

Ten Quick Tips for Young Trombone Sections

The trombone can be an intimidating instrument to teach, particularly if the director has little experience playing the instrument. Young trombonists are sometimes left to “figure it out,” leading to low retention rates and poor performance habits. Here are some practical ideas for giving young trombone sections some extra attention and direction.

1. Move the tuning slide out (and back in) every day.

On the first day with the instrument, include tuning slide adjustment to the order of assembly. Once the instrument is assembled, the tuning slide should be pushed (not pulled) out one inch. When the trombone is being disassembled, the tuning slide should be pushed back in, prior to putting the instrument in the case. The students will learn good maintenance habits, and the tuning slide will not become frozen. Generally, the students will also play with a darker sound from day one.

2. Slide cream, not slide oil. If you are not able to convince local music dealers to stock rental trombones with slide cream, purchase some and swap with the students for their slide oil. Slide cream works, slide oil doesn't. Slide cream should be applied only to the stocking (bottom four inches of the inner slide) to prevent over-application.

3. Drill slide positions into muscle memory. We are all familiar with the hapless trombone student who prefers to write in positions, rather than learn the names of notes. Of course, learning the names of the notes is important. But, the knowledge and muscle memory of where to place the slide is just as crucial. Every day, spend 30 seconds asking your young trombone sections to “show me 3rd” or “show me 6th” (without playing). Reinforcing the exact physical feeling for each slide position builds confidence. This quick drill should be combined with “show me E flat” or “show me C.” During slide position drills, the teacher should make constant (and quick) adjustments. Even if the student is close, an adjustment of an inch or smaller reinforces the importance of exact slide placement. In particular, the difference between 2nd and 3rd positions can become blurred if not reinforced regularly. There are no notes in 2 ½ position in sixth grade!

4. Continue to adjust slide positions as students grow physically. Students grow at different rates, including arms. Be on the lookout for growth issues throughout the year, and especially after summer and winter breaks. Sixth position will (hopefully) not always be “as far as you can reach.”

5. Buzzing, of course! Daily buzzing, with plenty of air support, develops big, dark sounds and improves pitch matching ability. On an unrelated note, as students grow and develop, a “double buzz” might occur for some students on certain notes played on the expanding range of the trombone. This occasional buzz on certain notes will go away naturally, as students are encouraged just to “play through it.”

6. A picture is worth a thousand words. Model both right and wrong. Modeling great trombone tone and technique inspires our students. Modeling an error – and then asking the students to verbally identify – builds critical thinking skills and nuance. The responses might be surprising. “You’re tonguing too hard!” “You’re puffing your cheeks!!” “You played E flat instead of E natural” “You only have one lip in the mouthpiece!!!”

7. Use 12C mouthpieces as a last resort. Small mouthpieces will encourage a thin, small sound. The 6 ½ AL mouthpiece is a fine size for most beginners, allowing for the development of bigger, darker sounds with better air support. Occasionally, there may be a student who struggles playing above the second partial, in which case the 12C might be an appropriate switch.

8. Slurring isn’t difficult. A lengthy explanation about “going against the grain” is confusing to an eleven-year-old. Initially, consider teaching trombonists to tongue every slurred note (using a “dah” legato tongue). Slide motion must continue to be fast. Later, students can be taught to use natural slurs. By referring to natural slurs as lip slurs with slide motion, students can easily make the connection.

9. Operate the water key only by hand. Many young trombone players are not tall enough to open the water key by hand while blowing air through the trombone to “help” the water out at the same time. If young students operate the water key by foot, the result can be damaging to the trombone slide. Opening the water key by hand will get most of the water out, even if the student cannot yet reach the mouthpiece at the same time.

10. Double tonguing will improve single tonguing. Double tonguing can serve several purposes for students in their early years of trombone playing. Properly introduced and demonstrated, double tonguing is not difficult, and can add clarity to the students' single tonguing articulation. Naturally, a student must first have a solid embouchure. Young brass students enjoy working on their double-tonguing, because it is a challenge that is attainable, and when done correctly, is impressive.

Trombones add an important and unique timbre to our school ensembles – concert band, marching band, jazz band, etc. A little extra attention can go a long way in helping students to stay motivated and enjoy playing the trombone.

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