

# Clarinet Calamities: The Secret Challenges Of Your Clarinet Section

**(and how you can help them)**

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# The Dream...

## *Inspired Music Students Who:*

- Love making music
- Enjoy their instruments
- Learn with enthusiasm
- Feel proud of their achievements
- Are not frustrated and left feeling inadequate



How can we help  
clarinet students to  
achieve this dream?

Let's understand what discourages young clarinetists.

They often experience these things:

- It feels hard to blow
- I squeak (this is embarrassing)
- My high notes don't work
- My fingers can't move quickly enough
- My notes don't come out
- My tone sounds bad
- "Clearly, I suck at clarinet"

Let's look at the most common causes of these frustrations (and how to fix them)

1. Reeds - we want the correct strength, one that plays well, and to know how to maintain them properly

The most common reed challenge that I see in school clarinet sections?



It's not what you think...

The most common reed challenge that I see in school clarinet sections?

Reeds that are too soft

# Reeds that are too soft

- Tone is squawky and 'loud'
- High notes wimp out - best way to diagnose this is play the high g-a-b-c and see if you hear an undertone
- There is not enough resistance to use proper air flow to create good clarinet tone, and you'll notice this most in the high register

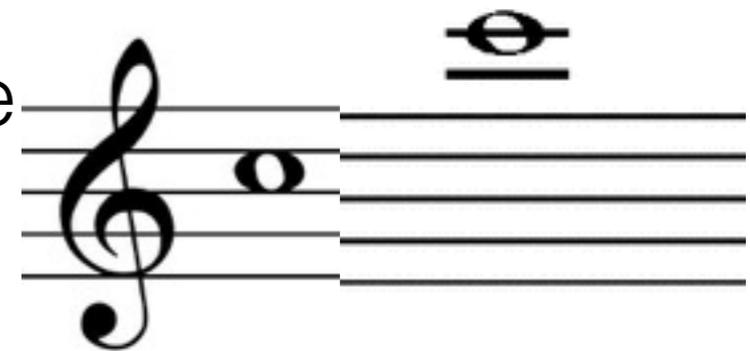
# Reed strength guidelines

- Beginners - 2 or 2.5 (I like Mitchell Lurie 2.5, or Rico Royal or Juno 2)
- As soon as they play any high register notes, at least a 2.5 works better
- Above the G at the top of the staff - 3 and up
- Most advanced high school players level off between 3.5 and 4



# How you can diagnose a soft reed:

- Listen for that loud, unfocused tone
- Student appears to make sound with very little resistance
- If they can play in the high register, have the tongue a C scale from C5 to C6
- If the highest notes “wimp out”, move the reed up on the mouthpiece and see if this improves response. Even if the tone is airy, if the note comes out more easily, this is a clue that their reed is likely too soft



