

BEGINNING ALTO SAXOPHONE
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I. SELECTING YOUR SAXOPHONISTS

Saxophonists come in all shapes, sizes and colors, but there are some characteristics common to most successful saxophonists. Many band directors refrain from putting their “ringers” on saxophone, preferring to place them on other “more desirable” instruments. Saxophone is a distinct and useful voice in the literature played by most concert bands and demands intelligent, motivated and flexible individuals. Students who show good leadership potential, self-discipline, and sense of expression, tend to develop into good performers. When selecting these students always remain conscious of the size, needs and goals of your program. Take a few minutes to interview prospective students to get a feel for their reasons for choosing saxophone. As with any instrument, not all players will be superstars, but almost any student can experience a degree of success with the proper guidance and attitude.

- A. Possible Interview questions for beginning saxophonist.
 1. Why did you choose band?
 2. Why did you select the saxophone? (Be wary of the “It seems cool” answer)
 3. Do you know what the saxophone sounds like?
 4. Have you ever played a musical instrument or sung in a choir?

B. Use the 5% to 10% rule. 5% to 10% of your entire beginner class generally keeps the saxophone section healthy but not too large. In some cases this number may be larger as it relates to the needs of your total band program due to attrition and graduation.

II. PHYSICAL CONSIDERATION

A. FACIAL

1. LIPS – While lip size is not a major concern, students with full lips or very thin lips will need to make slight adjustments. Less bottom teeth coverage for full lips and more teeth coverage for thin lips. *See embouchure formation.*
2. TEETH – Tooth structure should not cause alarm when selecting young saxophonists.
 - a. The proper embouchure will aid in minimizing the effect of irregularities in the teeth.
 - b. Students with an under bite may experience some difficulty with the formation of the embouchure.
 - c. Orthodontic procedures can have a major effect on tone production and quality. (Tooth extraction, spacers, retainers, etc...) From the beginning be sure to talk with prospective students and parents about current and future procedures.

B. BODY – Body and hand size should be carefully considered when selecting young saxophonist.

1. Students with smaller frames tend to have difficulty maintaining proper body and hand position due to the size and weight of the instrument. These students often try to find resting places on their bodies for the instrument while playing.
2. Students with smaller hands will have difficulty creating a “Soft C” around the saxophone making it difficult to hold the instrument properly.
 - a. Students with larger hands may have difficulty with the feel of the palm and side keys.
 - b. Students with larger or longer frames tend to rest their arms and elbows on their thighs.

III. INSTRUMENT PARTS AND ASSEMBLY

A. THIS IS AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT PART OF DEVELOPING YOUNG SAXOPHONISTS, SINCE MANY BAD HABITS CAN BEGIN DUE TO INCORRECT ASSEMBLY.

1. Be very patient and model carefully when teaching instrument parts and assembly to young students. Teachers should demonstrate each step in the process several times.

B. PARTS – The saxophone consists of a body and neck, mouthpiece, ligature, reed, mouthpiece cap, and neck strap.

C. ASSEMBLY Always make sure the case is properly placed on the floor, not upside down, before opening.

1. Mouthpiece and neck. (Once a student has mastered the assembly process you may *then have them place the reed in the mouth, for soaking, while assembling the saxophone.*)
 - a. Gently push and twist the mouthpiece about ½ way onto the greased cork end of the neck with the lay (flat side) of the mouthpiece and the uncorked end of the neck facing down.

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- b. Slide the ligature onto the mouthpiece and slightly tighten the screws leaving enough space for the reed. (*Make sure the large end of the ligature slides on first*) The direction of the ligature screws is determined by the type of ligature you use: Traditional ligature screws are on the lay (bottom) side of the mouthpiece while inverted ligature screws, such as Rovner and Bonade, are on the top of the mouthpiece.
 - c. Carefully slide the reed, heel first, evenly onto the mouthpiece with the flat side of the reed against the lay of the mouthpiece. When aligned properly, the tip of the reed should be just under the tip of the mouthpiece. (*A hairline amount of black space should show just above the reed*) **NEVER ATTEMPT TO PUSH THE TIP OF THE REED INTO PLACE WITH THE FINGERS!!** You should be able to slide the reed into place with the thumb.
 - d. Tighten ligature screws just enough to hold the reed snugly in place. Place mouthpiece cap onto mouthpiece assembly for protection.
2. Adding the mouthpiece/neck assembly to the body of the instrument.
 - a. Place neck strap over neck
 - b. Remove instrument from case by the bell and place into lap. Attach neck strap to the ring on the back of the instrument.
 - c. While holding the top of the body, gently raise instrument with left hand, loosen set screw and gently push and twist mouthpiece/neck assembly into the top of the saxophone. Align the reinforced brace of the neck with the center of the saxophone body.

