

# Forming a Single Lip Clarinet Embouchure

Phillip O. Paglialonga, D.M.A.

Learning how to correctly form an embouchure is an often-overlooked skill for clarinetists. This skill is important not only for learning how to become a more effective teacher, but also for increasing understanding of the mechanics of the instrument.

The goal of any clarinet embouchure is simply to allow maximum control of a reed vibrating to its full potential. Generally speaking a reed vibrating to its full potential will offer the most resonant sound possible, and consequently allow for the most musically expressive potential.

The embouchure should always be formed around the musculature of the face and should require a minimum amount of conscious manipulation while playing. Unless playing in an extremely high register or using an extended technique, the embouchure should remain essentially still.

Oftentimes people over estimate the amount of manipulation required. To demonstrate how little manipulation is required, turn the mouthpiece around on the instrument so that one person can blow and another can finger. It is often striking to realize that all of the notes come out just fine when someone else is doing

all of the fingerings. Every note in the Chalumeau register (those notes played without the register key) and the Clarion register (those notes played with the register key; from B4 to C6) should speak easily without any conscious embouchure or tongue manipulation.

## Forming an embouchure:

### 1. Line up your teeth:

Line up your front, top, and bottom teeth. I generally use my index finger as a guide to ensure that they are lined up correctly.

### 2. Open as wide as your finger:

Open your teeth as wide as your index finger being sure to keep your teeth lined up. (Do not worry about variations in people's finger sizes.)

### 3. Roll to the color change:

Roll your bottom lip in over your teeth so that the color change is roughly lined up with the edge of your bottom teeth. I define the color

change as the line on your lip where the red part of your lip turns to skin. Be careful not to roll in too much lip. The pressure point will be where your bottom lip will contact the reed. You can check to

see if you have rolled in too much lip by pressing your index finger against your pressure point. If you can press hard on your pressure point with your finger without discomfort, you are likely rolling in the correct amount

of lower lip. If you feel discomfort when pressing on the pressure point, be sure that you have not rolled in too much lower lip. (Note: Depending on the exact type of sound you would like to achieve you may roll in even less lower lip than is suggested here. If you prefer to play with a more vibrant sound like Robert Marcellus, you may find you need to roll in even less lower lip. Generally speaking the less lower lip you roll in, the more vibrations of the reed you will



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allow. Conversely, rolling only to the color change will produce a sound more mellow—more like the sound of Larry Combs. For my taste I generally like to have 3/4 of the red part of my lip rolled over my teeth. In any case, you should never roll beyond the color change as this will dampen the reed considerably.)

### **4. Place the mouthpiece against your top teeth only:**

Insert the clarinet mouthpiece in your mouth so it rests against your top teeth only. Do not move anything else in your face during this operation. You should be able to hold the clarinet in place this way only holding the clarinet with your right thumb on the thumb rest. The clarinet should balance nicely with roughly the correct amount of mouthpiece in the mouth. Be sure not to move your lips or to change the position of your teeth during this step.

### **5. Move your bottom jaw forward and bring your corners in to make a seal:**

Move your bottom jaw forward (parallel to the floor) until it meets the reed. At this point your bottom teeth should be slightly in front of your top teeth. Then bring the corners of your embouchure in towards the mouthpiece to make a seal. Be careful not to allow the position of your bottom lip to change as you make a seal.

### **6. Blow-- “Shh!”:**

Without moving anything, blow “Shh!” as if you are telling someone to be quiet.

It is not difficult to form an embouchure following these six simple steps once they are understood. The difficulty is holding on to each step once it is formed as you play.

I have started beginners this way and they almost always have little trouble making a well-formed embouchure quickly. College students who have developed issues with some aspect of their embouchure, however, find maintaining this new embouchure incredibly difficult. I usually like to remind my students that if you want to get a lot better you need to do something a lot different. It is possible to fix a troubled embouchure after years of incorrect habits if you are committed to the change and to the necessity of the change.

## Further Refinement

As a teacher I firmly believe in what I refer to as “positive teaching”. I feel that the teacher should try to show students a constructive direction to move forward, and resist the temptation to teach through a series of corrections. When teaching through corrections students get immediate results, but usually are left feeling lost and ultimately struggle to eventually know how to teach the same things to their students.

When you tell a student a correction they also tend to go too far in that direction and ultimately end up with the opposite problem. Furthermore, they have a difficult time articulating their pedagogical beliefs.

Once students have been taught to form an embouchure in the manner outlined above you can continue to refer back to these simple underlying principles to further refine their mechanics.

(See the chart on the following page.)

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Audible Issue	Probable Cause	Embouchure Step(s) to Review
High notes don't speak easily	Not enough of the reed is in the mouth. The bottom teeth need to be in front of the top teeth at all times.	1. Line up your teeth 5. Move your bottom jaw forward and bring your corners in to make a seal
Undertone audible when playing extremely soft	Not enough of the reed is in the mouth. The bottom teeth need to be in front of the top teeth at all times.	1. Line up your teeth 5. Move your bottom jaw forward and bring your corners in to make a seal
Sound is pinched or extremely thin	Either too much lip is rolled over the lower teeth or the jaw is collapsing.	2. Open as wide as your finger 3. Roll to the color change
Sound seems to lack color and is dull	Likely too much lip is rolled over the lower teeth, but biting could be contributing to this as well.	2. Open as wide as your finger 3. Roll to the color change
Sound is small, but the quality is good	Not enough mouthpiece is in the mouth.	4. Place the mouthpiece
Uncontrollable speak	Too much mouthpiece is in the mouth.	4. Place the mouthpiece against the top teeth only
Quality of the sound is spread	Tongue is too low in the mouth.	6. Blow "Shh!"

Clarinetist Phillip O. Paglialonga teaches at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. He is a founding member of the PEN Trio ([www.PENtrio.com](http://www.PENtrio.com)) which regularly tours throughout the United States and is represented by Price Rubin & Partners. In the summer months Dr. Paglialonga is on the faculty at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp in Michigan. More information about Dr. Paglialonga is available on his website ([www.thefirstgissilent.com](http://www.thefirstgissilent.com)).