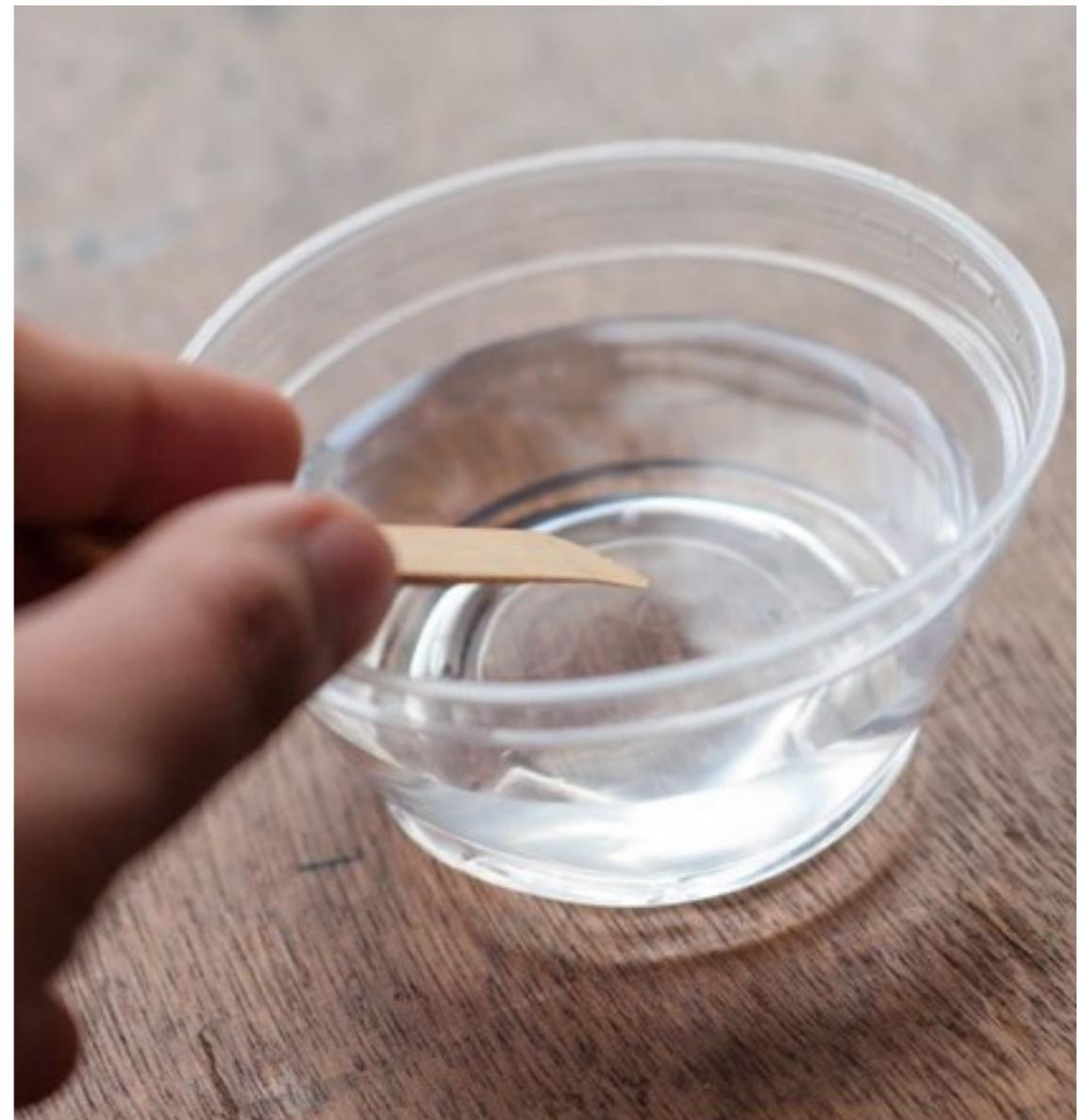
# Useful Reed Tips

- recommend a better storage case to students
- dry reeds upside down before storing them
- always have a few reeds on the go and rotate between them
- reeds get softer each time we use them - eventually they just get too soft to play well



# “Break-in” cane reeds for better results

- Once a cane reed is waterlogged, it won't respond well (but students usually don't know this). Look for the “transparent tip”
- Day One: 10-15 minutes
- Day Two: 25-30 minutes
- Day Three: 45 minutes
- Day Four+: 60-90 minutes



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1. **Reeds** - we want the correct strength, one that plays well, and to know how to maintain them properly
2. **Optimum Head/Clarinet Angle** - this has a huge affect upon tone quality and ease of playing



The King Of Swing



Watch out for  
'head down, clarinet out'



