

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	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!

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