Bassoon Reeds

By Devin Hawthorne

for BCMEA 2026

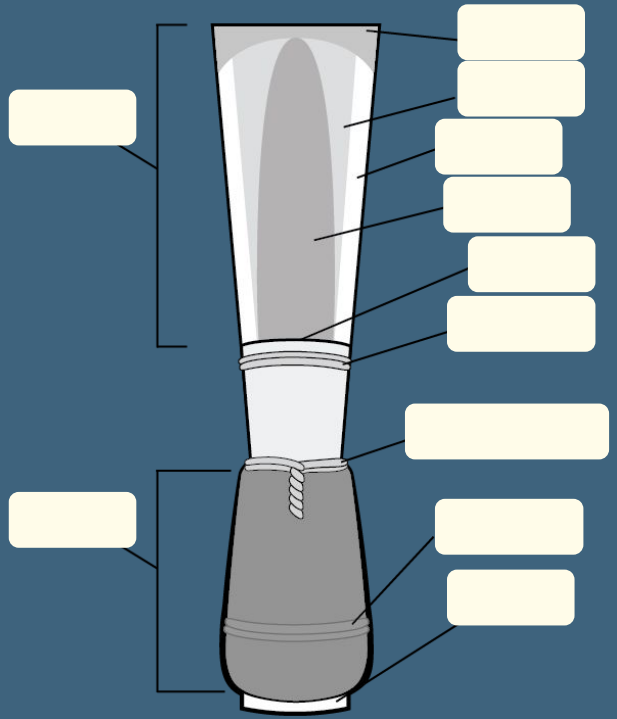
A BIT ABOUT ME

My name is Devin Hawthorne (he/they) and I am from Victoria BC - the unceded traditional territory of the lək̓ʷəŋən-speaking peoples including the Songhees and Xʷsepsəm nations.

I've been playing bassoon for 13 years (since the summer of Grade 6)! I hold Bachelor's degrees in Music and Secondary Education from the University of Victoria, which I attended from 2019-2025.

In addition to performing on bassoon in Greater Victoria and on Salt Spring Island, I TTOC for middle and high school music in SD63 (Saanich), conduct the Greater Victoria Junior Concert Band, and teach private bassoon lessons.

Reed Anatomy



Store-Bought Reeds

- Eastman, Danzi, and Jones are all generally good brands - I typically use Eastman medium-hard reeds and adjust them to my needs.
- Avoid Carlton, Emerald, Selmer (plastic), and Légère (plastic, $$$).
- Reeds should never be bought in a strength below medium - one can always take cane off to make the reed more responsive.
- Store-bought reeds typically need a bit of adjusting after purchase; this can include needing to replace the wires & wrapping, scraping the blades, or making the bottom of the reed the right size for your students' bocal.

Choose Your Fighter!

GOOD REED	BAD REED
Typically costs $25-40	*Typically* costs $15-25
28 mm from the first wire to the tip - use a ruler!	First wire too low or too high relative to the tip
Blades start narrow, get wider, and are thinnest at the tip, thickest at the back	Blades are straight, without much flare, and may be irregularly thick in places
The tip of the reed ‘smiles’ - the opening is symmetrical	The tip of the reed is flat, or very open, or lopsided
The base/butt is circular, free of debris, and flat across the bottom	The base is misshapen and/or has loose cane fibers inside
The wrapping is clean and strong, with no lumps or gaps	The wrapping is inconsistent, has gaps, may be unspooling

Modifying Reeds I

- So, you followed all my advice, and the reed you just bought still isn't working well! **This is totally normal. Most reeds require post-purchase adjustment.**
- First and foremost, here are the tools you or your bassoon student will need to modify reeds. In total all of these items will cost about $300 but it is necessary to have these tools to work on reeds in a good way. A bassoon is an expensive instrument, no 2 ways about it…

Reed Equipment

The best place to buy all reed-making materials and equipment (except for thread, which you can get at Michael's or other craft stores) is Reed Supplies Canada.

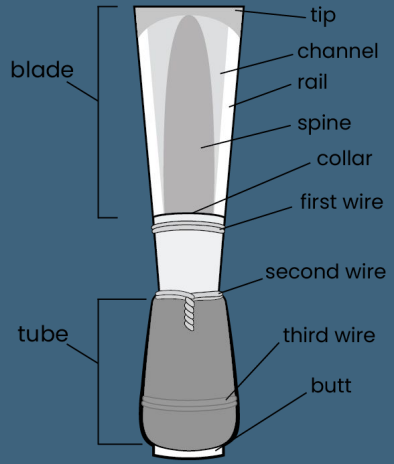
This link takes you to their full reed-making kit, which has everything one could ever need for reed-making. Peruse their site for individual items and pre-made reeds as well!

