A GUIDE FOR PLAYING THE SAXOPHONE

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Provided by SaxShed.com Lessons by Mail
I.

APPROACHING THE SAXOPHONE

1. The saxophone should hang on the neck strap to your right side, not in the middle.

2. Support the instrument with your right thumb, keeping it away from your body slightly. While sitting the saxophone should rest against the right leg, about half way between the knee and hip.

3. Keep your body position straight, head erect and always bring the mouthpiece to your lips. With the neck strap is adjusted correctly, the mouthpiece should line up directly to the lips while sitting up straight.

4. Place the fingers “on the pearls” (white mother of pearl inlay on keys) at all times. Left hand on top, right hand on the bottom. The left thumb goes on the thumb rest under the octave key. The right thumb hooks under the thumb hook.

5. Place the mouthpiece in the mouth and anchor the weight of your head and teeth down onto the mouthpiece. The top teeth and bottom lip should be approximately 3/8 inch in from the tip of the reed.

THE TOP TEETH AND BOTTOM LIP SHOULD MEET AT ARROWS:

Things to remember:

A. Never remove the teeth or top lip from the mouthpiece.
B. Drop the jaw to take a breath.
C. The natural resting position for the tongue is on the reed (ready to be released).
D. The natural position of the hand forms a “c”.
E. Place tips of fingers in the center of the pearls.
F. Keep the tips of the fingers (fleshy part) on the pearls when playing. Squeeze keys down, don’t hammer.
G. Keep the fingers arched slightly, as in playing the piano.
H. Relax hands. Try this: Drop your hands by your side and try to completely relax them. Raise them in front of you without tensing up. This is the natural curve of your hands and the saxophone was designed to work with the natural curve of your hands.

II. Embouchure

1. Form an “O” or “Ou” position, evenly around the mouthpiece.
2. Turn corners into the mouthpiece while pulling down slightly.
3. Drop jaw from the hinges (near ears). The jaw must be relaxed.
4. The jaw and lower teeth pull away from the reed, while the lower lip lifts up onto the reed in the opposite direction. (Like exaggerating the letter F)

This dynamic of the jaw, lower lip and teeth working the reed with just the correct amount of opposite tension, is one of the most important elements in playing the saxophone. Perhaps the saxophone embouchure can better be described as an “Ouf” position. Remember — just form the letter “F” with your
LIPS. DOING THIS WILL GET YOU WELL ON THE WAY TO FORMING THE CORRECT EMBOUCHURE.

5. WHEN THE POSITION DESCRIBED IN STEP 4 IS CORRECT, IT SHOULD CREATE AN OPENING IN YOUR MOUTH WHEN PLAYING, AS IF THERE WERE A PING-PONG BALL IN YOUR MOUTH. YOU CAN TRY TO FAKE A YAWN TO CREATE A SIMILAR SENSATION.

6. BOTTOM LIP MUST BEROLLED IN ENOUGH TO CREATE A GOOD CUSHION TO WORK THE REED, BUT TOO MUCH WILL DAMAGE THE TONE AND YOUR LIP. DON'T SWALLOW YOUR LIP. THE CORRECT POSITION IS MUCH LIKE THE NATURAL FORMATION YOU GET WHEN SAYING "F".

III.
EMBOUCHURE EXERCISES

1. PUT THE INDEX FINGER ON YOUR BOTTOM LIP. PRESS LIP OVER BOTTOM TEETH AND PULL DOWN. THIS WILL HURT UNLESS YOU RESIST BY LIFTING YOUR BOTTOM LIP UP AND AWAY FROM THE TEETH, USING THE FACIAL MUSCLES IN CONJUNCTION WITH MUSCLES IN THE BOTTOM LIP. (F)

2. PLAY LONG TONES WITH UPPER LIP OFF THE MOUTHPIECE. THIS IS ONLY AN EXERCISE. AS STATED BEFORE, THE TOP LIP SHOULD NEVER COME OFF THE TOP OF THE MOUTHPIECE UNDER NORMAL PLAYING CONDITIONS.

3. BRING THE CORNERS OF THE MOUTH DOWN AS FAR AS YOU CAN, INDEPENDENT OF ALL OTHER FACIAL, LIP AND CHIN MUSCLES. THIS IS SIMILAR TO A FROWN WITHOUT POUTING.

