

Middle School Brass Basics

Compiled by Ryan Kerwin

Breathing:

“Wind is the fuel that makes our instruments work. By learning about breathing, we make our instruments easier to play.”

Principles:

“Wind always moves in or out, it never stops.”

“Wind always goes up and over the tongue”

“Our instrument works best when we are between 80% and 20% full.”

Basic Games:

1. Getting Wind Moving

- a. “Fly the Kite”
- b. “Spin the Pinwheel”

2. Focused Wind

- a. Straw
- b. OK sign

Tone:

“Our tone is our voice on our instrument. It’s the first thing everybody gets to hear.”

Principles:

“Tone = wind + vibrating surface”

“We only hear sound when wind is flowing”

“We don’t need to use the tongue to make tone”

Practice Strategies:

1. Breath attacks → Practice starting the notes with wind and no tongue
2. Long tones → Start the tone with wind (no tongue!) and let the beginning, middle, and end of the note sound the same
3. Long Tones with Dynamics → Start the tone with wind and change the dynamics
4. Long Tones with Bends → Start the tone with wind and “wobble” the pitch.

Tone

"First Notes"

Goal: Use wind to produce tone in the middle register throughout the dynamic range

drawn from Dr. Robert Sears

1. 

2. 

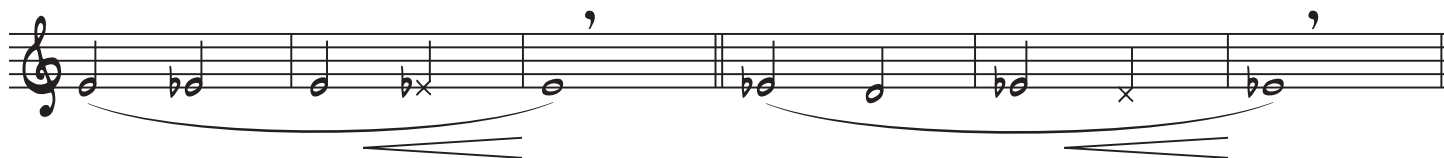
*all tones may begin with a breath attack to reinforce an exhale

Pitch Bends

Inspired by Ryan Nielsen/David Hickman

Goal: Discover and sustain the "center of the pitch" in the middle register

1. 





2. 



* x-notes are bent down to pitch without using valve/slide

Changing Pitch with Fingers or Slides:

Principles:

“Valves are on or off like a light switch/Throw the slide from position to position.”

Practice Strategies:

1. Ear Tunes → Start the tone with wind and play songs you know how to sing on your instrument
2. Descending Intervals → Start the tone with wind and play scales with crisp transitions
3. Moving Longtones → Start the tone with wind and play scales with crisp transitions

Descending Intervals

1.

2.

"Moving Long Tones"

Goal: Sustain the center of pitch while expanding to the upper register

drawn from Vincent Chicowicz

*all exercises can be expanded to the low register
by transposing down chromatically

Articulation:

“Articulation is how we pronounce the beginning and the end of our notes.”

Principles:

“Articulation = constant wind + ‘T’”

“The wind always moves!”

“Legato = connected wind/Staccato = ‘lifted’ wind”

Practice Strategies:

1. Ear Tunes → Start the tone with wind and play songs you know how to sing on your instrument
2. Repeated Notes → Make a beautiful sound and hear a clear “T” on every note

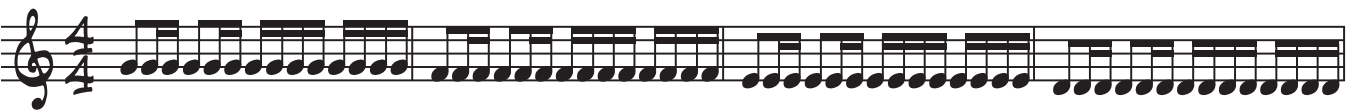
Articulation

1. 



2. 



3. 





4. 





Changing Pitch without Fingers or Slides:

“To change our pitch we change our whistle”

Principles:

“The lips only vibrate”

“Higher pitch = faster vibration = higher pitched wind”

“Lower pitch = slower vibration = lower pitched wind”

Practice Strategies:

1. “Pitched wind” → Use a gentle whistle to practice moving between the pitches
2. “Mouthpiece Glissando” → Use the mouthpiece to slide through the pitches

Slurs

1.

Exercise 1 consists of two staves of music in 4/4 time. The first staff contains three measures of music, each with a slur over two notes and an accent mark above the second note. The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter). The second measure has a sharp sign before the G4. The third measure has a flat sign before the B4. The second staff contains four measures of music, each with a slur over two notes and an accent mark above the second note. The notes are: D5 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter). The second measure has a flat sign before the D5. The third measure has a flat sign before the B4. The fourth measure has a sharp sign before the A4.