# How to find the optimum clarinet angle

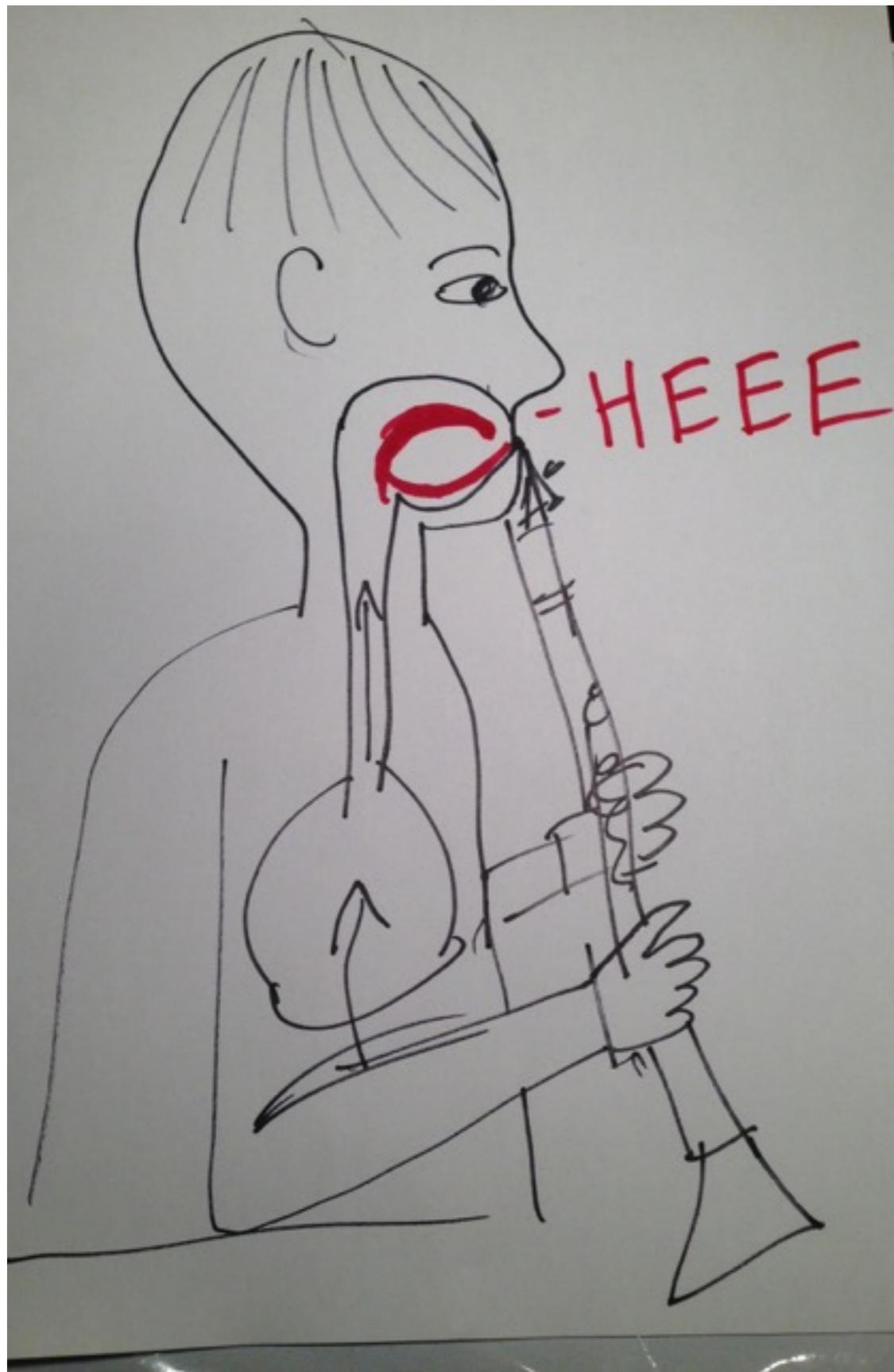
- Make sure the student's head is up, looking forward (make sure their music stand is not too low)
- Have them play a few easy slurred notes with the clarinet pulled in all the way
- Gradually move instrument out and try again, repeat, moving a bit each time
- Listen for the best-sounding position
- It is usually inside of the knees, but every student is different

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3. **Voicing** - what do you do with your tongue when you are not tonguing?



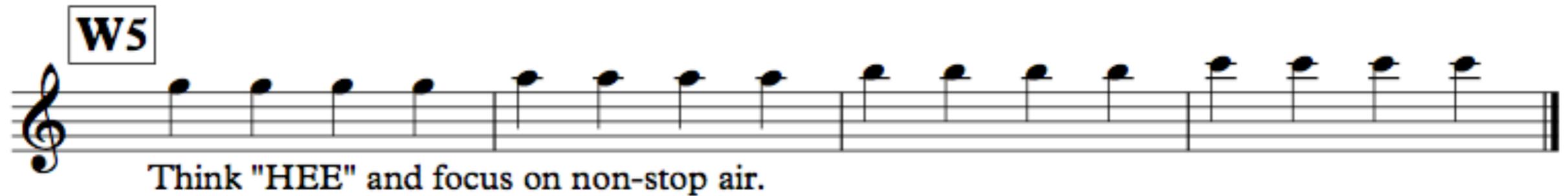
Normally, our  
tongue likes  
to rest on the  
bottom of our  
mouth



Instead, if we can move our tongue up to the top of our mouth, as if we are saying “HEEE”, we get faster air, and better pitch and tone.

Ask students to play their high C (thumb and register key only), and while blowing, imagine they are saying “Hee-Hay-Hoo-Haw”. Listen to the change in pitch and tone.

# To diagnose, and, fix improper voicing:



- Ask students to play high G to high C with a tuner.
- If the pitch goes lower on each note, their tongue is too low inside their mouth.
- Have them say “HEEE”, try to freeze their tongue into position, and slur upward again.
- When they get the high C in tune, their tone will be better, and they probably have the correct voicing

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4. **Tonguing** - how do you do it? (with good tone)?

# The 2 most common tonguing challenges on clarinet

1. The tongue is not hitting the reed properly
2. The student stops blowing before each tongued note

# Help your student to learn where to place their tongue on the reed

1. Have your clarinetists speak “TEE-TEE” and ask them what their tongue is hitting.
2. Ask them to put their clarinet in their mouth, in playing position, and speak “TEE-TEE”. (This will feel silly). Ask them what their tongue is hitting. In most cases, what they do when they speak, is exactly how they should do it when playing clarinet (basically “tip of tongue near tip of reed”).

# Help your student to learn where to place their tongue on the reed

3. Have them loosen their jaw, so that they can “whisper” into the instrument. Have them whisper “TEE-TEE”. They should be able to hear their tongue striking the reed.
4. Ask them to morph from whispering, to playing a real note.

\*\*\*This really helps students who have developed a form of fake tonguing using either their air, or throat, to learn how to use their tongue.

Why is their tone worse when they tongue (especially in the high register)?

1. The most common bad habit with tonguing on clarinet is “huffing” with the air. Ideally, on clarinet, we want one continuous air flow, whether we are tonguing or slurring.
2. Sometimes when a student tongues, the tongue moves lower in the mouth, losing that ideal “HEEE” voicing. This can result in flat, squawky high notes.

# How can we help them improve their air while tonguing?

1. Show them “inside-out” tonguing. This really helps to illustrate the concept of non-stop blowing while the tongue temporarily blocks the air.
2. Have the student “whisper” open G, listening to the airstream, and then morph into playing. Listen carefully for any pauses, or lessening of the air support and encourage them to keep blowing as if they are playing one long note while their tongue moves.

# How can we help them with voicing while tonguing?

1. Ask the student to speak “T-HEE” (“tea” with a lisp) while the mouthpiece is in playing position
2. Have the student whisper this into the clarinet while blowing
3. Morph into tonguing with steady air, and thinking “T-HEE” on each note.
4. If a student is playing higher notes, have them play these notes with a tuner:

**W5**



Think "HEE" and focus on non-stop air.

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5. **Fingers** - how to hold hands and fingers so that it is much easier to move around the clarinet

# Arched, rounded fingers - GOOD



# Fingers squeezing hard and bent at first knuckle - BAD



It is usually the left hand that causes a clarinetist to have trouble “crossing the break”, and playing quickly enough

- If you teach beginners how to play an “A” and “Bb” in the throat tones with the correct hand position, they will play the high notes much better.



- They will also feel much more comfortable on the clarinet.



# Try this exercise to help your students master good left hand position



- Have a student look in a mirror, and finger low C, with arched, rounded fingers
- Tilt the fingers up a bit, so that the top index finger is touching the “A” key above it
- Now blow, and while fingering C, add the A key (this will be a “nonsense” note) and notice what part of the finger touches the A key (usually near the knuckle, on the side of the finger)
- Then, gradually morph into playing C to A, by lifting the other fingers as little as possible. This trains the top finger not to move out of position, and keeps the other fingers close to the holes

Watch the top index finger carefully

What it wants to do:



What it should do:





# Left thumb

The thumb should also lightly touch the register key at all times, and just roll up to it, without moving much at all



Wrist position - we want as straight a line as possible between the elbow, forearm, wrist and fingers

A bent wrist can interfere with finger mobility. Have students “shake hands” with their clarinet, and look in a mirror.

# Watch right hand angle carefully

What it wants to do:



What it should do:



# Adjustable thumb rest?

Make a “finger puppet” and notice where the thumb naturally sits in relationship to the index and middle fingers. You want to thumb rest to be adjusted to that point when the right hand is on the clarinet



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6. **Embouchure** - Not enough mouthpiece, biting, and a flabby chin

# Embouchure

One easy way to make students sound better very quickly:

## **More mouthpiece**

On most clarinet mouthpieces, there is a spot that I call the “Squeak Line”. The more mouthpiece you put in the mouth, the more reed vibrates, and the better the tone...UNTIL... you cross the Squeak Line. This is very easy to find, and can make a big difference to a student’s tone quality.

# Bad Embouchure Habit: **Biting**

Most of us tense up a bit when we are doing something challenging. On the clarinet, this can cause kids to “bite” on the reed (too much jaw pressure). This results in squeaking, pinched sound, resistant high notes, and lots of other common and frustrating things.

Have your kids try this amazing embouchure tester to determine if they tend to bite, and if their air is fast enough.

**Section #3 - Embouchure Tester**

**Section #4 - Whisper Technic**

**A** **B**

This “**embouchure tester**” fingering is a very volatile fingering, and doesn’t respond easily. It makes a great tool to diagnose two common clarinet problems:

1. If the student squeaks, they are “biting” on the reed. Have them counter this by rounding in the corners of their mouth.
2. If they get a low undertone, their air is not fast enough. (This is super common.) When they can blow with fast enough air to make this note sound loud and clear, they will sound good on any notes.



Pull bottom lip and chin down, and away  
from the reed

This will help your students to play with clearer, more  
resonant sound

# Why do clarinet players squeak?

1. If they are “biting” on the mouthpiece, they will squeak (usually right at the beginning of a note). This will happen to students then they are playing a “really hard” section.
2. If their fingers are not covering the holes all the way, the notes can feel very resistant, and squeak. In beginners, this is really common. In more advanced students, you’ll see it on intervals where they need to move a bunch of fingers quickly, all at once.
3. Their reed is too soft. This will make squeaking much more likely to occur.

# Further Resources

Backun Musical Services has created a series of educational videos called the Backun Educator Series. These are designed to be short, focused, resources for teachers to help their clarinet students.

Many of the issues that we discussed today are presented in these videos for you to refer to.

You can find the playlist at: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

## **How To Assemble Your Clarinet Properly**

[https://youtu.be/xDHASStse9pE?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/xDHASStse9pE?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

Teach your clarinet students to assemble the clarinet in the best way possible to avoid damaging the instrument. This video shows you step-by-step instructions on assembling each piece of the instrument, as well as how to place the reed on the mouthpiece. This is great for those of you that teach beginning students, but may also be a great review for more experienced ones as well.

## **Clarinet Maintenance 101: Proper Cleaning and Swabbing**

[https://youtu.be/Maga0UUyZ0M?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/Maga0UUyZ0M?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

Why should your clarinet students swab and clean out their clarinets? Aside from removing their personal inner-clarinet mould garden, swabbing enhances the life of the instrument and prevents some mechanical problems that could make it more difficult for students to play. This video demonstrates how to clean out the clarinet properly after a music class or practise session.

## **Clarinet Reeds - What Should Your Students Use?**

[https://youtu.be/7QSt\\_7TC0\\_c?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/7QSt_7TC0_c?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

Many clarinetists do not play on reeds that support them in producing the best sound that they can. Often they do not realize that they have outgrown their reed strength, and their high notes sound loud and squawky, or wimp out all together. This video gives you some clear guidelines as to what strength might be best for your clarinet students. Michelle also discusses some reed types that she likes and recommends for students.

## **How To Correct The Most Common Clarinet Tone Mistakes**

[https://youtu.be/ccrLOFeXt24?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/ccrLOFeXt24?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

Would you like to help your clarinet students play with better tone? This educational video will help you to identify the most common challenges young clarinet players have in producing good tone, and show you how to correct them. This video identifies three things that can make a big difference in how easy it is to play the clarinet and produce a good sound. This includes how the angle of the clarinet affects tone, how to determine the best reed strength and some important embouchure pointers.

