REEDS

UTM Clarinet Studio

What is this creature we call a reed? And why won’t the dang thing just work?! Well, it all begins with what a reed actually is: cane (Arundo donax), a plant fiber similar to a tall grass, although it’s often helpful to think of it like wood. Just like the grains in a 2x4, a reed has tubes that run horizontally through it. We can also sand and shape a reed, just like a piece of wood. Also like wood, a reed responds to changes in the weather and humidity, meaning it may play great one day and not the next. It can also warp – which is very bad for us!

Getting Reeds to Play Their Best

Selecting Reeds
The brand of reed you choose has a lot to do with how you sound! Pricier brands are better quality, so they sound better – plus, you’ll usually get to use more of the reeds in the box, and they’ll last longer. In the end, even though a box of reeds may cost more, the value of the reeds can be very similar based on how long you can play on each reed and how much (or how little) time you have to invest to make it sound good.

Beginner brands: Rico, La Voz
Intermediate: Mitchell Lurie, Rico Royal
Advanced/Professional: Vandoren (blue box or V12), Gonzalez (FOF cut – quarter sizes!)

Other options: d’Addario, Rico Reserve, Vandoren Rue Lepic, Olivieri, Zonda (quarter sizes)

Synthetic: Legere (better), Fibracell (cheaper – marching band only)

Remember that strength varies from brand to brand, and even within brands (Vandoren’s blue box reeds are harder than their V12s). When trying a new brand, consult a reed comparison table for the new brand.

Breaking In Reeds
When you first play a reed, it’s very important that you break it in. Breaking in a reed allows the reed to last longer, to play longer in a single sitting, and to be more stable/reliable. This process of playing for a short time and then allowing the reed to dry fully helps it conform to your specific mouthpiece and ligature; it also makes the reed less likely to warp, meaning that it will play more consistently throughout its lifespan.

There are many methods for breaking in reeds and philosophies about what to do and what not to do. Here’s my method, which is one of the simplest (I think):

• Break in 2-4 reeds at a time. Doing more than that may seem like no problem on the first day but it’ll get tricky in a few days when you’re playing them longer.
• **Begin by wetting the reed.** Don’t soak it thoroughly – just treat it like any other reed that you’d play on.

• **Use your warm up to break in reeds.** Long tones are an especially good time to do this, since you’re focusing on good air support and embouchure. This will let you hear and feel what a reed is capable of.

• **Adjust your reed** (below) if it doesn’t feel/sound good. If it still doesn’t work for you, get rid of it. Don’t waste your time and get frustrated; not all reeds are going to play well, unfortunately.

• **When your reed starts to feel soft, stop.** That’s your cue that the reed is becoming water-logged, which means it’s slightly warped toward the mouthpiece (giving it that soft or thin feel). It’s done for the day. You’ll likely play on it for just a few minutes that first day, and that’s just fine. =)

• **Label your reed.** When you take it off your mouthpiece, write on its back or its heel; number it, date it, whatever. Just do something so that you can tell your reeds apart.

• **Place your reed on a piece of glass** (ideally) so that it dries without warping. If you don’t have plate glass (or somewhere to store it), a reed case will do.

• **Repeat this process** with the rest of the reeds you’re breaking in. If you finish with your warm up, that’s fine; try to move on to something on the slow side, where you can still pay attention to your reed.

• **Over the next several days, continue playing on your new reeds.** Make sure to play each reed once per day, adjust as needed, and stop when your reed feels soft. You’ll notice that you can play on them a little longer each day, and eventually, you’ll get to 20-30 minutes. At this point, I consider the reed to be broken in, and I put it into my regular rotation of reeds (see below).

Sometimes, you’ll hear another reed player advocate “sealing” or “polishing” the reed by thoroughly wetting it, placing it on a sheet of glass, and then using your thumb to press the water out of the reed. While this does decrease the likelihood of warpage (which is why so many people do it), I find that it also makes the tone thinner because it closes off the tubes that run through the reed.

