



# YAMAHA

## Educator Series

WIND INSTRUMENTS



*John Bleuel*

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## Breathing and Embouchure: Foundation Skills for the Developing Saxophonist

*By John Bleuel*

The most important concept we should teach to our students is the development of a beautiful, characteristic saxophone sound. While capable of spectacular technical feats and a wide dynamic range, the saxophone is not a truly convincing voice if played with a poor sound. In this article I will discuss breathing and embouchure, which together form the foundation of a beautiful saxophone tone. If students learn to take full advantage of their breathing capabilities and to form the proper embouchure, they will be able to perform consistently with a characteristic saxophone sound.

### Breathing

In order to produce a beautiful saxophone sound, students need to have a basic understanding of the physical characteristics of inhalation and exhalation. The chest cavity should be thought of as bellows, expanding with inhalation and contracting with exhalation. As we inhale, the rib cage expands outward, and the diaphragm – the muscle separating the chest cavity from the abdomen – moves downward. As we exhale, the rib cage contracts and muscles in the rib cage, neck, and throat work together to expel the air taken in during inhalation. It is also important for students to understand that the kind of breathing we do automatically – passive breathing – is insufficient to produce the air stream required to play a wind instrument with success. To produce a beautiful tone, we need to go beyond passive breathing to active breathing in order to inhale and exhale a larger volume of air. Active breathing seeks to take in the maximum amount of air during inhalation and to expel a consistent, intense air stream during exhalation. To introduce active breathing, ask your students to stand and take a series of five breaths. The first breath should be a normal passive breath, and each succeeding breath should take in more air until the students have reached their maximum capacity with the fifth breath. Students should always inhale through the mouth during this exercise. Ask the students to place their hands at the base of the rib cage and repeat the exercise, enabling them to feel the expansion that takes place with active breathing. Encourage students to include this exercise in their practice routine; active breathing will become an automatic response only with repeated practice! During exhalation, students should think of blowing a steady, intense air stream into the saxophone. Finally, active breathing requires consistently good posture in order to fill up with the maximum amount of air. We are best able to fill up with air when standing; remind your students to stand when practicing and “stand when they sit,” sitting straight up on the edge of their chairs for maximum air intake.

### Embouchure

Because the embouchure serves to focus the air stream into the saxophone, its correct formation is just as important to a beautiful saxophone tone as active breathing. Students should be encouraged



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to take a comfortable and natural approach to forming the embouchure. The neckstrap should be adjusted to a height that enables the saxophone to fall naturally into the student's mouth, and the mouthpiece should be in a position on the saxophone neck that allows the student to play with the head, neck, and shoulders in a normal, relaxed position. The top front teeth should securely contact the mouthpiece approximately a half inch from the edge to ensure that the mouthpiece position does not change while playing. These teeth should support the entire weight of the head, eliminating any unnatural tension in the jaw and lower lip. The upper lip should not be rolled over the upper teeth, but rather should cover the top of the mouthpiece immediately in front of the teeth. Students should think of the lips as forming a rubber band-like seal around the mouthpiece. The corners of the mouth should be drawn in to form as round a shape as possible around the mouthpiece, and lip firmness should be equal all around the embouchure. The lower lip should be rolled over the bottom front teeth to form a cushion for the reed. The position of the lower lip is crucial because it affects the way in which the reed will vibrate. The player must find a balance between pressing the lower lip against the reed with the bottom teeth, constricting the reed's ability to vibrate freely and thus to produce a good sound, and allowing the lower lip to be too relaxed, resulting in a wild, uncontrollable sound. A round embouchure focus will enable the facial muscles to hold the lower lip in place without undue pressure from the bottom teeth and will eliminate leaking air at the corners of the mouth. The tongue should lay flat in the mouth, and the throat should have a relaxed, open feeling. The chin should remain in its normal flat position, with the muscles firm but relaxed. The cheeks should remain flat when playing. Beware of bunched chin muscles and puffed cheeks; both will distort the air stream and detract from the player's ability to produce a beautiful sound.

#### **Exercises For Practice**

Students should practice the "five breath" exercise mentioned previously before practicing the saxophone. This will enable them to focus exclusively on active breathing before dealing with the instrument. One of the best ways to check for correct breathing and embouchure is to listen to the pitch the student produces on the mouthpiece alone. Students should play a concert C on the soprano saxophone mouthpiece, A on alto, G on tenor, and D on baritone. If the mouthpiece pitch is high the embouchure has too much tension and the throat may be constricted, but if the pitch is low the embouchure is too relaxed and unfocused. This test should always be performed fortissimo, using the same volume of air as when actually playing the saxophone. Encourage your students to check their mouthpiece pitch regularly against a keyboard, tuner, or The Tuning CD (see [www.thetuningcd.com](http://www.thetuningcd.com)). Additionally, students should practice long tones with a metronome regularly. Long tones provide the opportunity to

continually reinforce active breathing and proper embouchure formation. Finally, students should practice in front of a mirror regularly to check their overall playing position.

#### **Conclusion**

The most important feature that distinguishes great musicians from average players is quality of sound. Breathing and embouchure formation make up the foundation of a great saxophone tone. Regular, consistent practice in these two areas will pay big dividends in developing a beautiful, characteristic saxophone sound!