

Hello Paula,

I am a senior in high school and have played the clarinet since the 5th grade. Just this year, I moved from the last chair clarinet player to the first and am having trouble adjusting. While I have noticed it before, now that I have solos (especially the ones in the staff), it is evident that I often have an airy/fuzzy tone.

I am not sure what the cause is. It could be reed or mouthpiece issues, or very possibly my embouchure. My band director has lately been harping on me for raising my clarinet too high when I play it, but it's a habit I've formed over seven years and he has no advice for fixing it, bring a trombone player. If it's an air issue, I need help understanding how to fix it. I've been told to increase my air speed on the throat tones, but am not sure how to do this or how to get the most out of practicing long tones.

Also, I am having trouble hitting higher notes. While my practice has allowed me to hit notes I wasn't able to hit before this year, I can't get them out at lower volumes.

Thanks,  
Ben

Hi Ben:

You express yourself so well in writing that you should have your pick of colleges! Thanks for asking such a good question. I'll give it my best shot.

Airy/Fuzzy Tone - some likely causes:

1. Airspeed too slow and/or tongue too far away from reed. Analogy: Playing clarinet is like the air hoses we use to inflate tires. The hose itself (through which the air travels) is larger in diameter than the attachment on the end of the hose used to disperse the air. To make a good sound, we must make the air stream fast, cold, spinning, in the front of the mouth, tongue high and close to the reed. HEE! Practice an open G with your left hand holding the barrel and the right hand in regular playing position. Play as loud as you can to start. Then, gradually decrease the volume (larger diameter air stream) to softer volumes. You'll discover your "softest" sound capability. As I always say "When it's fuzzy, it's too soft."
2. Mis-matched reed to mouthpiece: There are many different interpretations of a good clarinet sound. Here is mine: clear, vibrant, and focused. Most students do well with "medium" - tip opening not too large or too small; reed strength 3.5. Recently I worked with a graduate student and showed him the difference a good match will make. He came in playing a very open-tip mouthpiece. When you looked at the tip of the mouthpiece from the side, the tip was almost bent forward creating a very large distance between the reed tip and the mouthpiece. He had a 3.5 reed which was too hard for the large tip opening. The sound was fuzzy and the response was poor (hard to blow). I gave him a 5RV Lyre (Vandoren) with a 3 reed to start. He could not get over the difference in sound and response.
3. Poor middle register response is almost always caused by:

Tongue position is too low - think Hee and bring the tongue position up and forward.

Air is not fast enough (as discussed above).

Not enough mouthpiece inside the mouth.

Grip not firm enough - Use the top teeth more than the top lip.

I have all my students warm-up relentlessly on register shifts. Go to the Free Downloads Tab and click on "Make Me Sound Better Now" PDF. There are explanations there as well.

Hope these comments help. Let me know if any of my ideas help.

Sincerely,  
Paula

Dear Paula,

I am an 8th grade student, and am considered advanced for my age group. I perform in my district's high school Wind Symphony, and am my band's clarinet section leader. Coming in May, my band is adjudicating, hoping for a superior to send next year's band to Grand Nationals again. We just decided on one of our songs to perform and I noted that I have a solo. My issue is that most of the notes are in the F-Bflat range, right before middle c. When I play any of these notes I have an extremely airy tone, and it sounds spitty, and sometimes my clarinet buzzes. I obviously can't have these problems when we adjudicate, but I don't know what to do. I've tried different reed strengths, mouthpieces, even clarinets. My clarinet has been checked multiple times, but it is in fine working condition. Please help soon! Any advice would be appreciated.

Rachel

Hi Rachel:

Thanks for writing. You bring up some very interesting points. Here are my best guesses:

All of the notes below middle C are "relatively" easy to play. Some players let the embouchure grip loosen and/or play louder than they should which causes a spread sound. If you play with a spread sound in that register of the horn, spit will build up under the reed for sure. Make sure you are playing with a good grip (top teeth) so that the mouthpiece doesn't move inside your mouth. Next make sure you are playing with a fast air stream. Even at soft volumes, you must push the air through the instrument. The difference in loud and soft has to do with air stream size rather than speed. The air stream should always be fast.

An airy and/or buzz tone sounds like reed problems. Reed strength needs to match the mouthpiece that you are playing. For instance, if you play a more open mouthpiece you need a softer reed; a more closed mouthpiece needs a harder reed. The humidity and/or the lack of humidity really affects reed response as well. I have always played mouthpieces that support a 3.5 - not too soft, not too hard. In Dallas I played Blue Box 3.5 for years. In North Carolina the Blue Box didn't work as well as the Rue Lepic cut. Now in central Texas (more desert-like) I am using V12's. Check to see that your mouthpiece supports the strength you are using. Mouthpieces eventually wear down (rails, especially if you run a swab through it). Maybe it's time for a new mouthpiece.

I would love to hear you play in person but since that is not possible, this is the best I can do. Thanks again for writing and best of luck with your spring contests!

Best,  
Paula Corley

Hey Mrs. Corley,

I found your website, and so far it's been a real help, so thank you! But I also have some specific questions for you.

I'm a 10th grade player in my school's Wind Symphony, and I'm not that great. My director says that I have good technique for all the fingering, but my weakness is just my extremely airy tone. I currently have some Selmer mouthpiece, and I play with a 3 1/2 reed. I was wondering if getting a new M30 and maybe bumping down to a size 3 reed should help get rid of the airy quality.

And also for tuning, I have a tough time doing that in class without a tuner right in front of me. But when I'm tuning individually: I pull out my barrel to tune the open G, then I pull out the upper joint to tune the low C, but then my B on the staff is flat. Then if I pull out my bell (and not the upper joint) to tune the B, my low C is super sharp. Is that normal? Should I try to use venting, or should I just get my instrument checked out?