IV. PLAYING POSITION

Positioning the saxophone on the side or the front is probably the most debated aspect of beginning saxophone. A survey of band directors and saxophone resources revealed many different opinions. The “side until front is accessible” theory is advantageous for many reasons. Many embouchure problems can result from improper playing position. Deciding the starting playing position begins with the end result in mind. *The end being front playing position.*

***Tenor and baritone saxophones should only be played from side position.*

Remember, NATURAL POSTURE, NO TENSION

A. FRONT POSITION – The desired position for all players is front position.

Have students sit in a tall but natural position on the forward edge of the chair and with their feet flat on the floor. When sitting up tall a student should be able to see the ceiling and the floor without moving their head.

1. Allow the neck strap to hold the weight of the saxophone with the instrument between the legs. Use the thumbs to aid with stability but not to the extent of tension.

***As a general rule, if the key at the bottom rear of the saxophone (Low E-flat key) or the bottom of the saxophone clears the chair, then front playing is recommended.*

When the student’s body, neck strap adjustment and hands are correct, the mouthpiece should be even with the student’s mouth and easily placed into embouchure.

***BODY POSTURE SHOULD BE AS NATURAL AS POSSIBLE! FACE FORWARD TOWARD THE MUSIC STAND AND NEVER LOWER OR RAISE CHIN/HEAD.**

There are several issues regarding front playing and smaller body types.

1. The instrument will hang too low between the legs, causing an awkward, unnatural twist in the wrists. This makes it impossible to achieve tensionless hand position.
2. Students will rest arms and elbows on their thighs.
3. Students may stick the neck out forward and try to support the weight of the instrument with their hands instead of the neck strap.

A. SIDE POSITION – The side playing position is recommended for smaller body types until front position can be achieved correctly.

1. Have students sit in a tall but natural position on the forward edge of the chair and with their feet flat on the floor.
2. Allow the neck strap to hold the weight of the saxophone with the instrument on the right side of the body close to the thigh. Use the thumbs to aid with stability but not to the extent of tension.
3. Make sure the bottom of the saxophone is slightly forward toward knee to insure upright head and body position. Be careful not to go forward of the left hand.
4. Make sure the right wrist is not “cocked.”
5. When the student’s body, neck strap adjustment and hands are correct, the mouthpiece should be even with the student’s mouth and easily placed into embouchure.

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B. HAND POSITION – SAME FOR FRONT AND SIDE PLAYING POSITIONS

K.Y.F.C. – Keep your fingers close to the keys! The pad of the finger rests in the curve of the pearls of the keys.

1. LEFT HAND - The left hand should be at the top of the instrument creating a natural “Soft C” with the fingers to fit around the saxophone.
 - a. The left thumb should be placed on the thumb rest, pointed to the two o’clock position, with enough of the tip free to roll onto the octave key. Always keep the thumb on the thumb rest while playing.
 - b. The left index finger should roll back to play the front F key.
 - c. The left pinkie should rest on the G sharp key.
2. RIGHT HAND - The right hand should sit at the lower part of the instrument, creating a “Soft C” around the instrument with the thumb under the thumb rest.
 - a. Be sure the pad of the thumb is touching the back of the instrument and do not use the thumb to wrap around the instrument.
 - b. The thumb knuckle should never pass beyond the thumb rest.
 - c. The right pinkie should rest on the E-flat key. Rollers are for easy movement between C and E-flat keys without lifting.

