Building Better Bassoonists

A practical reference for teachers introducing bassoon as a first instrument or helping students transition from another woodwind.

Mindset: learning a new instrument

The Einstellung effect is a cognitive bias in which a familiar approach to a problem is reused even when a more effective solution exists. Encourage students who already play another instrument to remain flexible about embouchure, hand position, and air. Have students think back to their time in beginning band when first learning an instrument and encourage experimentation and learning from making mistakes and being okay with making those mistakes!

Beginning bassoon supply list

- At least two reeds (reed options listed below)
- A reed case, make sure it has proper ventilation, 3 reed case from Miller Marketing $20
- Seat strap; I highly recommend a “cup” style seat strap over a “hook” one. Protec has a model available here (and on amazon): Cup Style Seat Strap from Miller Marketing
- Silk swab This specific model from Forrests works for both the wing and boot joint
- reed soaking cup can be a shot glass/toothpick holder, old pill bottle, small dixie cup; anything that is small enough to fit in the case but deep enough to soak the entire reed.
- Cork grease and beeswax/paraffin wax when applicable if bassoon has nylon thread tenors. DO NOT use cork grease on nylon threaded tenons.
- Good bassoon fingering chart. David Well's Bassoon Fingering Chart
- pair of pliers $10 Pliers from Miller Marketing $34 Pliers from Forrests
- Palm rest (optional for players to use one, but make sure the case has one!)

Posture and playing position

1. Sit upright but relaxed, with the neck aligned with the spine. Ask students to look at an object at eye level; keep feet flat on the floor.
2. Bring the bassoon to the student, not the student to the bassoon.
3. Adjust the seat strap: pull the right side to lower a bassoon that sits too high; pull the left side to raise one that sits too low.

Hand shape

- Use gently curved “C-shaped” fingers on both hands: think “Lego person hands.”
- Left hand: keep the palm against the long joint. The left third finger may need to stretch; a plateau key can help.
- Right hand: a palm rest may support the hand shape, particularly for students with larger hands.

Teaching embouchure and voicing

4. Ask the student to say “oo” and form a whistle shape. Feel the firmness of the corners and the space between the teeth.
5. Roll the bottom lip in only enough to cushion the bottom teeth; do not roll the upper lip inward.
6. Rest the top lip lightly on the upper blade. Maintain a relaxed jaw with a natural slight overbite, do not bite.
7. Take approximately two-thirds of the reed into the mouth. Use a finger at the first wire as a reference point for placement.
8. Crow on the reed alone and listen for multiple pitches sounding simultaneously.
9. Keep the tongue low and relatively flat; try the syllable “luh” to avoid heavy, slow articulation.

Crowing and air troubleshooting

- Only low pitches in the crow: check for insufficient air support and corners that are not firm enough; the instrument may play flat. Common problem from students switching from flute to bassoon.
- Only high pitches: check for excessive embouchure tightness or biting; the instrument may play sharp. Common issue for students switching from saxophone or clarinet to bassoon.

- Distinguish air speed, support, and volume. Speed is slower in the low register and increases substantially in the upper register; support remains engaged throughout; volume is the quantity of air needed to make the note speak, lower register needs a higher volume of air than higher register.

Reed care and break-in

- Rotate between at least two reeds. A single reed lasts about four weeks; rotation will extend the reed's lifetime. Allow approximately 24 hours to dry between uses.
- Store reeds in a proper reed case, not loose in the instrument case or in the plastic vials they ship in.
- Soak the entire reed for at least one minute, including the tube, to help it seal on the bocal.
- Under-soaked reeds may feel hard/resistant and play sharp; over-soaked reeds may become too soft and play flat.
- Break in new reeds over roughly four 30-minute practice sessions; new reeds often feel hard initially.