Thank you so much for any help!

Tyler

Dear Tyler:

Thank you so much for writing with such great questions. I'll give you my best guesses.

You are correct in trying to rid yourself of "airy" tone quality. I like to describe good clarinet tone as clear and vibrant. There are several factors that contribute to airy tone but the mouthpiece/reed combination is definitely the place to start. I suggest you try several mouthpieces before purchasing. Perhaps your local music dealer would be willing to order them for a trial.

When selecting a mouthpiece, here are your priorities:

1. Ease of blowing and response in the low and middle registers.
2. Tuning of the 12th's: Play low C/G; Bb/F etc. Check to make sure the tuning tendencies are the same – sharp low C – sharp G. Most always the tendencies are the same.

Of course if the easiest mouthpiece is the worst for tuning, keep looking. I like the M30 because it's a bit more open and allows a 3.5 reed which makes it very flexible. The M13Lyre is popular as is the M15. Both of these are more closed and need at least a 3.5 (or above) to work well. If you have a student line model clarinet, try the 5RVLyre. It works extremely well with these types of clarinets.

When giving tuning advice I can only speak for Buffet Crampon which is the brand I have played for 30+ years. With that said, the third space C is normally sharp. Other sharp notes are fourth line D and fourth space D#. The low B can be sharp as well. Any notes that are super out-of-tune should be checked out by a repair person. Perhaps they can lower the key/pad height to adjust.

I must tell you that I am seeing a large number of clarinet brands now that I have never seen or heard of before with unusual tuning tendencies.

Thanks again for your thoughtful question. Your inquiry will be most helpful in this column.

Best,  
Paula Corley

Hello Paula,

I have been a clarinet player for five years now. I played Clarinet for two years in elementary school, and then Bass Clarinet for two years and then got back on clarinet. I've improved a lot over the past year, and decided I would finally get myself a good mouthpiece. I acquired a Vandoren M30 mouthpiece and I'm currently using Vandoren V.12 3's. Lately I've noticed I have an airy sound. The curious thing is it's only airy from two finger mid range two finger E up to Bb (notes that require less than four fingers on the left hand). I was wondering: is it possible that my mouth is not ready for the V.12 3's, is it the Clarinet, or my embouchure?

Thank you,  
Jacob

Hi Jacob:

What great questions you ask! Thanks for writing.

I play the M30 as well. I prefer it for the rich tone it produces.

Unfortunately the V12 3's are probably too soft for the mouthpiece. V12's are made from the same cane as the saxophone reeds which means it is wider than the cane used for clarinet. I suggest that you go to a regular Blue Box 3.5.

The 3.5 may seem hard to blow at first, but you'll get used to it. I think it is important to learn how to move air through the instrument. A soft reed does not really allow you to create the back pressure needed to make a great sound on clarinet because it responds so easily. The reverse - putting a really hard reed on a mouthpiece that needs softer reeds can create a very airy sound as well.

You might also have a repair person check your instrument for leaks.

Thanks again for writing. I hope the 3.5 reeds work for you. If not, let me know!

Sincerely,  
Paula Corley

Dear Paula,

Hi. I'm a Clarinet Section Leader of my high school and I am in the school band. I'd like to ask, how to get my juniors to tongue properly, how to get rid of the super airy sound they always have and how to get a very warm sound using a RC clarinet. I myself have been having problems on tonguing and I can't really produce a warm sound, especially on my higher register. I'd also like to ask how a proper clarinet embouchure would look like. I hope you'd reply back to this as I have a competition coming up next year. Thanks so much for the wonderful resource.

Sincerely,  
Elmina

Hi Elmina:

Thanks for visiting clarinetcity. I'll try to help you as best I can through email.

First a general assumption on my part stemming from 25+ years of teaching: Students don't practice as much as they need to. Without consistent and persistent practice, no playing problem can be overcome. Students 'join the band' for vastly different reasons. Many are in band for fun, to enjoy the social aspects, and reap the benefits of a group experience. Therefore some may never accomplish what we would like for them to. Your interest level is obviously very high. As a leader, you can only model excellence and offer help to others. Hopefully some will improve and enjoy getting better. Keep in mind that others will not due to the reasons above.

Sound and Articulation are the two biggest issues in clarinet playing. Here are some physical things to check first:

1. Reeds - Are they good quality and is the strength appropriate for each student's mouthpiece?
2. Mouthpieces - Do the students have good ones or are they playing on 'stock' mouthpieces - the no-name ones that are often included with the instrument.
3. Is each instrument in good playing condition (no matter the brand name)? If a clarinet is leaking (pads not sealing properly) then sound and control problems will be very apparent. Bent keys will also cause major difficulties.

Sound:

- The clarinet is a back-pressure instrument. You must put enough air through the tube to feel 'resistance.' Reeds, mouthpieces, and the condition of the instrument play a major role.
- To play 'in-tune' you must have a firm enough grip on the mouthpiece to produce the note F# on just the barrel and mouthpiece alone. I go into great detail about this in *So You Want To Play The Clarinet*.
- There is a right way to approach the upper register. There are two pages in *So You Want To Play The Clarinet* dedicated to this.

Articulation

- The less movement the tongue makes, the better you will sound. Most students move the tongue too much creating a harsh tone. Keep the tongue as close to the reed as possible.
- Use plenty of air. Most students do not put enough air behind the tongue to keep the sound alive as when they are slurring.

Thanks again for writing. I would love to know more about your band program. Best of luck for the new school year.

Sincerely,  
Paula Corley