

Fixing Fussy Flute Faux Pas

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After 19 years of music education, I have observed that even though students come from a variety of musical backgrounds, they often have the same issues. I have comprised a list of the most common issues that I have found in intermediate and advanced level flute players. While this certainly isn't the definitive list of issues that students face while playing the flute, I have captured those that are often the most prominent that get in the way of successful performances. This check list is designed to assist band and orchestra directors and anyone else that is working with young flute players, who are not flutists themselves, to quickly identify some of the common problems of student players not producing a characteristic clear and beautiful tone.

1. Instrument assembly - Alignment is usually the problem. Most young flute players either disregard the proper alignment or never learned it. Make sure that it resembles the picture provided in the band method, with means aligning the tone hole with the first key of the middle joint, and aligning the post of the footjoint rod with the middle of the last key of the middle joint.
2. Incorrect Hand Position - This usually creates problems with balance, affects the clarity of the tone produced, and hinders facility which usually reveals itself when trying to play more technical types of passages, or even the simple changing of C to D in the staff. The flute should rest at the base of the left index finger allowing the fingers to naturally land on the centers of the keys. The thumb should be comfortable resting on the B-flat key and the B-natural key. The right hand fingers should rest naturally in the center of the keys and the thumb should be positioned beneath the index and middle fingers of the right hand underneath the body of the instrument. Young students often allow the fingers to hang way over the keys and place the right thumb in an unnatural position. Also, the flute can be slightly less than parallel with the floor. Also, because of the unique posture required for flute players, it is a good idea to only assign one flute player per music stand.
3. Placement of the lip on the lip plate - The roll down method is an age old method but is not fool proof. Sometimes this causes the placement of the lip plate to be too high or too low. Students should place the edge of the lip where the skin changes to the edge of the tone hole on the lip plate. I call this 'edge-to-edge' and works very well. Students often produce a clear tone right away.
4. "Smiley-Faced" embouchure - this results in an okay sound but focus is lost in the middle and low register, and tends to produce a pinched sound in the upper register. There may also be a complete loss of tone production altogether in the lower register. The best embouchure is produced by relaxing the corners of the embouchure downward, keeping the lower lip tissue relaxed, and tightening only in the center. The tightening is controlled by the upper lip.

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5. Playing sharp all the time - First make sure that no pads are compromised, but if they are in tact, chances are the headjoint could be pushed too far into the middle joint (beginners are notorious for pushing it all the way in) or the headjoint itself can be rolled too far out preventing the airstream from going into the tone hole. Also, overblowing can cause sharpness, coupled with clenched teeth.
6. Playing flat all the time - Again if there are no instrument issues, the headjoint can be pulled out too far, or is too far rolled in, in which the lip is covering the tone hole preventing proper airflow.
7. Incorrect Fingerings - So many students do not vent the left hand index finger on D and E-flat in the staff, and many students begin using some alternate fingerings rather than the primary. For instance for F-sharp in the staff, many students use middle finger on the right hand instead of the third finger. If the third register F sharp is prone to crack, then using middle finger is acceptable. An alternate fingering that is encouraged but is often over-looked is the Thumb B-flat. It is recommended that students use the Thumb B-flat rather than the one-and-one B-flat that is normally taught. Thumb B-flat allows students to avoid contrary motion and provides better facility when playing flat scales and requires only one finger when changing from B-flat to C. The B-natural left thumb resting position on the flute is best utilized when playing the chromatic scale or in sharp keys where B-natural is most often used. Advanced students may also begin experimenting with the lever B-flat as well. This is again, a better option than the one-and-one B-flat.
8. Incorrect trill fingerings - This is probably an issue that many woodwind instrumentalists encounter. When nothing is indicated, assume the trill is to be executed from the main note up one whole step in the key of the music. Newer music often will indicate if another note is to be trilled, for instance the half-step, or if the trill should be downward. Most trills are simple, but some can be a little bit tricky particularly in the third register. A trill chart can be found online for very tricky or awkward trills. Either refer the student to a fingering chart, or to a reliable trill chart.
9. General Equipment Problems - When the flute is not producing any sound or a really strange sound there is probably something wrong. So often when it is a young player, it is easy to blame the student. Flutes have so many keys and rods that it is easy for a screw to come out or for a key to go out of adjustment. Some of these are easy fixes but others are more complicated. If you do not have a lot of repair experience, do not guess or assume. Take it to the shop and let a professional diagnose the problem. Even when it is a young player, try to provide the best possible instrument available. Investing in good equipment will assist in providing a good beginning experience. When the equipment is iffy, you will never be able to truly assess the student's talent.
10. Transitioning to open-holed flutes - There comes a point in every flute players' journey when they outgrow the closed-holed model. It limits the ability of mature students to be competitive when intermediate and advanced players are still playing on beginner model instruments. If students have committed to playing the instrument in high school and are competing in All-County, District, and State settings, it is safe to assume that student is ready for an open-holed model. To reinforce proper hand position, all plastic plugs should be discarded upon purchase. When students purchase the open-holed flute and still use the plugs to compensate for tone hole coverage, chances are hand position needs adjustment, or the flute itself is not a good fit for the student. There are many models of open-holed flutes with several different specs. Consult a flute professional to help assist with finding the best instrument for the student. Remind parents that students can get scholarship assistance when paying for college for participating in band and for majoring or minoring in music. This is an investment with an almost guaranteed return and that their child deserves every advantage that they could provide.