THINGS TO REMEMBER:
A. KEEP A STATIONARY EMBOUCHURE. INITIALLY THE BEST APPROACH IS TO USE ONE EMBOUCHURE SETTING FOR THE ENTIRE RANGE OF THE INSTRUMENT. LOW B FLAT ALL THE WAY UP TO HIGH F SHOULD BE PLAYED USING THE SAME EMBOUCHURE SETTING. "SET IT AND FORGET IT!"
B. Integrate all of this with long tones, embouchure studies and scales throughout the full range of the saxophone.

IV. THROAT
1. The throat should be open in "Hee" position.
2. Regardless of what syllable you are thinking while playing, the throat should be open and relaxed.

V. BREATHING
1. Breath from the diaphragm. Stomach muscles press against the resistance of the diaphragm.
2. Correct breathing involves the stomach muscles and diaphragm working together to push the air out of the lungs.

Try this:
A. Lie flat on your back and place a large, heavy book on your stomach. Breath in through your mouth slowly. The book should rise as you inhale. Exhale through the mouth. The book should lower as the diaphragm pushes the air out of the lungs. You can also check diaphragmatic breathing while sitting in a chair. Hold the legs of the chair while sitting up straight. Inhale and make sure your shoulders do not rise. The stomach should expand (get fat) as you inhale. When you exhale the stomach should go in. (get skinny)

VI. TONGUING
1. “EE” position. The tip of the tongue is placed on the tip of the reed. (Approximately 1/16-1/8 inch from the top of the reed). This is the natural resting position of the tongue when the mouthpiece is in your mouth. Form an embouchure - apply air pressure and then release and return the tongue. The tone should sound full if the support is sufficient and the release is accurate. All the while air pressure must
CONTINUE FROM THE ABDOMINAL MUSCLES, EVEN WHEN THERE ISN’T ANY SOUND, DUE TO THE PLACEMENT OF THE TONGUE ON THE REED.

2. The air does most of the work in tonguing. We only use the very front part of the tongue - sing “ee”. That keeps the rest of our tongue stationary - then “tee-tee-tee-tee”.

A. An excellent exercise is to pretend to spit a piece of rice off the tip of your tongue. It’s almost like “t” and “p” in one motion.

B. Another similar exercise is to form a small aperture (flute embouchure). Blow air through the small hole formed in the lips. The very tip of the tongue should release and return to the small aperture creating the sound “T - POP.” When you return the tongue to the hole correctly it creates a rather percussive “POP” sound. It is imperative to keep the air speed intense all the while.

The best approach to tonguing is the achievement of good legato tonguing, which will lead to a good staccato tongue.

Here we use the stomach muscles to kick the air “HA HA” with the tongue “TEH TEH” so it is “TEH” not “TUT”. The musical effect we want here is light and tapered staccato. The air must start fast and abruptly, but stop slowly or tapered like a pizzicato or pluck of a string.
**Exercises in Legato Tonguing**

Light touch tongue all air. It should sound almost like you are sustaining a note.

**Legato Tonguing**

"Dit" or "tet"

**Exercises in Staccato Tonguing**

Do this exercise in all keys.

5 Half Tones

1st x legato
2nd x legato tongue
3rd x staccato

Etc. through full range

*When playing chromatic passages use the trill F# key as well as the side C. If the chromatic scale is within the context of a slow melodic line, use regular F# and C.*
VII. VIBRATO

Once a student has achieved a good, healthy sound, even if he/she's only been studying six months or a year, vibrato should be introduced.

Using the syllable "Vah-Vah-Vah-Vah" or "Wah-Wah-Wah-Wah" will create the pulsations necessary to produce a controlled and even manipulation of the pitch.

"V" or "W" is the jaw movement; "ah" is the air stream. The "ah" or air portion of the vibrato is very important. First say "Vah-Vah-Vah-Vah" with the air, not the voice.

It is a combination of jaw and air - putting the air through the horn like this: (cycling) instead of this: (pulsating) it should be as though you were making circles or oscillations, not just an up and down movement of the jaw.

