

# The First Steps of Legato for the Young Trombonist

Jeff Dunn

To view this information in a presentation format, including videos, please [visit this Prezi link](#).

This handout accompanies the presentation as well.

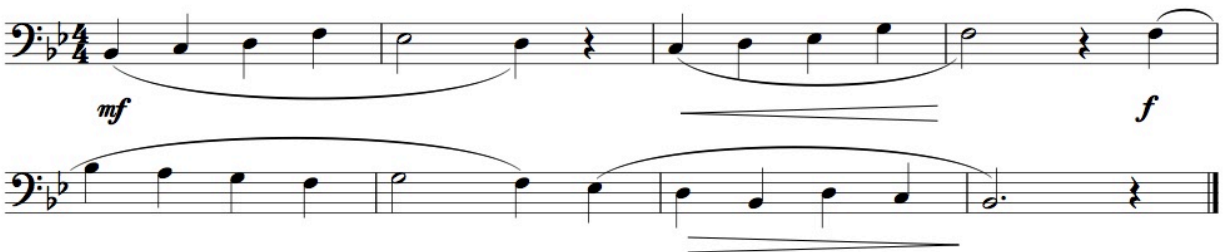
As I tell all of my young trombone students, legato technique on our instruments is a lifelong pursuit. Even the seasoned professional continues to work on legato etudes, and continue to hone lip, natural, valve, and tongued slurs. I find with most students, however, smooth legato is possible through an approach to the instrument that is conducive to a connected style, as well as productive practice techniques at the students' level. After a discussion on the introduction and practice of legato, we will address the foundation of this approach.

## The Three Parts of Legato

Before addressing the pedagogy of legato playing, let's identify what it means to slur on the trombone. I tell my students that there are three components of proper slurring: **constant air**, a **light tongue**, and a **fast slide**. By breaking it down in this way, the information becomes retainable, and illuminates the way in which we should be practicing.

## The First Lesson on Legato

Let's take a simple melody:



8 Bar Melody No. 1, © 2014, Jeff Dunn

The long lines over or under the notes indicate that it should be slurred (smooth and connected, legato). Practice the three aspects of legato separately, before we perform. Air should always come first, so we practice that **glissando**. Constant air will yield constant sound!



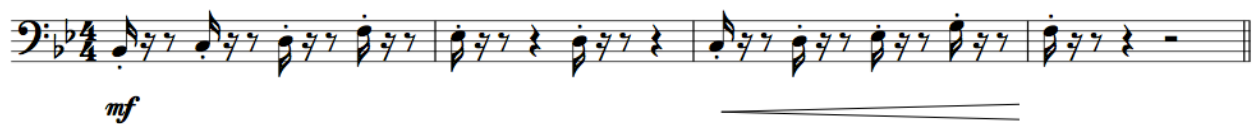
Ask yourself: “Are there any gaps or breaks in my sound?” If so, continue to smear until all of the sound is connected.

Next, work on the light tongue. Do this by practicing the **rhythm on one note**, using an “L” syllable instead of a “T” or “D.” I like to use the 5<sup>th</sup> scale degree for this exercise.



Continue to question gaps or breaks in the sound, but also ask yourself, “Do all of my notes sound the same?” We need the same gentle articulation on each note.

Finally, focus on the fast slide, by **practicing only the fronts of the notes**. By playing these “bops,” we can focus on lining up the slide with new note. You might want to think about the slide playing the same rhythm as the notes, or moving both late and fast. Stay in one position as long as possible.



When working on this part of legato, listen for cracked, chipped, or uncentered notes. This is a sign that the tongue, air, and slide did not line up, which is what we’re working on. Continue to think about the consistency of your notes as well.

Now that we have addressed all aspects of legato playing, put it together! Perform the melody (or piece of music you're working on), as written, using constant air, a light tongue, and a fast slide. The most important part of this is that we are aiming to build healthier and beneficial habits. Do not expect that you'll develop a perfect legato technique in 20 minutes, and then be finished practicing. This will take daily work, but it is worth the effort!

### **Laying the Groundwork**

Preparing trombonists for legato playing starts on day one of their education, when we make the first sounds. At this stage, students are developing their sense of what playing sounds, and feels like, and the habits we establish now will permeate their playing until new demands are enforced. Many qualities about a person's playing, such as tone, breathing, and tongue action, are much more difficult to change as they age, compared to other aspects.

When tonguing is first introduced, it is imperative that the tongue touches gently and retracts quickly, and does not interrupt the airstream. For those that need a visual, this YouTube video of [Sarah Willis](#) shows the tongue action well. Educators should be sure to insist on tenuto style in these early stages; choppy playing will only reinforce poor habits that do not lead to proper legato style in the long run. It will be much easier to add space and decay to develop staccato style in the future, rather than have that be the default and try to lengthen notes later.

I reference our default tenuto style as "notes that touch," as our phrases are already seamless. To practice this, trombonists should blow a column of air on their palm, and tongue four times, without interrupting the airstream. Feel the air on your hand: are there any breaks or gaps? If the air is constant, and the tongue is retracting quickly, you will feel a constant airstream on your palm. This is the goal, and will translate to the proper style on the instrument.

Now try playing four tenuto Fs, and make them touch:



The air and tongue should behave just as the wind patterning exercise. Try this on different notes, and then start moving the slide. Begin with small motions, and gradually introduce other positions. Try scales, and other exercises, but do not allow the air or tongue to change. A confidence and consistency of this style sets us up well for slurring later.



### The “Right” Time to Introduce Legato

For the educators, there is no special time or age at which we have our first legato lesson, but bear in mind the aforementioned concept that we begin setting our students up for legato from the first day on the instrument. That being said, there are four things to look for before introducing slurring:

1. Healthy and characteristic sound production
2. Proper tonguing technique (“Notes that touch”)
3. Ability to change partials freely
4. Habitual use of proper slide technique

If any of these four skills prove to be difficult, clean and smooth legato will not yet be possible. A characteristic sound where notes are in the center of the pitch is a good sign that airflow is working properly, and the healthy air and tongue balance is confirmed by the previous exercises of “notes that touch.”

Lip slurs will be the first slurs introduced to students, with a continued focus on airflow, and proper use of the back of the tongue. Without laboring the physical aspects of technique, trombonists can become comfortable moving partials by changing the vocal syllable for different ranges:

- “Oh” for low-range notes
- “Ah” for mid-range notes
- “Ee” for upper-range notes

These syllables will change over time, as range expands. Early on, a 4<sup>th</sup> partial Bb may be “ee,” but this will change to “ah” when the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> partials become more accessible.

Slide technique should be consistent and efficient, per instruction of the teacher. There of course exists many differing opinions in the field, all of which have their strengths. Players should bear in mind the basics of great playing as well, including posture and healthy breathing, when embarking on their legato journey as well.

### **Continued Practice**

Plenty of other resources, tools, and repertoire exist for continued legato practice. Please view the presentation and handout for more of this information. I will reiterate that legato is a lifelong journey, and developing a consistent and smooth technique will require repetition, experimentation, and a diverse practice routine as playing progresses. I am always happy to hear from players with questions as well, and can be reached by visiting [www.jeffdunntrombone.com](http://www.jeffdunntrombone.com).