BODY POSTRURE SHOULD BE AS NATURAL AS POSSIBLE! FACE FORWARD TOWARD THE MUSIC STAND AND NEVER LOWER OR RAISE THE HEAD OR TWIST THE INSTRUMENT. IF PLAYING POSITION IS CORRECT, THERE IS NO NEED TO TWIST MOUTHPIECE TO ACCOMMODATE THE PLAYER.

V. EMOUCHURE FORMATION

The proper embouchure is one that produces a beautiful singing tone quality while allowing flexibility for optimum intonation and use of vibrato. Most students play with the embouchure too tight creating a thin “tin like” tone quality. The following steps should help create a good embouchure. There is no “perfect embouchure.” When constructing an embouchure, understand that the look of the embouchure will differ from student to student relative to the facial characteristics and oral make up.

- A. The complete embouchure should resemble a “circle of muscle.” Often referred to as a drawstring or rubber band effect.
 1. Slightly separate the teeth and create an “OOH” shape with your mouth, allowing the lower lip to curl over the bottom teeth just enough to create a cushion.
 2. The top teeth should rest on the top of the mouthpiece, preferably even with the lower teeth.
 3. The top lip will rest on the top of the mouthpiece slightly firmer than a natural close. (About ½ of the top lip showing above the mouthpiece.)

IN A MIRROR THE EMOUCHURE SHOULD BE A SEMI – FLATTENED CIRCULAR SHAPE WITH THE LIPS RESEMBLING A DRAWSTRING AND THE CHIN CREATING A NATURAL POSITION. AVOID MAKING THE CHIN TOO FIRM OR FORCING A FLAT CHIN WHICH WILL RESULT IN A VERY TIGHT EMOUCHURE AND THIN BRIGHT TONE.

4. Insert the mouthpiece with about ½ inch of the top into the mouth. Close the lips around the mouthpiece keeping equal pressure on all sides and allowing the weight of the head to rest on the top of the mouthpiece.

THINK ½ INCH TOP AND ½ INCH BOTTOM AS A GOOD STARTING PLACE.

***Teacher should model this for the students and then have students practice with a small mirror on the music stand.*

B. BASIC EMOUCHURE FORMATION TECHNIQUES

1. Finger Press
 - a. Place index finger or index finger knuckle between front teeth where the teeth and gums meet.
 - b. Make an “OOH” shape with top lip slightly pressing down on finger or knuckle. This should create your “circle of muscle.”
 - c. Roll bottom lip back slightly over bottom teeth just enough to create a cushion for the reed.
 - d. While keeping teeth slightly separated, insert approximately ½ in. of the mouthpiece into the mouth.
 - e. Any adjustments of the embouchure formation will be determined by the facial characteristics/oral

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make-up of the player and the desired tone quality of the director.

2. Thumb Drawstring
 - a. Put about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch of the thumb in your mouth with the pad touching the top teeth.
 - b. Curl the bottom lip just over the bottom teeth. (More or less lip depending on size).
 - c. Have student suck the thumb. You will notice that the chin is in a natural to flat position, the cheeks are not puffy, and the lips are in the aforementioned drawstring circular pattern. Have the student simulate this with the mouthpiece and blow instead of sucking.

VI. BREATHING

- A. Good breathing habits and use of air will affect all aspects of tone quality.
 1. Breathe to the bottom of your seat.
 2. Try using the syllable "CO" or "OH" when inhaling.
 3. Always keep air stream steady and smooth.
 4. Shoulders and body should remain still when inhaling.
 5. Uneven air stream can result in pinched tone or spread tone.
 6. Encourage fast and steady air for optimum tone quality.
 7. Encourage breathing exercises as part of the daily routine. *EX. With a metronome at quarter note = 60 – 80, inhale 2 counts and exhale for 8 counts. Keep air stream even for the full 8 counts and do not puff the cheeks.*

