs movement from the tip of the tongue to contact the reed.

9. Keep reed strength low (soft) for as long as possible. Students retain stronger fundamentals over long breaks if they stay on soft reeds throughout beginner band than if they move up half way through the year. While we all value a good tone, always work first for how each student’s fundamentals LOOK and how they FEEL to the student. Sound is a byproduct of these two factors and contribute to long term success with less time spent fixing bad embouchure habits. Starting clarinets on #2 ½ reeds is ideal on a close facing mouthpiece such as the Vandoren M-15 or D’Addario XO.

10. For students on Vandoren M-13 Lyre/M-15 or D’Addario XO mouthpieces\*, staying with #3 reeds is perfectly acceptable for all of 7th grade and feasibly through 8th grade. Keep in mind that while stepping a student up to a more resistant reed may pay off in the short term with a more controlled sound, the long term may be detrimental.

*\*A brief note about these three listed mouthpieces: The Vandoren M-13 Lyre is pitched at A=440 and tunes well with most intermediate clarinets, however young players may struggle to play in tune on professional and step up instruments. This is particularly true with Buffet R-13 clarinets. Young players often play flat with this combination. The Vandoren M-15 (product code CM317) is pitched at A=442 with very similar playing characteristics to the M-13 Lyre but offers more flexibility with intonation. When choosing between the two Vandoren products, be aware that most of their products are offered in 2-3 different variations: Traditional, Profile 88 and 13 Series Profile 88. Only the Traditional and Profile 88 mouthpieces are pitched at A=442. The D’Addario XO mouthpiece has a similar feel to both the M-13 Lyre and M-15 but is pitched at A=441, a nice middle ground for keeping your clarinet section up to pitch regardless of what instruments they are playing.*

11. Embouchure muscles atrophy quickly! Those long winter and summer breaks will leave embouchures weaker at the start of the next semester. Students who have grown accustomed to buying harder reeds and playing into the psychology of harder reeds = better players likely to continue to buy harder reeds. Chances are, students will start out the next year on reeds that are too resistant for their embouchure strength. This is a prime culprit for why students who start with good embouchure fundamentals lose them each returning semester. It is also a prime culprit when students begin to bite or pinch on the reed and struggle fixing the habit.

*Dr. Connor O’Meara currently teaches a full studio of clarinet students from 6th grade through 12th grade in both Frisco ISD and Lewisville ISD. He primarily teaches at Wakeland High School and Killian Middle School. Since moving to North Texas, Dr. O’Meara has been an active member of the performance community. As a former member of the UNT Wind Symphony, he can be heard on over ten commercial recordings featuring the best of the wind ensemble repertoire as well as recordings for the Teaching Music Through Performance series. He has also performed with the San Angelo Symphony, the Allen Philharmonic, Odysseus Chamber Orchestra, Midland-Odessa Symphony Orchestra as well as a multitude of performances and regional tours with the Fort Worth Symphony. Dr. O’Meara has been a member of the Lone Star Wind Orchestra under the direction of Eugene Migliaro Corporon since 2013. Dr. O’Meara earned degrees from the University of Northern Colorado (BM), University of Texas at Austin (MM) and University of North Texas (DMA).*