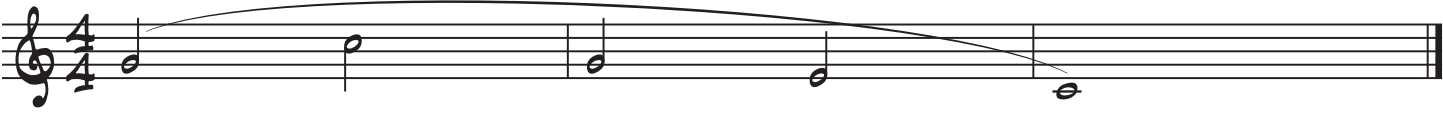
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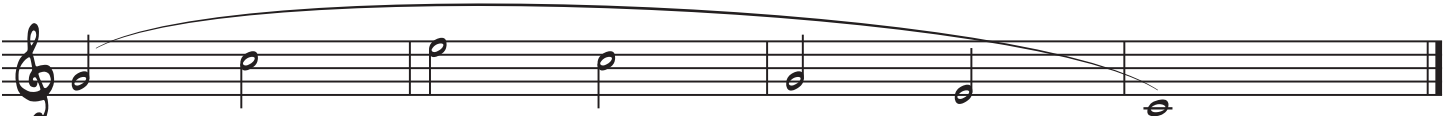
Exercise 2 consists of two staves of music in 4/4 time. The first staff contains three measures of music, each with a slur over two notes and an accent mark above the second note. The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter). The second measure has a sharp sign before the G4. The third measure has a flat sign before the B4. The second staff contains four measures of music, each with a slur over two notes and an accent mark above the second note. The notes are: D5 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter). The second measure has a flat sign before the D5. The third measure has a flat sign before the B4. The fourth measure has a sharp sign before the A4.


3.

Exercise 3 consists of two staves of music in 4/4 time. The first staff contains three measures of music, each with a slur over two notes and an accent mark above the second note. The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter). The second measure has a sharp sign before the G4. The third measure has a flat sign before the B4. The second staff contains four measures of music, each with a slur over two notes and an accent mark above the second note. The notes are: D5 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter). The second measure has a flat sign before the D5. The third measure has a flat sign before the B4. The fourth measure has a sharp sign before the A4.

"Linear"

1. 

2. 

3. 

*all exercises can be expanded to the low register
by transposing down chromatically

"Alternating"

Inspired by John Schlabach

1. 

2. 

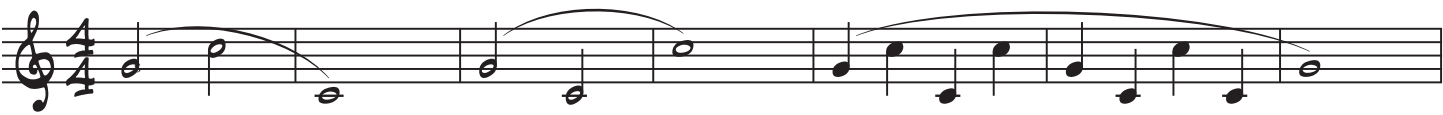
3. 


*all exercises can be expanded to the low register
by transposing down chromatically

"Skipping"

Goal: Keep wind spinning while slurred from center to center, without hearing the "in-between partial"

drawn from Bai Lin

1. 

2. 

*all exercises can be expanded to the low register
by transposing down chromatically

Ryan Kerwin is a music educator and trumpeter from Morgantown, West Virginia. As a teacher, Ryan is passionate about making music education approachable and accessible to students with musical interests outside of the traditional band, orchestra, or choir curriculum. Ryan currently serves as Adjunct Professor of Music at West Virginia Wesleyan College, Associate Instructor of Trumpet and Jazz Improvisation at the WVU Community Music Program, and as an Administrative Intern with the West Virginia Governor’s School for the Arts and the annual Jazz Port Townsend workshop in Washington state. In addition to these responsibilities, Ryan maintains an active performance calendar as a classical and jazz trumpet player. He has performed with professional ensembles including the Stephen Phillip Harvey Big Band, the WV Brass Quintet, and the Pittsburgh Jazz Orchestra, and alongside noted jazz artists such as Michael Davis (HipBone Music), Nadjie Noordhuis (Maria Schneider Orchestra), and Sean Jones (Jazz at Lincoln Center). His playing is featured on the upcoming NewStream Brass album, “A Step Forward” and his jazz septet project, “Gratitude,” both available on Spotify and Apple Music.



Ryan received a B.A. in Music from the Ohio University Honors Tutorial College, an M.M. in Jazz Performance from the Frost School of Music at the University of Miami, and is currently pursuing a Master’s degree in Music Education from West Virginia University. At Frost, he studied jazz composition and arranging with keyboardist Martin Bejerano and Dr. Stephen Guerra respectively. Ryan’s primary mentors on trumpet include John Schlabach, Dr. Robert Sears, and multi-Grammy winner Brian Lynch.

Get in Touch With Ryan:

