

Clarinet Embouchure: E-Tips for E-Lips

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[The following embouchure tips have been heavily influenced by the ideas of master single reed teacher Joe Allard. The reader is especially directed to [Debra McKim's important dissertation on Joe Allard](#) and the little booklet accompanying the [Joe Allard DVD](#).]

In a recent important article on teaching a master class, clarinet professor Kelly Burke stated that the problems students have in performing works are often related to either "a technical/mechanical aspect of playing related to a core concept," or "an underdeveloped understanding of musical phrasing." (*The Clarinet*, March 2009, p 40)

One of the most important core concepts is that of embouchure. Below are some embouchure tips that I have found helpful in improving my students and my own playing. Also, most of these tips work great on the saxophone, too.

E-Tip #1: Engage. "Keep Lower Teeth Engaged." Beneath the reed, keep the lower teeth right under the bottom lip – do not allow space between the lip and teeth. Think "Reed, Lip, Teeth." You want to somewhat feel the reed through the lower lip with the bottom teeth. But, don't push up too much. Think in terms of creating a good platform for the reed to vibrate upon. Keeping the lower teeth engaged allows for sensitive adjustments to the sound, as there is a close connection to the resonator (reed vibrating against the slot of the mouthpiece).

E-Tip #2: Edges. "Don't Pinch the Edges of the Reed." Be sure to keep the lower lip flat against the reed so as not to crimp the sides of the reed. Once past the reed, the lips need to seal to keep air from leaking out. Remember, clarinet sound is produced by the vibration of the reed. The more the reed vibrates, the more sound is produced.

Many teachers recommend using the "Embouchure Wheel" – lips circling "the mouthpiece with an equal pressure toward the center," much like a rubber band around the mouthpiece (Larry Teal, *Art of Saxophone Playing*, p. 41). As useful as this embouchure concept has been for many clarinetists and saxophonists over the years, it has a major flaw. It will almost certainly produce a pinching of the edges of the reed. This will cut off some of the reed vibration and thus limit the quality and quantity of sound.

This tip may be controversial to some. Before dismissing this tip, I suggest a clarinetist test his/her embouchure to see if s/he pinches the reed corners. A way to test this is to play an Open G holding the clarinet with your left hand at the barrel and the bell with your legs. Then reach up with your right hand, putting your first finger and thumb on opposite sides of the lower lip beside the mouthpiece. While continuing to play the Open G, stretch the lip away from the mouthpiece on both sides and see if more sound is produced. If so, then you are pinching the reed corners. (Note: In the more than fifteen years I have been teaching this concept, I have only had a couple students who did not pinch the sides of the reed at least a little.)

E-Tip #3: Eee's. "Use 'Eee' Syllables." I've found it very helpful to voice¹ these syllables in the specified ranges when playing in different registers on the clarinet:

"Tew" in low register (below Open G) with a French pronunciation² (see video clip below)

"Tee" Open G up to second space C in the staff

"Dee" C# in the staff and higher

Notice in the above, that each syllable has a progressively higher "Air Position" than the next. By "Air Position" I am referring to how high the air goes through the mouth. (I suggest trying this by whispering "Tew, Tee, and Dee" in succession. Notice that the air is higher on each one.) The basic idea of this tip is that the higher one plays on the clarinet, the higher the air should go through the mouth. To me, it is easier and more useful to think in terms of "Air Position" than "Tongue Position."

These voicings help not only with embouchure, but also help out greatly with tonguing. It was a big breakthrough for me to finally realize that embouchure and articulation are very closely related. [There is a video clip of me pronouncing and explaining these syllables available on my website. Go [HERE](#) and then click on the "Embouchure: Tongue Position = Air Position" video clip.]

Another important and useful syllable is "Hee." It has a very high air position and works really great for me for voicing Super High G (fourth ledger line above the staff). However, it is not usable in the same way as the others because it is not good for tonguing. (In warm-ups, I'll whisper "Hee" a few times to set the voicing and then play a Super High G with a "Dee" articulation.) "Hee" is also very useful pedagogically in explaining to a student about voicing and "Air Position." (Have the student whisper "Tew" or "Tee" and then have them whisper "Hee.")

The above syllables and ranges are what work for me. These will not necessarily work exactly the same for other clarinetists. What works for any one clarinetist depends on a variety of factors: embouchure, mouthpiece/ligature/reed, tip vs. anchor tongue, size of mouth/tongue, etc. (In fact, the ranges for the syllables changed a little when I changed mouthpieces a few years ago.) I encourage you to try different syllables in different registers and see what works for you and your students.

E-Tip #4: Ex. "Say syllable 'Ex'" – Lower Teeth Give, Top Teeth Receive." Don't bite down hard on the mouthpiece with the top teeth – i.e. don't push down with head. Think in terms of top teeth "receiving" the mouthpiece from the lower teeth as when saying the syllable, "Ex." As with all of these concepts, it is important to personalize this to a clarinetist's unique physiology, equipment, etc.

E-Tip #5: Eat. "Use 'Chewing Muscles' Up High." Starting about High E (third ledger line above the staff) and higher, put molars and back teeth very slightly closer together as if chewing something. Be sure to use "Dee" voicing (see E-Tip #3). The higher the note, the more "chew" is needed. The key to playing up high is to find the best spot in your air position, embouchure, mechanism (i.e. your body), etc. for each note. Or, as Joe Allard used to say, "Every note has its own special feeling." (This is true for all notes in all registers, actually.) As with the other E-Tips, this concept will take some experimentation.

¹ "Voicings" such as these are used to help with the position of the air, tongue, embouchure, mouth, etc. A clarinetist should be careful to not move the jaw the same amount s/he does when actually speaking these in normal conversation.

² On "Tew," be sure to not drop the bottom teeth away from bottom lip (See Tip #1 above).