# Texas Bandmasters Association
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# Starting Beginner Saxes Off Right


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**SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS**

## Reed and Ligature Placement

1. Only touch the reed at the bottom of the reed and on the sides. NEVER TOUCH THE TIP!
2. Loosen the screws of the ligature (do not take them out).
3. Place the flat part of the reed on the flat part of the mouthpiece making certain that the reed lines up vertical and the tip of the mouthpiece and the tip of the reed are even. It's ok if the black line of the mouthpiece is visible over the top of the reed.
4. Once again, check to be sure the reed is on straight at the top as well as the bottom.
5. Very CAREFULLY move the ligature down just below the point where the reed changes texture and tighten the screw(s) until they are snug, not tight!

## Recommended Mouthpieces and Ligatures

Beginner – If cost is an issue, the Fobes Debut is a good "starter" mouthpiece and should be considered temporary at best. I encourage kids to invest in a mouthpiece early.

2nd year students and older – Selmer C* mouthpiece is still the preferred brand with a Rovner, or VanDoren Optimum, ligature.

## Recommended Reeds

Beginner – first day thru first few weeks: Rico Reserve 3 or VanDoren 2.5 or 3

As students gain control of their tone and start to overpower the reed, move them up to a stiffer reed.

Middle school – VanDoren 3 or 3 1/2

*NOTE: The days of "the harder the reed, the better the sound" are GONE. Be more concerned about the **quality of sound** and the **control** when playing full and soft dynamics in all ranges of the instrument. No students should have to struggle to get air into the horn.

## Hand Position

The saxophone hand position can be a challenge without hitting the side keys/palm keys if the student has small hands (this shouldn't be an issue if proper recruiting has been done).

1. The fingers should be relaxed and curved in the shape of a "fat C", or like gripping a baseball.

2. The left thumb should rest on the black button on the back of the saxophone with the tip of the thumb touching the octave key. The thumb should point toward the 1 o'clock position and move easily to push the octave key when the thumb is flexed.

3. The fat, fleshy part of the fingers will press the keys down with movement from the big joint of each finger. It is important that the hands stay open and relaxed so as not to rest on the palm keys and side keys.

*Watch for bad habits of collapsing the wrists inward and shifting the thumb up and down to operate the octave key. The thumb must remain on the black button and flex at the knuckle to open the octave key. Be sure students do not slide the right thumb too far under the thumb rest…this will cause them to bump the slide keys.

## Embouchure

I start from the very beginning having the students practice the saxophone embouchure by:

1. Saying the word "ooo".
2. Next, have them place their thumb in their mouth and push upward on the bottom of the front teeth.
3. Make a pillow using the bottom lip as a cushion over the ridge of the bottom teeth. You **should** be able to see the colored part of the bottom lip on both sides of the thumb. Do not allow the students to roll the lip in too far. The chin should not be bunched up.
4. Squeeze the corners of the mouth in toward the thumb.
5. Repeat the above EXACTLY using the mouthpiece and neck with the neck of the saxophone pointing down at a 45 degree angle (the pitch of the mouthpiece on the neck should be concert G#/Ab). The head should look straight ahead with muscles of the neck relaxed naturally.
6. The tongue stays down in the bottom of the mouth with the air coming over the tongue.
7. Air speed should be firm but not forced and moving at a consistent rate of speed…air with intensity, direction, and energy.

## Things to watch for:

1. Top teeth not touching the mouthpiece…they will have the top lip curved over the top of the mouthpiece aka double lip embouchure (ouch!).
2. Bottom teeth resting on the reed…the reed will chirp and the sound is edgy, metallic sounding.
3. Not enough mouthpiece in the mouth…thin tone or no tone due to the reed closing off.
4. Too much mouthpiece in the mouth…bright tone or chirping reed.

5. Corners pulled downward…corners should press inward toward the mouthpiece.
6. Puffed cheeks…if the corners are pressed inward the cheeks will not puff out.