Reed wire adjustments: quick reference

A pair of linesman pliers will be needed to make these adjustments

Wire / pressure	Tip / response	Pitch / tone
First wire — squeeze sides	Opens tip; more resistant	Flatter
First wire — squeeze top/bottom	Closes tip; more responsive	Sharper
Second wire — squeeze sides	Closes tip; stronger high notes; more resistant	Sharper; mellower; may stabilize E3, E ♭ 3, C♯3
Second wire — squeeze top/bottom	Opens tip; freer response; stronger low notes	Flatter; brighter; more projection

Do not adjust the third wire, which is typically covered by thread or glue. For unstable E3, E ♭ 3, or C♯3, check the second wire first. If adjusting the 2nd wire doesn't improve stability of E3, E ♭ 3, or C♯3 the blade of reed is too long and needs to be clipped with a reed guillotine. When using a reed guillotine to clip the tip of the reed only clip 0.5-1mm at a time and then check the pitches.

3D Printed Reed Guillotine $24 USD (need to provided own razor blades)

Georg Rieger Reed Guillotine $229 USD (traditional but expensive option)

Reed sourcing and equipment

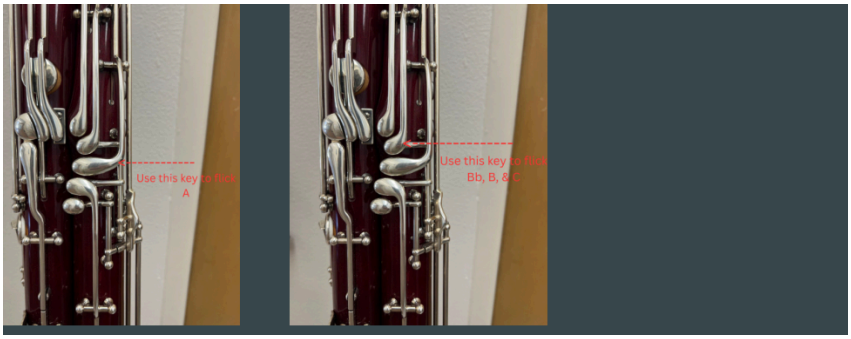
Below is a list of reeds available from quality reed makers. Reeds come in all different strengths and shapes, and as students advance and are ready to upgrade from a beginner reeds , it's best to try different reeds and see what works best! Reeds similar to mouthpieces on other instruments are not one size fits all different musicians will prefer different styles and scrapes of reeds. Avoid Jones Reeds and other factory made reeds!

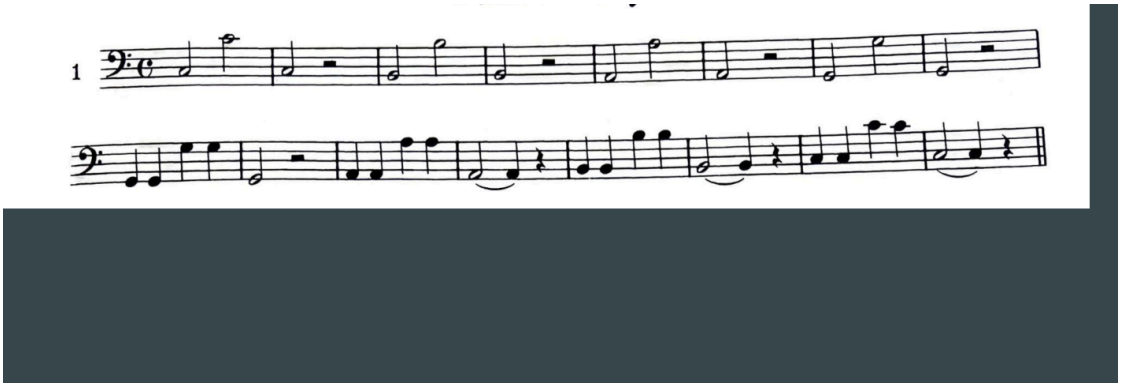
- **Forrests Music in Berkeley, California (most similar climate to where we're located)**
- Beginner Reeds: Forrests Albion Blue Label Medium Soft, This is the best beginner reed students of mine have had the most success with. After about a semester of playing or if the repertoire requires more upper register playing they can move on to a medium strength reed
  Upgrade Reeds from Forrests:
  Forrests Blue Label Reed
  Forrests Black Label Reed
  Treasure Bassoon Reed
  Forrests has excellent customer service if you have any questions about a specific reed just call and ask!
- **Bocal Majority in Richardson, Texas**
  https://www.bocalmajoritystore.com/collections/bassoon-reeds
  Bocal Majority uses a number system for their reeds. Students should start with a #1 or #2 and then after a semester or so move to a #3 or #4. From there #5-9 are up to personal preference of what a student wants from a reed.
- Miller Marketing in Norristown, Pennsylvania
  Beginner Reeds:
  https://millermarketingco.com/product-category/bassoons/reeds-reed-cases-bassoons/beginner-reeds/
  Advanced Reeds:
  https://millermarketingco.com/product-category/bassoons/reeds-reed-cases-bassoons/advanced-reeds-reeds-reed-cases-bassoons/
  Professional Reeds:
  https://millermarketingco.com/product-category/bassoons/reeds-reed-cases-bassoons/professional-reeds/

