

Identifying Common Hand Position and Posture Problems with Young Musicians

Flute: It is important to check the left hand. The flute should rest on the big knuckle of the left-hand index finger. The left-hand index finger should “crunch” around the flute to help hold it. The pad of the right-hand thumb should be placed under the flute between the first and second fingers. There are three balance points for the flute. The flute should balance between the (1) chin and the lower lip, (2) the base of the left-hand first finger, and (3) the right-hand thumb. To play a $D\flat$ properly, use the three pressure points and add the right-hand pinky.

Oboe: Watch the angle of the instrument. Often, oboe students play too close into their body and close off the reed. Sometimes, they also lower their head and this decreases lower lip pressure, resulting in unfocused tone and flat pitch. Their fingers need to stay low and close to the keys. Encourage students to not bite down, which closes off the reed. You should teach the correct combination of corner firmness and open reed akin to drinking a thick milkshake.

Bassoon: It’s important for students to “bring the instrument to YOU, not you to the bassoon.” Sometimes students struggle with holding the instrument and it’s important that the angle of the instrument be over the left shoulder. Watch the hand position for the whisper key F—students should keep the hand position flat and horizontal, not angled.

Clarinet: The top teeth should be on top of the mouthpiece and the teeth should be at the fulcrum, the place where the reed meets the mouthpiece. Most clarinetists don’t put enough mouthpiece in the mouth. Focus heavily on a flat chin. Make sure the fingers stay curved as if holding a tennis ball and the fingers should be straight across, not angled (students like to angle their fingers to rest on the side keys). If they angle, the ring finger on each hand will not cover the entire tone hole and they will not get a sound. You can also place their mouthpiece cap over the left-hand side keys to help create curved fingers. Watch the thumb position on the thumb rest—it should be on the nail (cuticle), not the knuckle. They do this for comfort but it’s actually a bad habit and creates a poor hand position. A great exercise is to ask the clarinets to hold the instrument with only their right thumb and embouchure. They must firm the corners to control the clarinet. Clarinets, like oboes, tend to drop the head, which makes anchoring toward the top teeth next to impossible. They will play very flat when this happens.

Saxophone: The most common problem for saxophones is posture. They must sit straight and not LEAN into the sax in the “jazzy” position. “Bring the sax to YOU” by adjusting the neck strap appropriately. Sometimes, students will turn the neck and mouthpiece at weird angles, which keeps the octave key from closing properly. Like clarinets, saxophones tend to use too little mouthpiece and/or will sometimes take more mouthpiece than needed, which produces an unfocused honking tone. Watch hand positions and stay away from resting the fingers under the side keys to distribute weight. Often this will open a side key and the student won’t be able to produce an appropriate sound.

Trumpet: Don’t allow trumpet players to tuck their arms into their side. This forces the trumpet into a downward angle and puts too much pressure on the bottom lip. Also, “no chicken wings” (arms locked near parallel to the floor); there should be a relaxed “inverted V” in the arms. Fingers must stay curved over the valves, not flat. Flat fingers extended over the valve caps force the valve down at an angled position, which slows technique (and sometimes results in valve issues). Trumpets should play with the pads of the fingers pressing directly down. Keep the right pinky OUT of the ring on top of the trumpet. Gently rest the pinky on TOP of the ring (in the ring creates a bad hand position for beginners). We call that ring the page turning ring because that is the only time your pinky can go in there! Watch the hand position with the ring finger that controls the 3rd valve slide; students often put too much of their finger in it and it creates technique problems.

French horn: Horn players should sit with both feet flat on the floor and at the front edge of the chair with a flat back. Their upper torso posture should be lifted, but relaxed. “The horn should come to you, not you to the horn.” Once the angle of the leadpipe is established at about a 55 degree angle, the bell should be lowered onto the right leg. To maintain the correct posture, students may need to bring the right leg out further than normal (this lowers the horn)—there may need to be a wider “V” in the legs and the right foot should always stay directly under the right knee. The leadpipe should be pointed directly toward the center of the music stand. If the leadpipe is not angled slightly down, students may begin to use a pivot when it’s time to change pitches (not good). Since the bell should be stationary on the right leg, the pivot is not a good habit because it will cause range and registration issues later in their development. Horn player’s heads must remain straight (not tilted) and the angle of the instrument should be like the right hand, when forming an X with your hands (not straight up and down). The bell should not face straight into the body, but at the angle of this right “X” plane. Also, don’t allow the left arm to collapse when holding the horn because this will result in the angle of the head tilting with it.

