

Tips for Tonguing

by Howard Klug

I. Placement

- A. “Top of the tip of the tongue to the bottom of the tip of the reed.”
- B. Use the syllable “thee” instead of “t” or “d,” which improves placement and lightens the touch; traditional syllables force the tongue to leave the roof of the mouth too quickly, move too far, and mis-orient it spatially

II. Visual Cues of Improver Articulation

- A. Motion in throat at base of tongue; correct tonguing is vertical, not horizontal; horizontal tonguing is slow, adds a “heaviness” noise to the tone and adversely changes the throat opening, hurting high register notes; **solution**—re-teach the required gentleness in the tongue by working on “dulling” the ends of breath-started notes, eventually starting notes with a releasing action of the tongue off the reed
- B. Lip motion, chin movements, or any other sympathetic “chewing” of the mouthpiece; do not touch the inside of the lip while tonguing; students often touch the lip, which then squeezes the reed shut; others anchor the tip of the tongue on the lip and then articulate from a spot back from the tip of the tongue; some “jaw” while tonguing; none of these are acceptable; **solution**—re-orient tongue back into the tip area on the reed, firm up the embouchure, encourage a long-tone embouchure during articulation, use fast tonguing “feeling” to eliminate jawing at moderate/slow speeds

III. Aural Cues for Improper Articulation

- A. Heavy, “thud” tonguing; **solution**--II.A. above; it is also possible that the tongue may not be touching the reed at all, only the roof of the mouth, often caused by improper beginning tonguing syllable, or inability of student to overcome “tickling” sensation of tip of tongue on vibrating reed
- B. “Scoop” in the middle of staccato notes; **solution**--II.B. above; the sympathetic chewing of the jaw generally only happens at slow-to-moderate speeds, due to slackness in the chin; at fast speeds, the jaw cannot get involved; start at high speed and slow gradually **while maintaining the same feeling**
- C. a small gliss “kwee” on tongued notes above the staff; **solution**—II.A. above; the changing throat opening during the articulation ruins the note placement; perhaps use breath attacks as a temporary (or long-term?) solution; also, lack of “pre-hearing” of the pitch can be a contributing factor
- D. An audible click coming through the back of the student’s neck indicates a glottal “coughing,” causing a delayed staccato; this may be with or without a simultaneous tonguing of the reed; as far as the student is concerned, the two events are inseparable; **solution**—go back to breath attacks completely, and gradually re-introduce tonguing through a back-of-the-note approach (II.A.)
- E. A squeezed-out staccato note, one which doesn’t develop its best sound until the middle of the note; lips may be involved in starting the note (II.B.)

- IV. Speed and Ease of Articulation is Based Entirely on the Tongue Effort Expended and the Retraction Distance Off the Reed
- A. Move the tip of the tongue down away from the reed only far enough to stay out of the vibrating arch of the reed; anything greater compromises your ability to get back quickly onto the reed; this minimum distance skill may be easier to start from a good legato; don't demand a short staccato of a young student prematurely; you may merely get a harder, rather than shorter note
 - B. Concept—a totally relaxed tongue “blown” into the reed
 - C. “Spring” the tongue lightly into the reed, so that you only pull the tongue off the reed, rather than forcing it both on and off the reed
- V. Tongue Thoughts
- A. While most students use too much effort in tonguing, some will use too little; those can be identified by a fast, but uneven staccato which may have a “metronome break” between circa 100 and 120 bpm (four 16^{ths} to a beat); those students shift from a definite tongue to stroke to a quiver-like “shake,” which, while very fast, is generally uncontrollable for evenness; it will “wander” around a metronome click; students must work to pull off the reed further when the “break” starts to happen
 - B. A “D-n-n” tongue is an incompletely damped reed caused by a laterally misplaced tongue, which only stops one side of the reed, allowing the other to keep vibrating, producing a “tail” to the staccato; most are “right tonguers;” re-orient them to the left, then to the center
 - C. Teach musical style along with stopped staccato skills; students must learn to vary the note lengths and not the spaces between the notes as the speed of the music changes; faster/shorter and slower/longer
 - D. Burst tonguing of small groups of notes can be improved considerably by starting the first note with the breath, **as long as there is a rest between groups** (Huh Tuh Tuh, Huh Tuh Tuh Tuh, etc.)
 - E. Staccato notes must have good breath support to fix long tube “lag” and other response problems; the tongue's function is to assist the wind, not supersede it
 - F. The center of the tongue should be arched towards the roof of the mouth to help the “speaking” of the staccato notes, particularly in the second register (i.e. Mozart, *Concerto*, Rondo mov't-opening); the center of the tongue should always stay high while tonguing, but its natural tendency is to flatten, thereby producing a delay or hesitation in the staccato; mentally project the staccato notes forward and high in the mouth; illustrate by pushing upwards on the outside bottom of the student's mouth
 - G. Don't tongue harder as you play louder; always play with a pianissimo tongue
 - H. Legato is staying off the reed; staccato is staying on the reed
 - I. Practicing tonguing patterns daily, both bursts and endurance
 - J. New reeds seem to have more snap off the mouthpiece than old reeds, so don't use that treasured family heirloom to play the Mendelssohn *Scherzo*

(V. "Tongue Thoughts" cont'd)

- K. Finger/tongue coordination problems in a staccato passage are usually the fault of the fingers; develop a habit of having them "feel slightly ahead of the tongue;" practice such passages slurred several times to ensure the accuracy of the notes (3X slurred, 1X tongued is a good practice game); this approach learns the notes without fatiguing the tongue; remember: "*The fingers are fast but inherently uneven; the tongue is slow but inherently even.*"
- L. Anchor tonguing (tip of the tongue placed at the base of the bottom teeth) is only bad if there is a suction created against the reed causing a "slap tongue;" anchor tonguing is usually not noticeable, and, in fact, many students will often articulate better in the third register than the top tonguers
- M. Change your articulation nomenclature; the "attack" of a note is usually too violent; instead, have students "release" the note into the instrument
- N. A caring and introspective teacher should be able to replicate **all** articulation problems; if you can produce it, you understand what the student feels and how you might formulate an approach to solving it