

Basic Clarinet Reed Maintenance

It is time to throw away your reed when it has ANY of the following qualities:

- Chipped
- Cracked
- Broken
- Moldy
- Colored from lipstick (you shouldn't be wearing any if you play a reed instrument!)
- Generally old and "played out" (more than a month old)

There are as many approaches to reed preparation and care as there are clarinetists. Below I will cover some of the most common ways to prepare and care for your reeds.

I. "Breaking in" new reeds.

- Soak them briefly in a film canister of water. Do not submerge the entire reed in water—only up to where the bark remains on the reed.
- Only soak the reeds for a minute or two—you do not want them to get water-logged.
- Lay them out flat side up and allow them to dry. Repeat this process one or two more times.

II. Testing your new reeds.

- Play them briefly to find out if they are hard, soft, or "just right"
- Place them down in order of best to worst.
- Label them by writing the date and a number in pencil at the heel of the reed (for example, 1-21-1 means Jan 21, reed#1; 1-21-2 means Jan 21 reed#2)

III. Sanding your new reeds

- There is much that can be done to alter how your reeds play. The most basic thing you can do is to sand the backs of your reeds.
- To sand the back of a reed you need three things: 1) a flat surface, like a piece of glass or a mirror; 2) wet and dry sandpaper #400; 3) wet and dry sandpaper #600.
- You should NEVER sand the tip of the reed during this process!!! Keep the tip of the reed past the edge of the sandpaper.
- Place a small piece of sandpaper on your flat surface.
- Lick the back of your reed, and then sand LIGHTLY with the grain of the reed first on #400; then lick the back of the reed (like a stamp) and sand LIGHTLY with the grain of #600. Lastly, lick the back of the reed and turn the sandpaper over. Rub the back of the reed across the back of the sandpaper (at this point it is OK if the tip is rubbing against the back of the sandpaper).
- This process flattens out the back of the reed, which can tend to get warped.
- Once you have a reed you like, many people suggest that you run your thumb down the front of the reed to close off the fibers. Rub with the grain, being VERY careful not to hurt the fragile tip of the reed. It would be best to lay the reed on your glass or mirror to do this.

IV. Proper care for your reeds

A. Keeping them from warping:

- Reeds are made of cane, which responds to the elements much like wood does.
- When a reed goes from being wet to completely drying out, it will warp.
- When a reed warps, the back is no longer flat.
- When the back of a reed is not flat, it doesn't lay flat against the mouthpiece, which makes for a less than ideal reed that will be difficult to play.

B. Reed cases

- There are many different types of reed holders, all of which center around the idea that the reed should lay on something flat when/if it dries out.
- Reed storage should offer a secure fitting of the reed against a flat surface, and should protect the tip of the reed.
- Some hold reeds against glass, some are plastic, and others are metal.
- Experiment with what kind works best for you.
- I have tried numerous methods, but prefer the Vandoren reed holders that contain a small "humidifier". Others prefer a different solution.
- **STORING YOUR REED ON YOUR MOUTHPIECE BETWEEN PLAYINGS IS NOT AN OPTION!!!**