Another assertion is that you should never adjust a reed until it is completely broken in. I completely disagree with this point! If a reed is unplayable out of the box, then you’re never going to take the time to break it in, so it’s money down the drain. If, however, you make a few minor adjustments, the reed may respond very well, and you may have a good reed on your hands, ready to break. I highly encourage you to adjust reeds as you break them in.

**Rotating Reeds**

Because reeds can be temperamental, especially when the weather is changing, it’s very important to have multiple reeds broken in. At the very least, you should have four reeds; ideally, you should have six or more. This will ensure you always have a reed that works, even when the weather changes drastically on the day of a performance.
In addition, to prolong the life of your reeds, you should cycle through all of your reeds that are broken in. Whenever you play on a reed, place it at the end of the rotation so that you use a different reed the next time you play. Allowing your reeds to “rest” (that is, to dry thoroughly) will make them last longer.

**Warpage / Storage of Reeds**

Warpage is a common reason that a reed won’t play as well as it used to. When a reed dries unevenly (some parts faster & some slower), it can warp. This means that the back is no longer flat, so the bottom won’t seal against the mouthpiece, and the top won’t vibrate evenly. Some people will polish or seal their reeds in order to protect against this; however, if you break in your reeds and store them properly, warpage shouldn’t be a problem, even without sealing them.

**Never store your reeds in the case they came in!** This individual plastic piece from Vandoren, Zonda, Gonzalez, or wherever else is not designed for wet reeds. Its purpose is to keep reeds from breaking while they are shipped; it does not promote even drying of the reed, and it actually increases the likelihood of warpage! Instead, purchase a reed case or two. This may be a relatively simple case that holds four reeds, something with humidity control built in, or one that allows them to rest on a piece of glass (my personal recommendation). The case you choose depends largely on your level of playing and your aspirations.

If your reed case does not have some kind of humidity control built in, this is something you need to consider during the winter months. When the heater is on, the air is dry—and that means the thinner parts of your reeds will dry out faster than the thicker parts, resulting in warpage.

I suggest placing your reed case(s) inside a Ziploc bag with a small square of damp (not wet) sponge, or a section of orange peel. Loosely close the Ziploc bag; there should still be air flow so that the environment isn’t too humid—you’re trying to slow down the drying-out process, not stop it completely. Remember to monitor the sponge and re-dampen it as needed (or replace the orange peel when it dries out).

**When To Call It Quits**

Eventually, every good reed comes to its end. But when? Personally, I base this decision on how a reed plays for two consecutive days.* If it doesn’t respond well (after I’ve tried re-adjusting it) for two days, it meets the wall test. **And if a reed has any visible chips, it needs to meet the wall right away!**

*Occasionally, I give a reed more than two days, but only if the weather is being especially temperamental.

**Position on Mouthpiece**

One easy way to change how a reed sounds and feels is to change its position on the mouthpiece. Many of us take this for granted: a long time ago, we were taught where the reed goes, often by a band director who may or may not have played a reed instrument. And then we just stuck with that.
Well, moving the reed slightly can dramatically change how it sounds and feels. **If a reed feels hard, move it down on the mouthpiece; if it feels soft, move it up.** This simple change is a great way to cope with day-to-day fluctuations in weather and their effects on our reeds.

Also, be aware of your reed’s horizontal placement on the mouthpiece. If it isn’t balanced (see below) and you aren’t able to adjust it right then (see below), you can move it slightly to the left or right in order to make it play better.

**Balancing / Adjusting Reeds**

When a reed doesn’t work out of the box, it is often because the reed isn’t balanced; that is, it isn’t symmetrical. This causes the reed to vibrate unevenly, which results in poor tone, difficult response, and pretty much any issue that varies from one reed to the next.

Before discussing how to fix a reed that isn’t balanced, we need to establish some terminology:

- **Vamp:** The portion of the reed that’s over the mouthpiece opening. Part of the vamp is what vibrates, producing our tone.
- **Tip:** The thin end of the reed. Tiny adjustments here can have a big impact on the tone, so **work with care.**
- **Heart:** The center of the reed. This should be narrow near the tip and broaden farther down the reed. The heart is the core of your tone, and **no adjustments should be made here!**
- **Rail:** The edge of the reed. This is where you’ll be making most of your adjustments because it’s where we see lack of symmetry.

