

Fixing Your Clarinet Reeds

Q. How many clarinetists does it take to change a light bulb?

It only takes 1, but she has to go through an entire box of bulbs before she finds one that works. It's true though. Reeds are very inconsistent. If you buy one box, you will find varying strengths and quality from reed to reed. Reeds are too expensive nowadays to simply throw away all the reeds that don't sound good immediately right out of the box. It is for this reason that we work on our reeds... to turn as many reeds as possible into playable reeds.

Working on clarinet reeds.

Reeds must be broken in over a period of days, or else they will not last long.

I do not advocate the usage of reed trimmers. If a reed is chipped, buy a new one. If a reed is too soft, buy a harder one. Reed trimmers rarely work correctly or trim the reed to the correct shape. If you trim the tip of a reed, you have effectively completely changed the entire reed and the relationship of all of its parts to one-another. Instead, buy reeds that are perhaps a little too hard at first, break them in over time, and use reed rush to make specific adjustments. I also do not advocate the use of reed knives. First, knives in schools are typically not allowed. Next, it is too easy to take too much off of a reed with a knife. When adjusting a reed, remember that you can always take more off of a reed, but you can't add more to it. Once it's gone, it's gone.

What you'll need:

- "Reed Geek" or Reed Rush (aka Dutch Rush, aka equisetum hyemale)
- Glossy paper and/or Ultra-Fine Sand Paper
- A very flat surface (marble or glass is fine)
- A cup of water (distilled is best)
- Saliva & Nose grease (seriously)
- Lots of patience and practice

Choosing a reed from your box that will likely be a half-way decent reed:

1. Choose reeds with a golden color to the cane, indicating it has been properly cured and will retain its playing characteristics longer.
2. A smooth texture on the surface of the reed which feels smooth to the touch. (no splinters)
3. An upside down, slightly curved V shape to the heart when you hold it up to the light. The heart is the final determining factor with regard to tone quality and freedom of response. Lack of sufficient wood in the center of the reed causes it to choke when the player tries to play at a loud dynamic level, and the tone quality produced will seem thin and pinched.

Play all of the reeds that pass the above test as follows:

1. Put these reeds tip down in a glass of water. Take out one reed and remove the excess water with your mouth. Hold it on your mouthpiece with your Right Thumb (no ligature).
2. Blow on the reed without tonguing. Play quickly, low C, D, E, F, G, F, E, D, C. You are listening for clarity of tone and strength. Do the same thing on high G, A, B, C, B, A, G. Then tongue those notes. If the reed sounds choked or stuffy, put it aside in the "maybe one day" pile (I suggest storing this pile in a slightly vented

Tupperware or a cigar humidor). If the reed is half-way decent, lay it flat-side up on a flat surface. I rank the reeds in order of best to worst this way first.

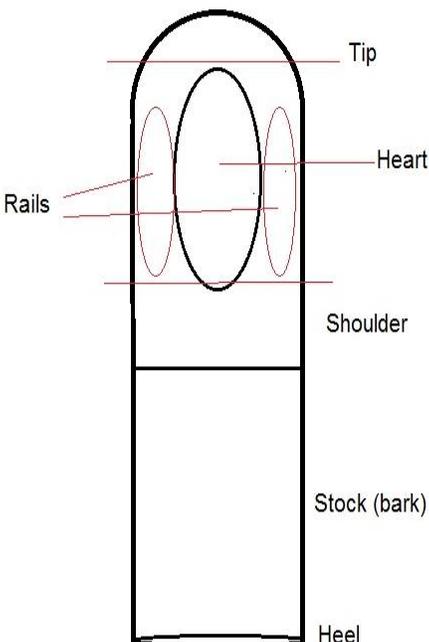
I always try to keep 8 reeds in my reed box. I keep 4 playable reeds in regular rotation using a reedgard. I keep the other 4 reeds in a reedguard labeled “new reeds”. These reeds stay in the same humidity and temperature monitored Vandoren reed box as the reeds that I play. This helps them to begin breaking in, even before I began playing and working on them. This way, they do not feel so much like new reeds when I finally begin playing on and working on them. If you don’t have a magical reed box that regulates humidity and temperature, use a plastic Ziploc bag with a small hole cut in it. Keep a fresh piece of orange or clementine peel in there during the winter months. If your reeds ever get moldy, stop using the orange peel, and/or cut two holes in the next plastic bag. If your peel gets hard, it’s not fresh anymore and must be replaced. Mold can be removed from reeds using hydrogen peroxide and a toothbrush.

