

Clarinet Tonguing Tips

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Delay the introduction of tonguing to beginners as long as possible.

Start notes with the breath only. When you do introduce the tongue, start with a legato concept using “dee”. I would suggest having the student speak “dee” several times noticing that only the front part or tip area moves. Don’t do anything different than you would in an “at rest” position (often touching the roof of the mouth). Simply open the mouth, insert the clarinet and blow. The tip of the tongue lightly touches the reed when the mouthpiece is in the mouth.

The tongue has three important but distinct parts.

The tip of the tongue takes care of articulation (vertical movement).

The middle of the tongue helps to refine and focus the tone.

The back of the tongue moves with the register (low register/high tongue).

Proper motion is vertical only and isolated to the front part of the tongue.

Many problems arise from improper horizontal tongue movement (which is slow, changes the throat opening, hurts the high register and often adds a heavy noise to the tone). One can often see excessive lip motion, chin movements, chewing motions, etc. as well as a variety of aural cues (heavy tonguing, scoops, etc.). You shouldn’t be able to hear the tongue “striking” the reed. The tongue simply interrupts the flow of air.

Suggest using an “ee” tongue position, blowing cold air, putting the tongue in a whistle position, hissing like a snake, anchoring the side of the tongue against the inside of the top molars or touching the top of the tip of the tongue to the bottom of the tip of the reed. Using the syllable “thee” may improve tongue placement and lighten its touch (traditional syllables force the tongue to leave the roof of the mouth too quickly and move too far).

An under sound often exists in the upper register because the back of the tongue does not stay lowered. Possible suggestions include: gradually change the syllable from “ee” to “ah” or to “oh” to “oo,” change the temperature from cold to warm to hot, or allow a yawn to start. In articulated passages, allowing the back of the tongue to become involved in the process produces an under sound at the beginning of the note (as the throat begins to open). It is critical that the throat already be opened before the note starts.

The closer you stay to the reed, and the softer you touch it, the faster you can tongue.