Reed Supplies Canada

Troubleshooting I

Here's some common reed issues and how to fix them

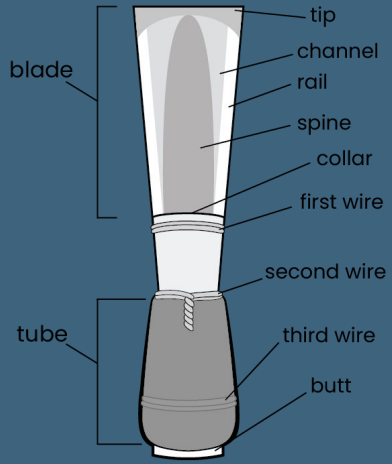
- ***The reed is not responsive/feels 'resistant' or 'hard' despite good air***
  - Soak the reed, put a plaque (slide 6) in between the blades, then try taking off a small amount of cane from the rails & channels with a file, particularly toward the tip. Try to balance both sides so they appear equally thick.
  - If this doesn't work, take a nail file across the very tip of the reed, *gently*. If things are still feeling tough, try and take a small amount of cane off the back of the reed using a small diamond file (slide 6), towards the collar.
- ***The reed sounds 'buzzy' or 'hissy'***
  - This probably an issue with the butt of the reed *or* with the wires. Soak the reed, push it firmly on a mandrel, and squeeze it into shape with pliers.
  - If this doesn't work, take of the second wire and replace it (see slides 10 & 11).
  - If it's still troublesome, do the same with the first wire as well. As a last resort take off the thread wrapping and change the 3rd wire, then rewrap the reed (see slide 14).



Troubleshooting II

More common issues and how to fix them

- ***The reed won't play in the higher register***
  - First, make sure student is using good, fast, supported air. If it seems like they are, the reed may be on the softer side or be imbalanced, particularly near the collar and rails.
  - Tighten or change out 1st and 2nd wires (see slides 10 & 11)
  - Look for obvious 'thick spots' on the cane in the channels or rails, try and balance things out with a file.
- ***The reed is flat in terms of pitch***
  - Once again, ensure good air. If this doesn't help, the reed is probably slightly too long. Start by filing across the very tip with a regular nail file.
  - Cut a small amount of cane off the tip very carefully with an Exacto knife or, if by some chance you have access to one, a reed tip-cutter!



Putting on Wires

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Tips for wires:

- Always do wire work (removal and replacement) on a mandrel (see slide 6) in order to preserve the tube and butt of the reed
- Only use 21- or 22-gauge brass wire
- Make sure that the pliers you are using have a spring to help hold them open while you work
- More is better; cut off a fair bit of wire (3-4 inches) the first couple of times to give yourself lots of room for error
- Never tighten a wire enough to dig into the cane, only tighten enough that it doesn't move up and down easily

Reaming/Forming a Reed

Reaming/Forming a Reed

Tips for Reaming/Forming:

- Never ream a wet reed or form a dry one, as this will result in many negative consequences for the reed and your equipment
- Try to use the same brand of reamer and mandrel, as they will work best to make a consistent tube
- Clean and dry reamers and mandrels after each use
- Do NOT substitute these tools for things that ‘look similar’ from a woodshop or tech space!!

Wrapping Reeds

Wrapping Reeds

Tips for Wrapping:

- Always wrap on a mandrel, and have an exacto knife handy
- Use thread that is 100% cotton - size 10 cotton thread works best
- Never wrap a reed that is soaking wet - instead aim for mostly dry (not bone dry, as the reed will have shrunk)
- Only seal reeds with Duco Cement - other sealants and epoxy products don’t work as well
- Wrap reeds in different colours to tell them apart easily

Time to Practice!

We are now going to do some work on reeds together!

1. First, some reaming on dry reeds (if there are any reeds that need it).
2. Then, some wire work - this is the most important skill to have.
3. Then either scraping or wrapping (or both if we have time)!

Feel free to work by yourself or in small groups on your reeds.

I will do my best to circulate and help everyone out :)

Thank You!

Your attendance today is so appreciated. I hope you learned something valuable that you can take back to your bassoon students of all ages!

Take good care, and please feel free to contact me at devinmhawthorne@gmail.com or 250-896-2905.