Play the exercise below at the following oscillations and tempos:
3 pulses at 108 M.M.
4 pulses at 72-80 M.M.
5 pulses at 56-63 M.M.
6 pulses at 48-60 M.M.

Vibrato exercises should be played in all keys, as well as the key of G Major is represented above.
ADDITIONAL TONGUING EXERCISES

Play the exercises below in all keys. Start on the tonic or root and descend one octave. Repeat the same exercise ascending one octave as detailed below.

5 Stroke Rolls

9 Stroke Rolls

13 Stroke Rolls

17 Stroke Rolls
Saxophone Scales
(Full Range-Low Bb to High F)
X - MECHANISMS - LOWER REGISTER

Play each exercise four times: twice legato, twice staccato.
Some Basics

Assembly of the saxophone
- when putting on neckpiece hold at the crook
- reed placement
  - wet the reed first
  - centred from tip to butt
  - just a hair down from tip
  - ligature position
  - effect of reed crooked, higher/lower on mouthpiece
- have mouthpiece rotated so that your head will be level

Embochure
- Fold bottom lip over teeth, not too much, not too little (see red part of lip)
- Round mouth (think "oh")
- Place bottom lip at pivot point of reed (varies from mouthpiece to mouthpiece)
- Top teeth on top of mouthpiece (I recommend using a mouthpiece patch)
- Corners of mouth forward (unlike clarinet)
- Overall relaxed embouchure
- Firm lip (demonstrate)
- Overall tension can be checked with mouthpiece pitch (CAGD for SATB)

Holding the instrument
- In front vs. side for alto
- hand position — D key opposite Index finger; thumbs on 3rd finger
- neck strap height — left neck strap take weight
- type of neckstrap
- right arm issues for tenor/baritone

Fingerings
- Bb issue
  - Side, bis (1-1, 1-2) — in this order
  - alternate fingerings — need to know K fingerings

Articulation
- tip of reed only!
- near tip of tongue — for better tone
- keep tongue relaxed, move it quickly
- tongue position — can be changed a lot
- air is what makes the articulation and shapes the note
- tongue is a valve (water sprinkler analogy)

Tuning/Intonation issues

- bad notes are fairly consistent from one saxophone to another
- 4th line D, high and mid C#, palm key notes
- alternate fingerings vs. voicing/embouchure adjustments

Equipment

- Reed/mouthpiece/ligature combination accounts for around 60% of your sound
- Neckpiece accounts for around 25% of your sound
- The body of the instruments accounts for around 15% of your sound

Reeds

- good reed is sealed, sucks out air, good if reed takes time to pop back
- for beginners no higher than a 2 ½ strength Rico or Rico Royal
- 2 is preferred, with an upgrade during the first year of playing
- be aware of the differences in strengths when changing brands
- good reeds need good mouthpieces (ex: Vandoren reed with Selmer C* mouthpiece)

Ligatures

- basic style is perfectly adequate, except if cracked or can’t fully tighten (diagram)
- leather/rubber ligatures vs. metal ligatures – explain difference

Mouthpieces

- no-name mouthpieces that come with rentals are bad
- it is worth it for beginners to pay extra for a good mouthpiece
- Yamaha 4C is good and relatively cheap
- Selmer C* is high quality (used by many professionals) and I highly recommend
- Vandoren makes good quality mouthpieces as well, in many many different models
- For jazz I recommend Meyer (good quality and not too expensive), Otto-Link, and Vandoren
- Mouthpiece tip openings, facings, and chambers are different, so having a variety of strengths and brands of reeds on hand is helpful (especially when going from a classical to jazz mouthpiece or vice versa)

Instruments

- Yamaha makes the best student and intermediate models
- Buffet makes a good intermediate model
Selmer makes the best professional models, Yamaha professional models are also very good. Beware music stores trying to sell you the coolest looking saxophone: it looks cool because that's the only way it will sell. Some makes are really overpriced for the quality that you get (Keilworth, Cannonball, etc.)