VII. TONE PRODUCTION

- A. Tone production should begin with only the mouthpiece assembly. After the embouchure is formed, the student should begin with slow to fast air speed to produce the initial tone. This allows the student to be conscious of any irregularities in embouchure or facial issues, such as puffy cheeks. Once the initial tone production occurs use the following guidelines:
 1. Always use "OOH" or "DOOH" syllables. "DAH" syllables tend to open the air stream too much and lend more to an open unfocused tone.
 2. Inner mouth: The tongue should be slightly arched and the student should be able to feel the lower rear molars touching the side of the tongue.
 3. Squawky unfocused tone – too much mouthpiece.
 4. Little or no tone - not enough mouthpiece.
 5. The desired pitch for mouthpiece alone is – Concert A.
(Tenor – Concert G, Baritone – Concert D, Soprano Concert B or C)
 6. In most cases the pitch will be very high, usually due to tightness in the lips. To lower the pitch, the student should relax the embouchure slightly, while maintaining formation and equal pressure from all sides.
 7. After adding the instrument, second line G (Concert Bb is a good starting note)
- B. Modeling and Listening
 1. Students need good examples from which to learn.
 2. Play or provide good characteristic tone qualities and performance examples for students to model and develop.

CHECKING PROPER EMOUCHURE TENSION

Have the student finger second space A while the director depresses the octave key. (Don't allow them to see) If the upper register doesn't speak or is spread and unfocused, the embouchure is too loose. If only the upper register responds, even upon release, then the embouchure may be too tight, or the instrument may need adjustment.

When the proper embouchure formation and tension are applied, the entire range of the saxophone can be played, with the exception of higher notes, generally E and F. Notes higher than this, as well as palm key notes, will require a higher arch in the tongue similar to an EE syllable. If the lower end of the instrument is unplayable, without embouchure manipulation, then the student have the instrument checked for leaks or alignment issues.

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VIII. ARTICULATION

A. Saxophone articulation is simply an interruption or stop of the vibration of the reed. The tongue does not “attack” or press the reed to stop notes.

1. Think “DOOH” syllable to keep from getting a “thunk” sound.”
2. Inhale
3. Set embouchure
4. Allow the area just behind the tip of the tongue (Upper side) to touch the reed just below the tip (Actually the top of the flat side approx. 1/8-in. from the tip) and hold it there. Touching the tip of the tongue to the tip of the reed is an unnatural and improper motion. The motion of the tongue is a downward release from the reed not a forward “attack” to the reed.

****To find the correct articulation point, have the student say “TAHHH.” The point where the tongue touches the roof of the mouth just behind the gum line is the correct articulation point.***

5. Blow or build air pressure behind reed and release. This should produce an “unrefined” start of the tone.
6. If the tone seems to be uncontrolled or very thumpy and loud, practice playing the concert A on the mouthpiece while articulating.

Note: There should not be any motion in the facial muscles, chin or neck area while articulating. Air stream must remain constant while articulating.

B. TYPES OF ARTICULATION

1. Tongue Stop
 - a. Used for lifted or detached notes such as staccato. The air stream does not stop – only interrupted by tongue.
 - b. Remove tongue from the reed then place back at articulation point to stop the sound.
2. Air Stop
 - a. Desirable at the ends of phrases and long notes followed by rests. This creates a tapered effect at the end of the note.

IX. EQUIPMENT

There are many brands and models available to today’s students and they should purchase the highest quality instrument as possible for beginner players. There is no substitute for quality, well maintained equipment. **NO MATTER THE INSTRUMENT BRAND, ALWAYS BE SURE THE INSTRUMENT IS IN GOOD PLAYING CONDITION AND THAT THE STUDENTS HAVE GOOD REEDS AND A GOOD MOUTHPIECE.**

A. PREFERRED BEGINNING EQUIPMENT

1. Yamaha YAS –23. This instrument is extremely durable and has a nice tone quality. With the right mouthpiece, reeds, and ligature. A student will get a lot for their money.
2. Selmer C* or Larry Teal mouthpiece. Most “stock” mouthpieces are not going to give you the tone quality you desire. This mouthpiece gives you a nice round tone and is quite easy for the students to play.) If these mouthpieces are not available try to get a mouthpiece with a medium facing made for concert band. (*Rousseau, VanDoren V-54*) Always use a mouthpiece cap to protect the reed.
3. Selmer Ligature for C* mouthpiece, Rovner inverted ligature or Bonade inverted ligature.

