Bassoon Reeds

By Devin Hawthorne

for BCMEA 2026

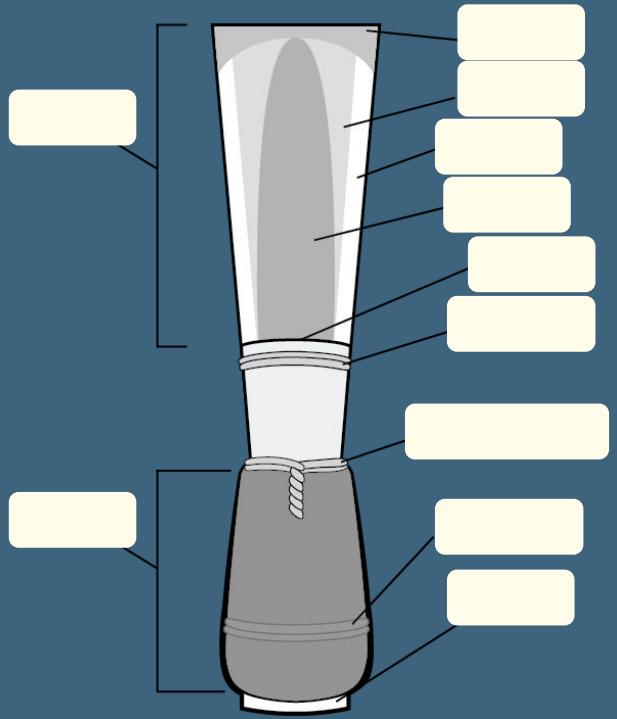
A BIT ABOUT ME

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 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, 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 perfect! **This is totally normal. Most reeds require post-purchase adjustment.**
- First and foremost, here are the tools you or your bassoon stud[illegible]d to modify reeds. In total all of these items will cost about $120-$150 but it is necessary to have these tools to work on reeds properly.

Forming Mandrel

Pliers (w/spring)

Diamond Files

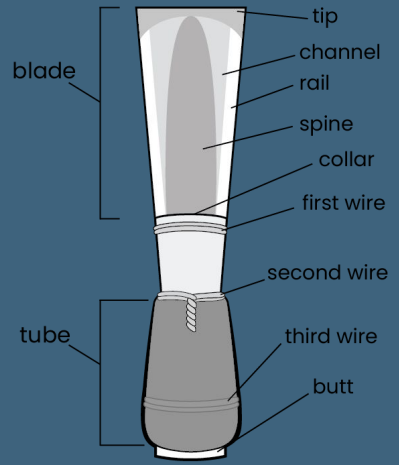
Arrow Plaque

22 Gauge Brass Wire

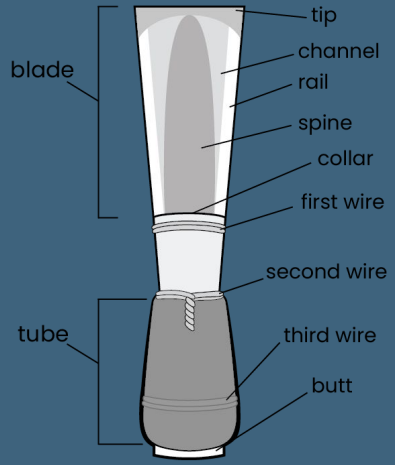
Modifying Reeds II

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

- The reed is not responsive/feels 'resistant' or 'hard' - soak the reed, then try taking off a small amount of cane from the rails & channels, 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.
- The reed sounds 'buzzy' or 'hissy' - probably an issue with the butt of the reed *or* with the wires. Soak the reed, push it firmly on the mandrel, and squeeze it into shape with pliers. If this doesn't work, take of the second wire and replace it. If it's still troublesome, do the same with the first wire as well.



Modifying Reeds III

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

- The reed won't play in the **higher register** - make sure student is using good, fast, supported air first and foremost. If it seems like they are, the reed may be on the softer side or be imbalanced. Change out wires, see if there are any obvious 'thick spots' on the cane, and try and balance things out.
- 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. Cut a bit 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!