Equipment Issues

- get saxophone checked a minimum of once a year for leaks
- there are many adjustments, minor repairs that can be done yourself, you just need screwdrivers and scotch tape
- screws – Bis mechanism, G# stopper, right hand stack screws
- octave key mechanism

Problems students have

Issues with switching size of saxophone

- Saxophone embouchures should all be basically the same, they are just different sizes (although the angle that the mouthpiece enters your mouth is different on soprano) – smaller-smaller, bigger-looser
- Take enough mouthpiece in mouth on the larger horns
- Need more volume of air for the big saxophones
- Tonguing on tenor and baritone can easily be “slappy” if not careful

Common problems encountered

- players who switched to saxophone from a different instrument
  - clarinet is the worst problem – tight embouchure, corners of mouth pulled back
  - not playing a saxophone like it’s a saxophone
- poor equipment
  - mouthpiece/reed/ligature combination is very important
  - condition of reed poor
  - playing on too weak/too strong of a reed
  - poor reed placement
  - mouthpiece/neckpiece disgustingly dirty, affecting air flow
- fingerings
  - poor choice of fingering for Bb
  - don’t know the high and low note fingerings (with only a 2 ½ octave range and one of the simplest fingering systems of any wind instrument this is not good)
- air usage (almost always not enough air support)
- embouchure issues
  - not folding bottom lip over teeth
- not enough mouthpiece in mouth
- too tight
- poor fundamentals
  - strictly jazz background
  - didn’t start on saxophone as first instrument and/or didn’t receive proper instruction

**Diagnosing common problems**

- if reed is too weak:
  - thin tone quality
  - tone pinches off when playing loudly, especially in high register
  - high register very difficult to get to speak properly
  - pitch tends to be on the flat side
- if reed is too strong:
  - articulations difficult, sluggish
  - tone airy
  - pitch sharper than normal
  - controlling the reed is taxing on the embouchure
- if embouchure is too tight:
  - excessive sharpness
  - reed buzz sound present, especially in notes just below the break
  - mouthpiece pitch too high (CAGD for SATB)
- if embouchure is too loose:
  - excessive flatness
  - unfocused tone quality
  - a general lack of control through the registers
- not using enough air:
  - small sound
  - slurred notes not very connected
  - can’t play loud dynamics
  - often coupled with not enough mouthpiece in mouth

**A few selected resources**

- General resources
  - Jean Marie Londeix: “Hello, Mr. Sax!”
  - Larry Teal: “The art of saxophone playing”
  - The biographies of Adolphe Sax by Malou Haine and Leon Kochnitzky
- Reference
  - Londeix: “165 Years of Music for the Saxophone” [Repertoire]
  - Londeix: “Master of the Modern Saxophone” [biography, 40 essays on important repertoire]
- **Method books**
  - Eugene Rousseau: “Saxophone High Tones Vol. II” [advanced][altissimo register]
  - Daniel Kientzy: “Les sons multiples aux saxophones” [advanced][the multiphonics bible]
  - Larry Teal: “The saxophonists workbook” [intermediate/advanced]
  - Londeix: “Les Gammes en interval…. [the only scale book you need]
  - Voxman: “Selected Studies” [intermediate/advanced]
- **Online resources**
  - [http://www.saxalliance.org/](http://www.saxalliance.org/) - access to publications, dissertations, recordings, discussion forums
  - [http://www.saxontheweb.net/index.html](http://www.saxontheweb.net/index.html) - large selection of forums, lots of information

**Names to Google (recordings)**

- Londeix
- Rousseau
- Hemke
- Vincent David - best - lots of contemporary
- Claude Delangel
- Fourneau (J.E.) - Best Sound
- Kenneth Tse
- Otis Murphy
- Jean-Michel Goury - new music
- Quaddels
- Habanera
- Soloforensemble Rev.
  - Classical Album
  - Voxman, Rubank
Mouthpiece Pitch

To ensure an authentic saxophone sound on the soprano, alto, tenor and baritone, the player must be able to match the following mouthpiece pitches (concert pitches) at a forte dynamic level. A common problem is that students will produce a sound higher than the concert pitches indicated which is a result of ‘pinching’ the reed and/or a tight throat (eg., alto players may incorrectly produce a concert C pitch but need to work for a concert A).

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SAX ALTERNATE FINGERINGS FOR TUNING

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Play each exercise four times: twice legato, twice staccato.
XXI - MECHANISMS - UPPER REGISTER

Play each exercise four times: twice legato, twice staccato.