As with breaking in reeds, there are many methods for adjusting them; some people even make their own reeds! However, with practice, you can get most commercial reeds to play well. This is the method that I use to adjust reeds:

- **Rely on sound & feel.** If a reed sounds good and feels comfortable to play, go with it! Even if it doesn’t look symmetrical, the ultimate test is always how it sounds and feels.
- **Play an open G (clarinet) or C# (saxophone).** Make sure your embouchure is set and you’re supporting with your air.
- **Now, the next part is weird:** **without moving your head or changing your embouchure, turn your instrument to the left and repeat the open note.** This prevents the right side of the reed (the one that’s pressed against your bottom lip) from vibrating, so you’re hearing how the left side of the reed sounds. If the tone is stuffy, you’ll likely need to adjust the left side of your reed.
• **Turn your instrument to the right and play your open note again.** Now, you’re hearing how the right side of the reed sounds (the left side is squished against your lip, so it isn’t vibrating). Again, note the tone: stuffiness means you’ll be adjusting the right side of your reed (and, yes, sometimes you’ll have to adjust both sides).

• **Take your reed off your mouthpiece and hold it up to a bright light.**
  - Locate the heart (see the diagram on the previous page).
  - Looking outward from the heart, compare the two sides. Find areas on the stuffy side of your reed that look slightly darker than on the side that played well. You may wish to lightly shade any area(s) you find with a pencil, especially while you’re learning how to adjust reeds.
  - Using a strip of super-fine-grit sandpaper, remove a small amount from the darker area (which you may have shaded in with a pencil). Remember that you can always take more off—but you can’t put it back on! Go slowly! And remember to **always work on the top of the reed** so that the bottom stays flat.
  - Put the reed back on the mouthpiece and see how it plays. Play your normal “first notes,” and then repeat the open G/C# test. If it sounds good on your first notes, you’re set—even if one side sounds just a touch stuffier than the other on the open-note test.

Here are a few more tips I’ve learned over the years:

• If a reed doesn’t respond like you want it to (it hesitates), the tip needs to be balanced. Normally, we don’t adjust the tip because it’s so delicate—but in this case, you need to in order to make the reed playable. Remember to take a tiny amount off, and go back for more if it’s still hesitant.

• If a reed plays great on the open notes but becomes stuffy as you add fingers, you need to adjust the reed farther down the rail. I’ve noticed that the location where you’ll be adjusting the reed is proportional to how many fingers you have down: if I have half my fingers down when the tone gets fuzzy, I take off a little bit from both rails about halfway down the vamp. If all my fingers are down, I take a little bit off near the shoulder.

• Vandorens tend to be thicker on the left side (at least for clarinet reeds). Why? It has to do with the mouthpiece/ligature combination they’re modeled on, but most people who use Vandorens usually have to adjust the left side in order to make them balanced. (This consistent quality control issue is one reason I switched to Gonzalez.)

• The **only** time you should adjust the back of the reed is if a reed is just too hard to play on. Put a piece of sandpaper on a flat surface, and lightly swipe the reed across it, moving **only** from heel to tip (to avoid breaking the tip). Again, go slowly: swipe once, then try playing it.

• If the tip of your reed is rippled, then it dried out a bit too fast. This is easy to fix; just soak, then place it on glass. With your thumb or thumbnail, firmly squeeze the water out of the vamp of the reed, moving from the shoulder to the tip. Repeat a few times. You’re sealing/polishing your reed at this point, which will change the tone slightly—but if you don’t do this, your reed is destined for the garbage.
Other Resources

Peter Spitzer: “Adjusting Saxophone and Clarinet Reeds”

Larry Guy: Selection, Adjustment, and Care of Single Reeds

Howard Klug: The Clarinet Doctor, pp. 79-87

Charles West: “Some Comments on Single Reeds”