- Local bassoon teachers

Flicking: A3, B ♭ 3, B3, C4

- Flicking helps prevent cracking on A3, B ♭ 3, B3, and C4. Coordinate the left thumb with the tongue at the start of the note.
- Flicking versus Venting; Flicking is the act of pressing the appropriate key the same time the note is tongued and releasing the thumb. Venting is where the appropriate key remains pressed down the whole time. I find teaching flicking from the beginning rather than venting sets students up for success better for technical passages where the thumb needs to be agile. Venting also can encourage students to rely on the key being depressed to get the higher pitch rather than using proper air speed.
- Use a quick, light tap—like pressing a video-game controller button.
- Flicking alone is not enough: increase air speed as the register rises.
- Practice with the Rubank octave study illustrated below

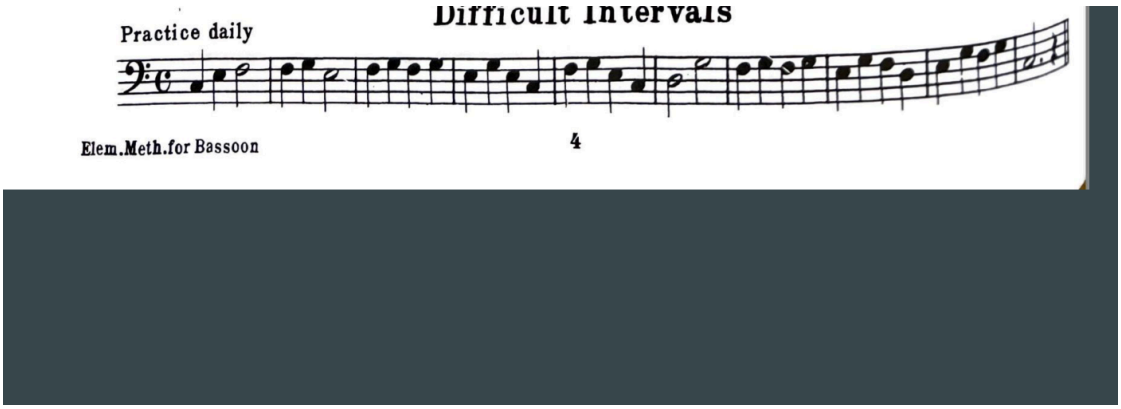




Octave Study — practice excerpt shown in the presentation.

Half-holing: F♯3, G3, G♯3, G4, G♯4

- Rock the left index finger to uncover the half-hole; avoid sliding the finger.
- Pair the half-hole motion with increased air speed.
- Practice transitions from notes using fewer fingers into half-hole notes, especially E3–F♯3 and F3–G3. The presentation compares this coordination challenge to crossing the break on clarinet.



“Difficult Intervals” — daily practice excerpt shown in the presentation.