

Trombone Basics #1

Dr. Michael Smith
Luther College

The Embouchure

The embouchure is the way we form our mouth and lips to play trombone. There is a certain way to hold a baseball bat or golf club, and there is a certain way to form our lips to play trombone and euphonium.

Buzzing

Low brass instruments are basically metal amplifiers that create sound by amplifying the buzz from our lips into the mouthpiece, through the tubes and out the bell. Producing a great sound and playing with maximum efficiency can only be achieved by learning how to buzz correctly and efficiently. If you teach beginners how to buzz correctly, you will have a very strong low brass section.

The very first things you should teach beginners are how to create a proper embouchure and how to develop a strong buzz. It is important that you guide them through the following steps **BEFORE** you allow them access to their instruments (if you are able).

The First Meeting – Where Do I Start?

Have students get out their mouthpieces only – no instrument! The following is an example of the approach you could take. Feel free to embellish.

“How many of you can whistle (quietly)?”

Pause for hands waving frantically in the air with sudden outbursts of whistling. (Not everyone will be able to whistle – make sure that it is a whistle with the lips, not through the teeth or with the fingers in their mouth). If they can’t whistle, tell them to pretend they are blowing out a candle placed 10 feet away from them. This action should get the corners of their mouth forward and lips slightly puckered just as a whistle would. You can also use a pinwheel for visual effect.

“Now blow fast air through your pucker while making the hole (aperture) smaller. You should feel your lips start to tickle a little. Don’t close your teeth!” Most of the class will be able to do this rather quickly, and much laughter and silliness will abound. Also remind them not to puff their cheeks (if they inquire as to why, tell them you will explain later).

“How many of you did it?” Wait for a response and then provide the appropriate accolades if necessary.

For those students who have trouble, tell them to make their lips pucker and say the letter *p* as in the word *putt*. Now have them pretend to say the word *putt* and instead of speaking, blow a lot of air through the center of their lips. The lips will touch slightly in the middle of the pucker when they say the word *putt* and the fast air will start the buzz in the center of the lips.

Go around the room and have each student buzz their lips individually using the aforementioned steps. Make it fun and very relaxed. Don't criticize and use only gentle reminders. If a student still can't produce a buzz, move on quickly so you don't embarrass him/her in front of the class. Keeping encouraging those who struggle.

Once a majority of the class can buzz their lips, move on the next section.

The Embouchure Finder

1. Pucker lips. Pretend you are whistling or blowing out a candle. Whistling is exactly the way we use our lips when we play. When you form your pucker, keep the corners of your lips forward. The top lip needs to remain supple (relaxed).
2. Place mouthpiece on pucker, centering it vertically and horizontally.
3. Firmly anchor the bottom of the mouthpiece just beneath the lower lip (you should not be touching the red part of your lip), and pivot the top of the mouthpiece down like a door hinge.
4. Buzz lips in pucker by blowing a lot of air through pucker as you make it firmer (pretend you are holding a straw in your lips and you are pressing in on it from all directions). Don't worry at first about buzzing a particular pitch, the primary focus at this time is to only get the lips buzzing.
5. Bring the mouthpiece up **SLOWLY** and find the spot where the air is sealed. Stop where the rim just touches the upper lip.

Pointers

Practice breathing through the mouthpiece (and through the trombone) without moving your embouchure. This will help you learn to take breaths without losing the embouchure.

Practice the embouchure finder with the mouthpiece alone and with your trombone (this will help you learn how to hold your instrument in the correct playing position).

Always practice the *Embouchure Finder* in front of a mirror. A small inexpensive mirror is invaluable to your progress.