Trombone: Be very aware of the angle of the slide to the bell. NEVER allow trombone players to “feel” 3rd and 4th position by touching the bell. Also, trombone players need to hold the slide with the meaty pads of the tips of the fingers only. I prefer thumb/index & middle fingers for lighter touch. Never wrap the full hand around the slide guide. This creates terrible slide technique, which is too harsh and jerky. Always check the left thumb position around the bar on the bell or trigger. You will see some crazy stuff if you watch for it. Don’t let trombones hold the horn severely angled down due to weight. A good exercise is to have them hold the trombone with only the left hand to learn a balanced position on the shoulder. It is also worth mentioning that the bell goes on the left side of your head! Because we’re addressing trombones—when putting the outer slide back on, the water key should be at the bottom!

Euphonium: Don’t allow students to set the euphonium in the chair and adjust their posture to that height. Hold it in the correct manner at the correct height. The proper holding posture/position is like giving your euphonium a gentle hug. Watch the finger position on the valves. Euphoniums and tubas (more than anyone) love to flatten fingers and do not use proper curved finger position. Same tricks work as the ones for trumpets.

Tuba: Most tuba problems come from issues controlling the size versus the student’s height. Use tuba stands when possible. If not, use duct tape around folded towels to get the proper mouthpiece height. Keep curved fingers over the valves. The correct holding position is like giving a gentle hug. Tubas often play way too high due to not being able to relax the embouchure. The center of the lips needs to be slightly pooched and loose, while the corners stay firm. Try having students say OH and then immediately OOH to pull the corners in to loosen the center of the lips—then buzz. The loose center of the embouchure from the OOH syllable will drop the pitch and the OH will drop the jaw, allowing them to get down into the lower register..

Percussion:

Check Posture

- Feet: Shoulder-width apart
- Hips: square to the instrument
- Shoulders: relaxed and down
- Stand straight, no slouching

Check the Grip

- Matched-Grip only
- Fulcrum: No GAP between Thumb and Hand (Y and Reverse-Y)
- Palms-down

- Fingers in in-contact with the sticks
- Beads of sticks together
- Sticks form a 90-degree angle
- Sticks point slightly downward when not
- Keep Grip engaged even when the hand isn't playing

Check the Stroke

- “play on your dots” (the two places where the sticks make contacts with the surface)
- Motion from the WRIST
- Fingers: “Contact without Pressure,” only there for support
- Arms are relaxed, but do not contribute to the stroke, so they wiggle as a response to the wrist. (Hold a stick on the students arm, just above the wrist to reminded them that the arm shouldn't move up and down; the wrist does the work.)

When critiquing Rudimental Patterns with Accents, Taps, double-strokes, etc:

Listen AND See their Sound

- Do they SOUND like the music LOOKS?
- Do they LOOK like the music SOUNDS?
 - Ex. Accents should look and sound like accents
 - Ex. Both Hands should have the same quality of sound
- Remind them of the 2 people in our audience:
 - 1. The Blind Person: only Hears and decodes the part
 - 2. The Deaf Person: only Sees and decodes the part
 - It should be OBVIOUS to both people

Mallet

- Marimba mallets are generally built to play 4-mallet music, so they are sometimes TOO LONG for a “normal” gripping point for beginners.
- Grip the mallets far enough up to have control without hindering motion (like choking-up on a baseball bat)
- Play in the Center of the bars
- Avoid the NODE, where the strings go through. (no tone)
- Piston Stroke: Start UP, End UP
- Relax the muscles not needed to play
- Hips square to the keyboard
- Keep wrists as low to the keys as you can, without touching them

Timpani Playing

- Piston Stroke with natural rebound
- Play approx. 1/3 of the way between the rim and the center of the drum
- Single-Stroke Rolls ONLY
- Listen for the best Sound