

ClarinetFest 2021 - Clarinet Learning Community
Essentials of Clarinet Pedagogy: The First Three Years
Essential Equipment for Young Players

General information and suggestions:

Basic equipment – Clarinet, Mouthpiece, Mouthpiece Cap, Reeds, Ligature

Accessories – Swab, Cork Grease, Reed Case, Mouthpiece Cushion, Neck Strap

Clarinet

Many schools will provide their beginner students with a list of recommended equipment, which includes the clarinet as well as a mouthpiece, ligature, and reeds. These are available for rental or for purchase at local music stores. In some cases, the clarinet will include the mouthpiece that came from the manufacturer and while they can be fine at the start, you may want to help the student upgrade as soon as they are able.

As you know, there are so many choices of instruments and it is very important to help parents understand the need to choose a better-quality instrument for their child's success. Parents may wish to save money by borrowing an instrument or finding a less expensive brand. Be sure to help them understand these instruments need to be checked for mechanical and intonation issues. Some less expensive instruments may be fine, but others are so poorly made that students sometimes can't even assemble them. Especially for students who have learning differences, these poorly working instruments can result in unnecessary frustration and upset. Regardless of what the student has gotten, check the instrument and other equipment carefully. Remember, manufacturers have artists and representatives that may help you with choosing the right model for your students.

Mouthpiece

Materials range from plastic, hard rubber, wood and crystal, which affects tone color, quality, and durability of the mouthpiece. Understanding the design and terminology for mouthpiece elements will help you understand the various kinds of mouthpieces available. Mouthpieces are described by being "close" or "open", which is determined by the measurement of the "tip opening", i.e., the distance between the reed to the tip of the mouthpiece. Another important factor in how a mouthpiece plays is the "length" and "facing or resistance curve", which is the curve that extends from the tip of the mouthpiece to where the reed meets the "rails". Here are some basic terms, but please go to the *Clarinet Equipment Information and Resources* handout for links to more detailed information.

- **Facing** – Includes the table, resistance or facing curve, and tip opening.
- **Table** – Flat area of mouthpiece where the reed is in contact with the mouthpiece.
- **Facing curve and length** – The curve and shape from the end of the table to tip. The shape of the facing (curve and length) affects the reed response and what to choose – type and strength. Generally, the more open, use a softer reed, and the more close, use a harder reed.
- **Tip opening** - How far the reed sits away from the tip of the mouthpiece.
- **Beak** – Top of mouthpiece. Look for the angle and length of the beak, which affects comfort.
- **Rails** – Edges along the opening of the mouthpiece, side of window and tip.
- **Tip Opening** – Determined by measuring the distance between the reed to the tip rail.

Ligature

Ligatures come in many shapes, sizes and materials. And just like in clarinets and mouthpieces, the material will influence how it affects the sound as well as the reed response. Many of the most popular ligatures are metal or a synthetic flexible material. While a metal ligature will be a more ringing sound, it often will help the reed vibrate and help with articulation. Synthetic flexible styles give a little more cover in the sound and dampen the reed somewhat. Things to keep in mind for young players are ease of use, but also durability. Be sure to purchase the correct mouthpiece cover to match the ligature. Other things to watch for and to teach, is how to place the ligature on the reed for the best reed response. Often a mouthpiece will have a “score line” just below the window and it’s usually best to position the ligature at or a bit below this line. It helps to teach beginners to place the ligature on the mouthpiece and then slide the reed into position. Be sure students understand reed placement on the mouthpiece and that they need to tighten the ligature snugly but not over tighten.

Reeds

So many to choose from, right? The choices can be overwhelming even for professionals, so try to help your students and parents understand that not all reeds work well on every mouthpiece. Encourage your students to stay with your recommendations for the chosen mouthpiece. Some parents will opt for less expensive reeds, not understanding the difference in quality or playing issues they may create. Again, generally speaking, more “open” mouthpieces will play better with softer reeds. Conversely, more “close” mouthpieces play better with harder reeds. Mouthpiece and reed companies offer comparison charts to help you understand the facings and which reeds best match each mouthpiece. Links to some of these charts are listed in the *Clarinet Equipment Information and Resources* handout. Remember, reed and mouthpiece makers have a roster of artists listed on their websites that you may contact to do a workshop – they are so knowledgeable and may give you great ideas and samples for your students.

Mouthpiece Cushion

Just like the other equipment, mouthpiece cushions come in many styles and materials. They not only protect the mouthpiece but offer more comfort while playing. The clear plastic type offers a little more clarity, while the thicker cushions offer more comfort. The cushions can also be used for training students’ proper upper teeth placement on the mouthpiece. Some are designed with a groove where students can position their teeth. When using these be sure to help the student with the position desired.

Cleaning and Maintenance

Swabs and cork grease should be in each student’s case and used every day. A small dab of cork grease makes assembling the clarinet easier, but also keeps the cork from drying out and breaking. Swabbing after every use is important for the life of the wood and pads. Teach students easy methods to drop the weight into the instrument and pull through. Also show them to remove moisture from each tenon and around the barrel. Encourage them to avoid eating and drinking before playing! Clean the mouthpiece by wiping with a soft cloth or gently pulling the swab through it.

Neck Strap

A neck strap will help young students not only with the weight of the instrument, but also can help develop good hand position. They also help with tone production, as they stabilize the mouthpiece in the mouth. Help students choose a style that will work with their thumb rest. An adjustable neck strap with an elastic cord is a good choice which allows the student to fit to their needs.