7. Neck strap length…the neck strap should be adjusted so that the head is looking straight forward.

**Starting Notes with the Tongue: "TWO Taste Buds"**

1. Breathing exercises are a must for ALL musicians, and equally important is proper articulation/tongue placement. **Improper tongue placement and tongue stroke** will **destroy** tone **quality, response, and intonation.**
2. Start by having students:
    a. Place thumb in mouth exactly like when we first introduced the embouchure set up.
    b. Form the saxophone embouchure and move air.
    c. While moving the air, lightly touch the end of the thumb. IMPORTANT: Keep the air moving, the tongue should touch and rebound quickly as if touching something hot, the air moves continuously with no gaps in the air stream itself.
    d. Next, have students practice this same technique using only the mouthpiece and neck.
    e. Move air through the setup WITHOUT producing a sound! The air still moves continuously as the tongue quickly/lightly touches the reed at a point very near the end of the underside of the reed (tongue placement). You should be able to hear the separation of the notes even though a pitch is not produced.
3. The throat and back of the tongue should be soft/relaxed as the air moves across a relaxed tongue (tongue stroke).
4. Practice consistency on just the mouthpiece and neck. Start by articulating whole notes, then half notes, followed by quarter notes/eighth notes/sixteenth notes and any combination of all. Yes, it's OK to allow the students to move their tongue fast!
5. Lastly, have them increase the air pressure so a tone/sound is produced. In other words, blow air and tongue, increase air speed to produce a sound while tonguing.

**Things to watch/listen for:**

1. Throat tonguing (closing off/opening of the throat)…makes a coughing sound.
2. Anchor tonguing (using the middle of the tongue)…makes a thudding/popping sound.
3. "Hooing" (start/stop air to separate notes)…the air NEVER STOPS.

4. Up and down movement of the entire tongue (if the underside of the lower jaw is moving up and down, they are using their entire tongue to articulate)…have the student place their free hand against the underside of the lower jaw to feel for little or no movement).

5. Movement in the jaw. 3

*When proper tongue placement and proper tongue movement are present, the underside of the lower jaw WILL NOT MOVE.

**Producing a Sound:**

1. Start producing sound on just the mouthpiece and neck. The pitch should be CONCERT G# for alto sax; CONCERT E for tenor sax; CONCERT D# for Bari sax.

2. Use the Tonal Energy app, and project it so all can see, or individual tuners so the students can see the pitch they are producing.

3. If the pitch is flat...
   * Embouchure is too loose
   *Air is too slow
   *Jaw, throat or mouth too open
   *Too little mouthpiece in mouth

   If the pitch is sharp...
   *Embouchure is too tight.
   *Jaw/mouth/teeth may be too closed
   *Corners are not in toward mouthpiece

4. Next, do the same thing using just the mouthpiece… this is more difficult to maintain. The pitch on the mouthpiece should be CONCERT A for alto sax; CONCERT G for tenor sax; and CONCERT D for Bari sax. Do this daily!

5. Once every student can consistently produce a characteristic tone IN TUNE, start with the entire instrument put together and play B (3rd line)…again check intonation. Next, have the students start on a second line G. If it jumps to the upper octave at the beginning of the note, their jaw is too tight aka biting.

6. After this, I have them walk their fingers down to low D. This will also let you know if they are using too much pressure with their jaw aka biting.

7. If students continually use too much pressure with the jaw against the reed, I have been known to have them use a double lip embouchure…THIS will keep them from biting because it hurts! *Only do this to prove a point…do NOT let the kids play with a double lip embouchure!

**Voicing: The position of the middle of the tongue**

The tongue position is necessary for centering the tone.

*Lower the tongue gradually to the bottom of the mouth starting with G (2nd line) down to low Bb as if to say “toe”.

*For notes G# (2nd line) to G# (top of the staff), gradually raise the tongue as if to say “tah”

*For notes above A (above the staff), the middle of the tongue gradually arches as if to say “tee” 4

**Other Important Sax Skills:**

1. Left Hand Palm Keys (aka...knuckle keys) when playing notes that require the palm keys to be depressed, it will be necessary to lift the fingers *slightly* from the keys. When doing this, the student should still keep the fingers as close to their original position as possible so movement is minimum. If the left hand does not maintain the same curvature around the palm keys, the student will have difficulty maneuvering around the other palm keys:

a. 1st palm key is opened by depressing the palm slightly (first finger, big knuckle)

b. 2nd palm key with the second finger (big knuckle)

c. 3rd palm key with the third finger (big knuckle)

**Chromatic Fingerings and Bis Key Bb**

1. The chromatic scale should always be taught WITH CHROMATIC FINGERINGS… F to F#, A to A#/Bb, B to C.

2. Besides learning Bb as left hand 1&2 + bottom side key, it is important that students also learns the Bis Key Bb fingering (B key and the key beneath it both with the first finger at the same time) as soon as possible or as soon as chromatic is introduced. Bis Key Bb should be used when playing in FLAT KEYS. Insist that your students use both Bb fingerings in the appropriate keys! It will make technique much easier when playing in flat keys.

