

# Building Fundamentally Strong Musicians in the Band Room

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**A core group of fundamental skills are the building blocks of everything we do, and ultimately determine the quality of our band's sound.**

We must:

- Set students up for a high success rate
- All students must experience success
- If students are not being successful, SIMPLIFY the skill

**From the masters:**

**John Wooden: "Little things make big things happen."**

**Eddie Green: "It could be a very small thing that triggers the whole thing."**

**Doug Lemov: When certain skills become automatic, we give our minds the capacity to carry out more complex tasks**

**Pareto "Twenty percent of the causes drive eighty percent of the outcomes"**

Playing an instrument requires both physical and mental skills. However, we cannot effectively cultivate the mental skills until we are proficient at the physical skills.

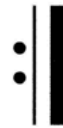
Basic fundamental skills include:

- Body & Hand Position
  - Tension-free, soft, natural
  - No part of the body touches another part of the body
  - Balanced
  - Fingers gently curved
  - Thumb position is crucial
  - Awareness (What does it feel like?)
- Breathing – two parts to the breath (inhale and exhale)
  - Relaxed, but full "poh" breath on the inhale
  - Silent (a noisy breath indicates tension!)

- Expansion around the middle
- Focused and directional air on the exhale
- Never forced
- Use the amount and speed of air that creates your most resonant, vibrant sound.
- Instant Sound
- Breathe before you need to
- Pushing all the way to empty creates tension, deterioration of tone, and intonation issues

### Breathing Routine for Focus and Timing

Sip	Out	In →	Out →	Sip	Out	In →	Out →
1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4



Sip: Take a sip of air to release the note (move hand toward you)

Out: Exhale the stale air (move hand away from you)

In: Take a full, relaxed, two-count breath (move hand toward you)

Out: Exhale a focused and directional stream of air for four beats (move hand away from you)

- Embouchure & Vowel Shape
  - Tension Free = unimpeded vibration
  - Woodwind embouchures must be "built" – isolate the steps
  - Vowel shape (voicing) that allows for maximum resonance
    - Flute = oo
    - Clarinet = ee
    - Saxophone = oh, awh
    - Oboe = oo
    - Bassoon = oh, awh
    - Brass = changes depending on the register

### Extraneous noise in the sound indicates that something isn't working properly

- Articulation
  - Specify the consonant to be used (d,t)
  - What part of the tongue? Where does it touch?
  - Tongue moves up and down
  - Fast air = fast tongue
  - Embouchure must not move
  - Tongue goes to the same spot with the same strength each time
- Releases
  - Organized
  - Release with the breath

- Embouchure must not move
- Where does the release occur?
- You must practice releases as diligently as you practice entrances

These physical skills must be practiced with a goal of **excellence**, rather than mere proficiency, because they drive nearly every other aspect of playing.

In order for this to happen, we must:

- Teach and practice skills in isolation
- Shorten the feedback loop

Utilize core fundamental exercises that are:

- Simple
- Isolate the skills
- Focus on ensemble concepts while allowing for individual growth
- Flexible/ adaptable
- Allow for layering of new levels of complexity
- Able to be performed with perfection (but usually are NOT!)

Exercises from Essential Musicianship Series. Used by permission from Hal Leonard

## 1. Establishing Sound

1-1 Block Concert F



### Student Goals

1. Breathe together.
2. Start together.
3. Follow through with the same air and **vowel sound**.
4. Release together.
5. **Organize** the end of each note as clearly as the beginning.
6. Vibrato-producing instruments can alternately play a straight tone or with vibrato.

Use this exercise to focus on:

- Beginning, middle and end of the note
- Establishing purity and clarity of sound
- Timing of entrances and releases
- Relaxed and full breath on the rest



Use this exercise to focus on:

Line A:

- Moving clearly from note to note
- Keeping energy in the air while changing notes
- Matching quality and volume of sound from note to note
- Balance with the drone (Line B)
- Predict the pitch to which you are moving, based on the drone
- Just intonation concepts (for more advanced groups)

Line B:

- Maintaining a steady, consistent sound
- Balance with Line A
- Stagger breathing
- Re-entering seamlessly after breath

**These fundamental exercises cannot be used in a vacuum. Once learned, they must be applied to the music.**

**We sometimes rehearse in ways that are counterproductive because it is easier, more “fun” or we assume that activity will lead to improvement.**

However, drilling skills in a way that strategically leads to improvement does not have to be boring. It can be:

- Intentional
- Fast-passed
- Intensely solution focused
- Quick feedback
- Immediate repetition in multiples
- Highly effective

When certain skills become automatic, we give our minds the capacity to carry out more complex tasks including:

- Listening
- Analyzing
- Responding

Jump start these skills in your students by:

- Asking lots of questions requiring students to *think*
- Having students tell you *how* to execute fundamental skills
- Expecting students to *know* what they are trying to improve
- Having students *describe* and *analyze* what they are hearing
- Asking students to *explain* how they would fix an issue

Teacher Responsibility:

- Adapt your language so that students can be successful
- If something isn't working, you need to provide the information in a different way.
- We can unintentionally cause problems with our word choice. (Students are literal!)
- What we *hear* should guide our rehearsal plan.
- Patience is key!

***Your ensemble will only be as good as your ability to hear and correct flaws.***

When all the fundamentals are being performed correctly, and when our musicians are listening and responding to what they hear, we get purity & clarity of sound!

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Books to add to your library:

*Essential Musicianship for Band Series* (Green, Blue and Orange levels) by Eddie Green, John Benzer & David Bertman

*On Teaching Band: Notes from Eddie Green* by Mary Ellen Cavitt

*Practice Perfect: 42 Rules for Getting Better at Getting Better* by Doug Lemov, Eric Woolway & Katie Yezzi