** The Rovner gives a more even amount of reed coverage and provides a good seal between the mouthpiece and reed, and is very durable.*

4. Medium to medium soft reeds. Van Doren #3 reeds are preferred but 2 1/2 is acceptable until the embouchure is stronger. Other reeds: Hemke #3 or La Voz medium. The student should also invest in a reed case to help maximize reed life.
5. Always use a good clip end neck strap. A Hook end neck strap will release without students’ knowledge and the instrument could fall.

B. QUALITY DURABLE BEGINNING SAXOPHONES

1. The Selmer AS-300
2. Vito 7131 (This saxophone was once the same as the YAS-23 with a different lacquer.)

Band directors should talk with students and parents considering second hand, family owned or pawn shop purchased instruments. The instruments should be thoroughly checked by a director or music company before being purchased by a student.

C. CARE

1. Students should always assemble instrument with care on the floor.
2. Swab through instrument after each use to preserve pads. (*Lint free pad savers are a good idea*)
3. Never leave reed on mouthpiece after playing. This will cause the reeds to warp and lessen playability and reed life.

X. COMMON PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Most problems with young saxophonists are due to incorrect embouchure or incorrect playing position. Most problems can be corrected or alleviated with careful monitoring from director/instructor. The following is a list of typical problems and solutions facing first year students.

Problem: Spread unfocused tone – too much mouthpiece, loose embouchure, very open oral cavity.

Solution: Less mouthpiece ($\frac{1}{2}$ in. onto mouthpiece); check embouchure tension, use DOOH syllable.

Problem: Thin, small tone – too little mouthpiece, tight embouchure.

Solution: Check embouchure tension, use DOOH syllable.

Problem: Airy or stuffy tone: Reeds too hard; Tongue is blocking air stream.

Solution: Try softer reed (**NOT TOO SOFT!**) Work with mouthpiece alone to get desired pitch and muscle memory.

Problem: Slumping posture.

Solution: Good rule is to tell the students, “Never let one part of you body touch another part of your body.” This should alleviate many arm resting issues. Also, check to make sure neck strap is holding properly.

Problem: Forward bending head or lowering chin (Usually in side playing position)

Solution: Push right hand forward toward the knee. *Be careful not to push right hand forward of left hand.*

XI. GENERAL INFORMATION

A. Vibrato

Although a more advanced aspect of playing saxophone and essential to mature tone quality, it is important that students have a good understanding and production of characteristic tone quality before introduced to vibrato.

1. Basic Concepts (Starting on Second line G)
 - a. Jaw vibrato is preferred over air stream vibrato.
 - b. Lower jaw just to point where pitch is varied not lost or distorted.
 - c. Begin slowly with eighth-note or triplet pulses in a Ya-Ya-Ya-Ya or Wa-Wa-Wa-Wa type of motion.
 - d. Pitch should go: Flat — Even not Flat – Even – Sharp — Even.
 - e. Gradually increase tempo (60 – 100).

B. Intonation

1. The saxophone is tuned by pushing the mouthpiece in or pulling it out on the corked end of the neck.
2. To raise the pitch gently push in.
3. To lower the pitch gently pull out.
4. Tune to 5th line F- sharp (Concert A). Concert F is very sharp and will not give a good pith center for the instrument..
5. Have students place a mark to generalize where their pitch centers.
6. Students should be able to match pitch with the director and the band by the end of the first year.

C. Practice

Teach students patience and the importance of daily practice!

1. Many students tend to rush the development process and never develop a characteristic tone quality.
2. Muscle memory (facial) and finger memory (technique) can only develop through disciplined practice.

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FIRST YEAR GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS:

- 1. GOOD BASIC UNDERSTANDING AND PRODUCTION OF TONE QUALITY**
- 2. PROPER PLAYING POSITION**
- 3. KNOWLEDGE OF ALL STANDARD FINGERINGS**
- 4. DAILY PRACTICE ROUTINE**
- 5. BEGINNING VIBRATO STUDIES**
- 6. FULL RANGE CHROMATIC SCALE (Low B-flat – F)**