**Vibrato:**

Saxophonists use the jaw to create vibrato. Usually taught towards the end of the beginner year or whenever your beginners are preparing a solo. Make sure tone quality and embouchure are consistent before introducing.

1. Start by having the students lightly chew on their thumb.

2. Then have the them try it on the mouthpiece/neck. Saxophone vibrato is created by letting the sound go below pitch and then back up. Don't allow it to be too wide (go too low) but do start with a wide, deliberate vibrato. 5

3. Practice vibrato by pulsing slow eighth notes, increase the speed. Then pulse slow triplets, increase the speed. And finally, slow sixteenth notes. *Trust me, it will sound terrible at first until students learn to control the jaw…be patient!.

**Troubleshooting/Sax Hacks:**

1. G# sounds the same as G natural: all of the water drains to the G# area of the instrument so you have to reach down and pull up the G# key pad to unstick it. The G# key/pad is located right in the middle of the instrument.
2. Octave keep is not engaging: first check to see if the primary octave key is sealing correctly. Where's the primary octave key??? On the top of the neck. Check it by fingering a G w/the octave key pressed and going to an A w/the octave key pressed. If it is sealing properly, you will hear a pop in the pad on top of the neck as you go from G to A.
3. Octave key still not changing from high to low: check the secondary octave key…WHAT??? Yes, there is a secondary octave key that operates in conjunction with the primary octave key. Again try G to A w/octave key pressed. If it's sealing properly, look to see if the small pivot key at the top of the body of the saxophone (when looking from the backside, it's on the right side) is opening/closing.
4. Also check to see if a spring is off or no longer holds causing the key to not function properly.

**Follow Through:**

As in all things done well, consistency is the key! Demand these things of your students daily:

1. Enter the room quietly and quickly without talking
2. Come to their seat with materials for the day.
3. Remain on task the entire class period…no you cannot leave the class for any reason.

4. Students should not engage in conversation with each other or WITH THE TEACHER. When asking questions of the students, expect them to raise their hand and be recognized before responding. *STAY ON TASK.
5. Have consequences for misbehavior, not having the proper materials, coming in late, disruptions AND CARRY THE CONSEQUENCES OUT!
6. Be kind but firm. Demand but not demeaning. Threat all children the same.

REMEMBER: Make your classroom a SAFE PLACE for your kids. Love them and respect them, and they return that to you ten fold! 6

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:**

1. How do you determine who to put on saxophone?
2. Is the kind of neck strap the student has really that important?
3. How can you tell if the reed is too soft for the student? And when should they move to a harder reed?
4. What should your students be able to do by the end of the each reporting period?

**Recommended classroom materials:**

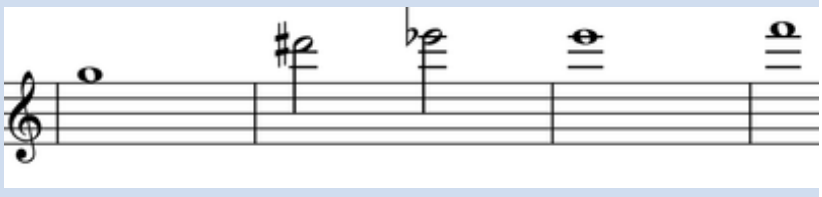
* Musical Mastery for Band by Asa Burk, Alicia DeSoto, Kathy Johnson, Chris Meredith, and Dominic Talanca. Available at MRNS MUSIC.

* Pacing for Success - Beginner Band by Darcy Vogt Williams. Available at www.AfterSectionals.com

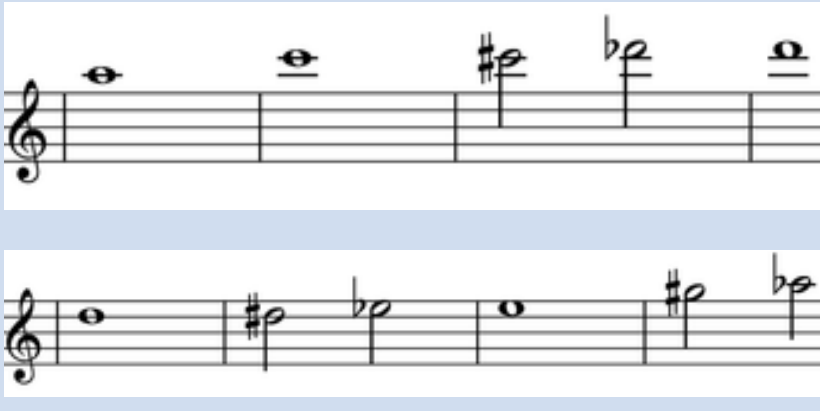
**Tuning Tendencies**

Here is a list of common naturally out-of-tune notes for the saxophone. These notes are the written notes for the instrument, not the sounding concert pitches:

Very Sharp

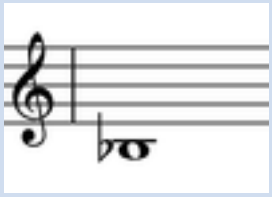


Moderately Sharp

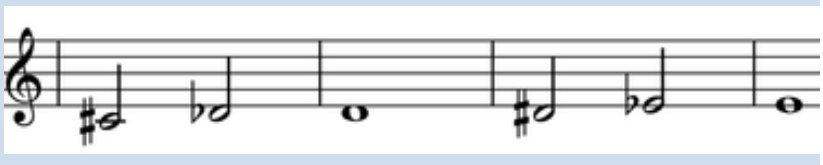




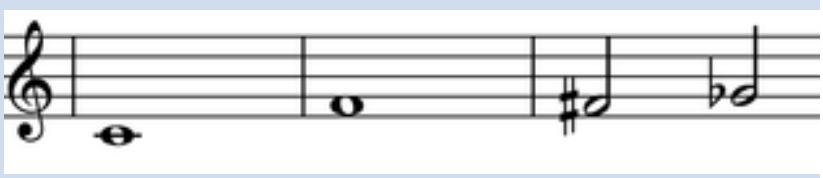
Slightly Sharp



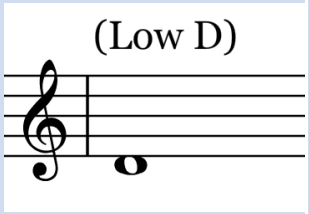
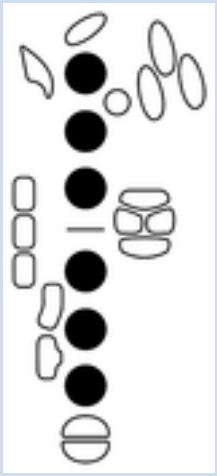
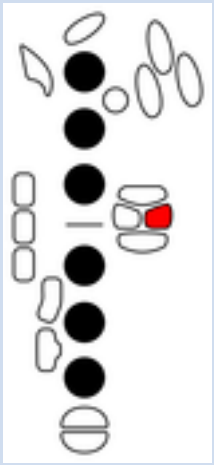
Moderately Flat



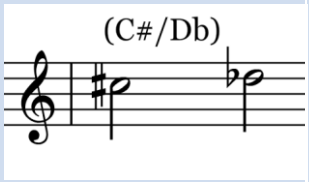
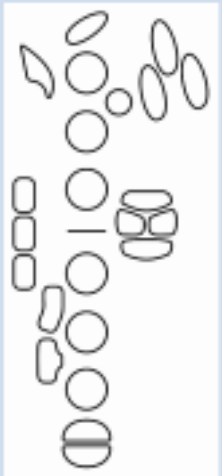
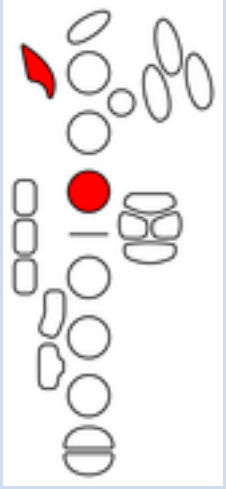
Slightly Flat



Listed below are **alternate fingerings** for many of the naturally out-of-tune notes on the alto saxophone. This is not a complete list, however, these fingerings will be helpful. You will find that many of the alternate fingerings will work for all of the saxophones (soprano, alto, tenor, baritone).

| Note | Primary Fingering | Alternate Fingering | |
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  | This note is moderately flat. Pressing the pinky C# key will raise the pitch slightly. Pressing this key will also raise D#/Eb. |



| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  | C# tends to be a flat note. Using this fingering will raise the pitch slightly. |

