

## A Practical Guide to starting beginners on Trombone

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Given the reality that at the creation of this document, COVID-19 will more than likely mean that many students will receive their first ever trombone lesson ONLINE. Because of the nature of the trombone being different than other band instruments in the use of gross motor skills rather than fine motor skills, demonstration and mimicry becomes even more crucial in early stages. Many band directors and educators are less comfortable on the trombone as a secondary instrument due to these unique factors. This document is designed to assist teachers and hopefully will help you feel more confident and comfortable introducing your young students to a new world of volcano noises.

### **A few things to consider**

Your first lesson should be on buzzing and assembly. Because the trombone requires a lot of hand control and is unwieldy. Also, as many repair shops are closed right now, if a student should damage their slide, they will be far behind in playing at a crucial time. Here is a great way to spend the first 20 minutes of trombone time on a Zoom call (or whatever online platform you may be using):

1. forming a solid embouchure (I use 'say MMM, but don't move your face when your done) and then (mouthpiece in the exact middle, blow air through, slowly loosening your lips but not moving your corners until sound happens)
2. repeating that buzz sound without a tongue (I use call and response, integrating rhythmic patterns by rote)
3. deep breathing from the low abdomen (no shoulder raising)
4. 'Sirens' on the mouthpiece, glissing up and down while maintaining a buzz
5. 'how soft can you buzz' contests (to help maintain the buzz at lower flow rates/softer dynamics- this REALLY helps growth fast)
6. Buzzing along to songs by rote

**Notice, there is NO tonguing on this list. I am actually a strong advocate for WAITING TO TEACH ARTICULATION until the student has mastered a sustained air stream (from experience, this is usually 6-8 months, or whenever the band director insists the trombones NEED to articulate to avoid smeary**

**band playing as an ensemble, which usually happens first. If I had my way (as would many professional trombonists), I would teach tonguing in a few YEARS into playing- in truth, the tongue causes a lot of problems with tone, clarity, tension, and range as you get into upper intermediate/advanced playing.**

### **Other things to consider**

1. Starting on Bb, or Starting on F: this is a common question discussed among educators. I don't think it matters terribly in the long run. I started on Bb, but the argument for starting on F has merit. It's often best to see where the student 'falls' when they first start. Trying to get them to Bb if they're having extreme difficulty playing low may not be the best idea.
2. 6<sup>th</sup> position C is difficult to reach for younger players with small arms. If they are playing very sharp C's (common), it's not necessarily something they can fix right away as they may not actually be able to reach a true 6<sup>th</sup> position. If they're told to 'make it in tune', and they learn to buzz low on the pitch, this is FAR worse. Better to correct it in a year when they've grown a little bit.
3. Because of the nature of gross motor skills, students traveling from 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> position will often bob their head/upper torso. This wild movement may not be an immediate issue, but it does destabilize the embouchure in a lever-like way. This can disrupt clarity, range, tone, and accuracy. Try to encourage students to slide down effortlessly rather than 'pinpoint' each position on the slide. I've also found that if you try and ingrain the idea that the slide is to be 'slid' up and down continuously rather than each position is a point that is either right or wrong and must be exact, you'll have a more natural slide motion and avoid a lot of this all together.
4. Students will have a tendency to stick their fingers out and touch the bell as they pass or stop in 3<sup>rd</sup> position. Make sure they're holding the slide fully and not doing this.
5. On the issue of slide grip, I teach two up, two down (I usually have my students try and do the Vulcan 'live long and prosper' and then divide their hand over the bottom slide tube). In truth, there are many acceptable slide grips, but MOST of them include a thumb touching the slide and not sticking out. I slip a penny between students' thumbs and slide tube if they have this problem and ask them to hold it.

6. For left hand grip, I have my students make the “rock on” sign, and then wrap the thumb over the cross brace, and lock the left pointer finger along the 1<sup>st</sup> perpendicular tube, meeting the mouthpiece. This is to help spread the weight of the horn out. Remember, students' left wrists will only be able to hold the weight of the trombone for about 2 minutes at a time at first. The muscles will build over time.

### **General Thoughts**

1. Have your trombonists play to the left of the stand. Also, consider angling their stands at a 45 degree angle. This helps sight and sound.
2. If students don't have slide oil, lemon pledge furniture polish in an aerosol can (yellow can) works well.
3. If students are/may be sick, boil their mouthpieces and brush them out with a mouthpiece brush or qtip.
4. Have students sing as much as they play. It helps greatly with an instrument where pitch is arbitrary.
5. If things aren't working, and you're not sure what is wrong, always start by suggesting they drop their shoulders and use more air. I like to rely on the phrase, “Do it again, but try to use 1 ½ times as much air”.