## **More Advanced Tone Improvements to Teach To Your Clarinet Students**

[https://youtu.be/4fIWdwSd9Cw?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/4fIWdwSd9Cw?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

This video will help you to teach your more advanced students how to refine and beautify their tone quality. These same techniques will improve their high register, and make it feel easier for them to play. This video includes some embouchure, voicing and tuning exercises.

## **Clarinet Squeaking – How and Why?**

[https://youtu.be/VS3CO5wHbdc?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/VS3CO5wHbdc?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

All clarinetists squeak. Do you know the most common causes of squeaks, and how you can help your students to identify and solve their squeaking problems? If your students can recognize what they are doing wrong, they will be able to correct things themselves. This video covers three common squeak-causers - soft reeds, fingers not covering holes properly, and a “biting” embouchure.

## **How To Teach Tonguing On The Clarinet**

[https://youtu.be/puMrkyPtbrk?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/puMrkyPtbrk?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

For many students, it feels challenging to learn how to tongue properly on the clarinet, and as a result, many students create their own, problematic, systems for tonguing. This video will show you a reliable method to help your students learn properly, right from the start. This includes proper blowing, tongue position, and how to help students who have learned incorrectly, to identify and fix their problems.

## **How to Tongue Quickly and Play Staccato on Clarinet**

[https://youtu.be/9A5UWX-oiM4?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/9A5UWX-oiM4?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

Many clarinet students have trouble tonguing quickly enough, and also playing staccato while maintaining good tone. This video will give you some systematic pointers on how to teach your students to have great tone when they tongue (especially in the high register), and to improve tonguing speed.

## **Better Clarinet Finger Technic - Especially “Crossing the Break”**

[https://youtu.be/H0DYy3eC66w?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/H0DYy3eC66w?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

It is very common for clarinet students to have trouble moving their fingers quickly on the clarinet, and to move between the low register and the high register. Often, they do not realize that most of their struggles come from improper hand and finger positions. This videos teaches you some simple exercises that your students can use to train their fingers to move much more easily on the clarinet.

## **How to Teach Proper Air Support for Clarinetists**

[https://youtu.be/PwiZYvcKnAo?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/PwiZYvcKnAo?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

To produce good sound on the clarinet, your students need to learn how to blow much faster than they have been. There are some techniques for air support on the clarinet that differ from other wind instruments. This video will show you how you can teach your student clarinetists to radically improve their air support on the clarinet. These simple exercises will help your clarinet students to play with a richer tone, and achieve a better dynamic range on the instrument.

## **Recording Clarinet Auditions**

[https://youtu.be/SbF437ernXQ?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/SbF437ernXQ?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

Many All-State bands and other auditioned groups require clarinet students to submit recordings. Michelle gives some practical pointers on how to help your clarinet students prepare a good recorded audition. This includes some technical recording suggestions, as well as how to prepare the audition pieces.

## **Clarinet Mouthpieces: The Most Important Gear Upgrade**

[https://youtu.be/QyzK7pqt82A?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/QyzK7pqt82A?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

The clarinet mouthpiece makes a big difference to the tone a clarinet player produces, and how easy it feels to play. Here are some recommendations for how to choose an appropriate mouthpiece. This should be one of the first equipment recommendations that you make to clarinet students who want to upgrade their tone quality, and play higher notes more freely and easily.

## **Clarinet Equipment Upgrades: The Barrel**

[https://youtu.be/OuszIz-bBmw?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/OuszIz-bBmw?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

The clarinet barrel can make a huge difference in the tone of a clarinet, and a wooden barrel is a great way to upgrade a plastic clarinet. This video illustrates how barrels affect tone, and will help you to make recommendations to your clarinet students. A barrel upgrade not only improves tone and resonance, but can be useful to regulate intonation as well.

## **Clarinet Equipment Upgrades: The Ligature**

[https://youtu.be/AoXjvsf6bzw?list=PLImm\\_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY](https://youtu.be/AoXjvsf6bzw?list=PLImm_vTERSvswjb-o3DajcnuvRCifELTY)

There are many different clarinet ligature designs, which are all intended to help the reed vibrate better, while still sealing well on the mouthpiece. A good ligature will add more sparkle and resonance to a clarinetist sound and tone quality. This video explores some of the different ligatures materials and designs, and gives you some information to help your students to choose a good ligature for their level of performance.