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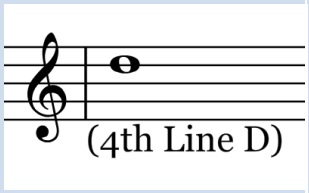
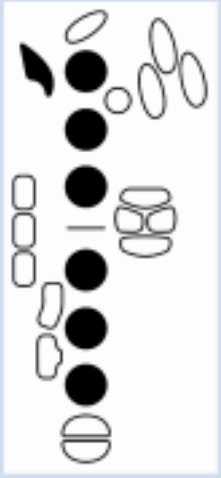
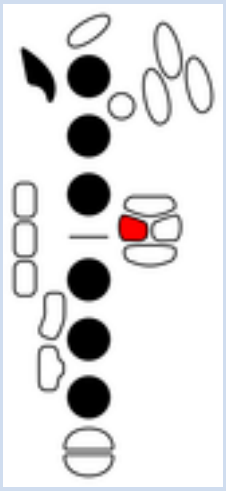
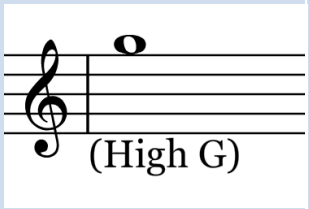
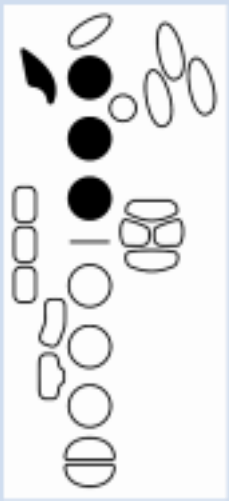
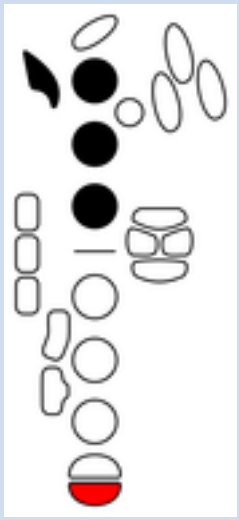
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  | Pressing the left hand pinky B key will also lower the notes D#/Eb and 4th space E. |
|  |  |  | Pressing the low C key will also lower the pitch of G#. |

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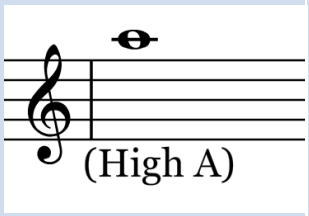
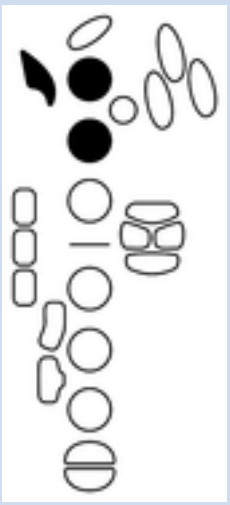
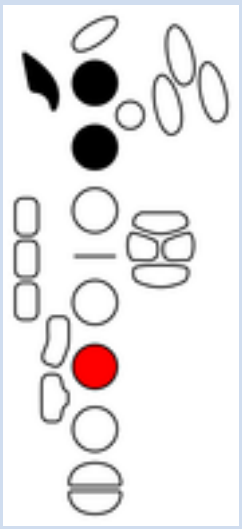
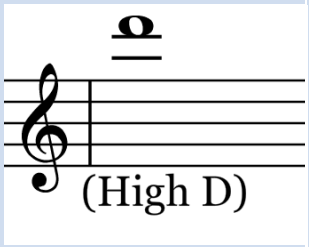
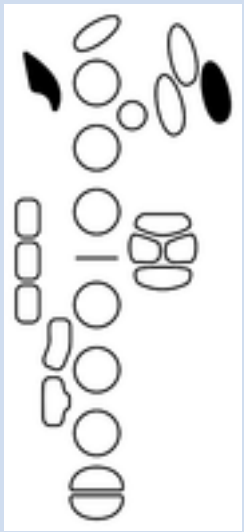
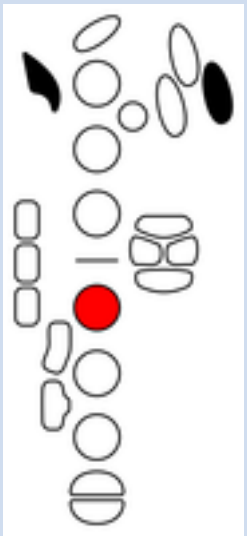
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  | A above the staff is a naturally sharp note. Adding the middle finger of the right hand will lower the pitch. |
|  |  |  | With this note, you can add more fingers of the right hand to bring the pitch down. Experiment until you find what works for you and your instrument. |