

The Embouchure

In my experience, faulty embouchures are BY FAR the most common of all the problems associated with young brass players. Sadly, the embouchure is one of the easiest things to teach, because students already know the “feeling” of a correct embouchure.

Rule #1: The lips MUST be together. “Spread aperture” is easily the biggest issue associated with embouchure problems. It results in a fuzzy and unfocused tone. It also creates problems with attacks, which usually results in the students tonguing harder than necessary in an effort to get the lips to respond.

Rule #2: Mouthpiece placement. Unless there is a physical anomaly with the player, try to get the mouthpiece set in the middle of the lips and with slightly more mouthpiece on the upper lip. Studies have shown that the “buzz” happens primarily with the upper lip. When the mouthpiece is too low, the sound becomes thin and strained.

Rule#2: Do not put too much pressure on the upper lip. Students who press the mouthpiece into their upper lip cut off the blood flow to the lips and destroy their endurance. All the blood to the facial muscles around the lips comes through the nasal passage and down through the upper lips. Students can press hard on the lower lip without any detrimental effect.

Strategies for teaching embouchure:

A. Insert a small (Starbucks) straw between the lips and hold it straight out. The lips should be slightly pursed and corners firm. Slide the mouthpiece over the straw and onto the lips. Remove straw, and voila...a good embouchure!

B. Hold your index finger straight up in front of your lips. Purse lips and kiss your finger. Set mouthpiece as stated above...good embouchure!

C. Say the letter “M”. Slightly firm the corner muscles. Set mouthpiece...good embouchure!

D. Say the letter “P” and close lips. Repeat as if saying “M”.

E. Have students play a flute head-joint or a pop bottle. Close the aperture until lips touch and set mouthpiece as stated above...good embouchure.

A few DONT'S:

A. DO NOT teach students to “smile” while playing. This adds unnecessary tension to the corner muscles and results in a bright and thin tone.

B. DO NOT let students play with an “upstream” embouchure. This puts all the mouthpiece pressure on the upper lip.

C. DO NOT let students place mouthpiece off-center. Be vigilant! It often takes years to fix a bad embouchure once a student develops a bad habit.