Balancing your Reeds:

Once I have selected a reed I sort-of like, I check the reed for balance. To do this, I put it on the mouthpiece with the ligature on as usual. (It’s very important to make sure the reed is perfectly centered, and set with the tip perfectly even with the tip of the mouthpiece. A half-millimeter one way or the other will completely change the way your reed plays, and could fool you into thinking your reed is faulty when it’s not) I play an open G whole note, with a sfz and decrescendo to niente. I am listening for the tone and response at the beginning, and its ability to decrescendo to niente evenly, with a clear tone. If it’s perfect, then stop there!! It won’t be, though.

Then, I turn the mouthpiece so that the reed is only being depressed with the left side of my bottom lip. This will allow me to check the right side of the reed, because the right side of the reed will be vibrating freely. Play the same note in the same way. If it’s clear and even, that side is good. If it’s stuffy, you will need to work on it, but check the other side first to see where you’re at. You want to get both sides the same, so work towards that goal as you begin working on your reeds.

If one side is stuffy, which is usually the case, I leave my reed on the mouthpiece, wet my reed rush with saliva so that it’s flexible (or just use a spot of ultra-fine sandpaper), and rub the corresponding rail to remove excess wood.



(I prefer reed rush because it is easier to be more specific with your area of focus) Only take a little off at a time, then recheck the reed. Keep rechecking both sides, because your goal is still to make both sides the same. Repeat this process on a low G to check the lower end of your rails. If you feel you are taking too much off, put the reed aside, and come back to that reed tomorrow. When I think I have the reed where I want it, I then polish it.

To polish the reed, lay it flat side down on a piece of glossy paper, or the glossy side of your fine sandpaper, on a flat surface. Place your first 3 fingers on it, spread them so that the pressure is evenly distributed along the reed. Now, rub the reed in circles on the glossy surface for about 10 seconds. Then, hold the flat surface up to the light, looking for a shiny “polish” on the surface. If you see a dull area, repeat the process, focusing on putting just a little more pressure on the area corresponding to the dull surface. Your goal is again to make it all the same. Then, write the date you started working on this reed on

the flat side of the reed below the brand stamp. (I use pencil, but pen or pencil is fine) Put this reed in your guard for the day.

Repeat the same process with that reed tomorrow. You don't want to play the reed too much on the first few days... maybe 10 min. the first day, 15 min. the second day, 20 min. the third day, 30 min. the fourth day, then you should be good. Once you feel you have the reed adjusted to your liking, then rub the heel of the reed and the sides on your glossy surface to polish those parts. Then, use your thumb to remove some nose grease from the side of your nose, and rub it onto the ramp side of your reed. This effectively seals the reed, keeps it this way for a long time, and improves your tone and response.

Remember, stay away from the Tip of the reed and the Heart when you are sanding. Focus on the Rails. The higher you work on the reed, the higher the register you are affecting. If you sand the rails on the lower end towards and into the shoulder, you are affecting your chalumeau register. The upper end of your rails towards the tip affects your altissimo register.

Be patient as you work on your reeds. The first few times, you might ruin a reed, so start by working on reeds you think are horrible, and just see if you can make them better. Experiment, practice, and get better.

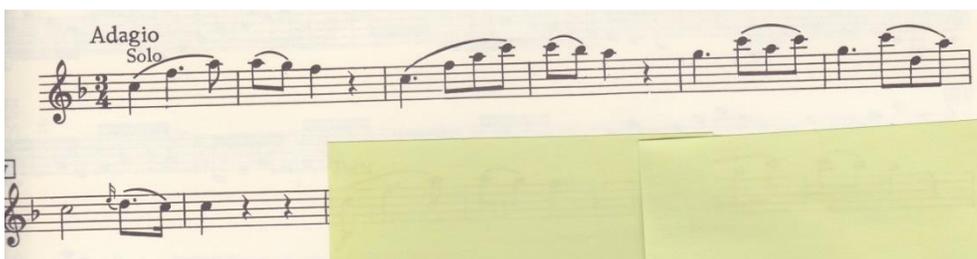
Usually, my reeds sound their best after I have been playing on and working on them for about 1 month, and then they continue to sound good for about another 2-3 months beyond that. I like to keep the temperature of my reed box around 72 and the humidity at 60%.

Excerpts for Testing Your Reeds:

This excerpt from Respighi's *Pines of Rome* tests the reed's smoothness of legato and response in all registers:



The first theme of the 2nd mvmt of Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto* for smooth tone and response at quiet volumes:



Check for clean staccato response by playing the opening theme of *Scherzo* from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*:

4 **In B.**
Scherzo.
Allegro vivace.
CLARINETTO I.

Nº 1.

p

dim.

cresc.

p

tr