Proper set-up of good equipment

About the Author

Dr. John Masserini is Associate Professor of Clarinet and Associate Director for Graduate Studies at Northern Arizona University

When I walk into a band room and work with a clarinet section, I always take the first five minutes to explain the proper placement of the reed and ligature on the mouthpiece. I also show that slightly shifting the reed to the left or right, or up and down, can make a reed open up (if too hard or stuffy) or become more resistant (too soft or bright).

What to instruct: Start with the reed. It must be saturated with water. I always have my students carry around empty prescription pill bottles, mini M&M tubes (the short ones you can find at any convenience store), or any other small vessel that can hold water without leaking. When placing the reed on the mouthpiece I always instruct to start with if lined up in the middle of the window (mouthpiece opening), with just a “razor-thin sliver” of mouthpiece over the top of the reed. The ligature is placed so that the top is just a few millimeters below the cut of the reed. Remember, this is where it starts; if the student does not like the sound or resistance, start by moving the reed slightly to one side, then the other, then up, then down. Basically, you are finding the “sweet spot” of the reed. These adjustments are literally fractions of a millimeter, but they make a big difference.

Issues to watch for: Often with rental equipment, you will have a hodgepodge of equipment, and the most common thing I see is ligatures that do not fit the mouthpieces properly. Remember, you want the top of the ligature to sit just below the cut of the reed; I often see ligatures too far up on the vamp or too low on the stock.

Reinforcement techniques: Encourage proper reed care – rotate reeds (don’t play on one until it dies. Have them play on multiple reeds throughout the week so that they always have a few that work), store them properly (don’t leave them on the mouthpiece), and place them on the mouthpiece carefully to avoid breaks and chips. Have a system set up with local businesses to supply proper equipment (see tip #5).