

Improve Your Sound Immediately

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# Essential Reed Setup Tips

**BetterSax** 

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## **In the next few pages...**

This document is a quick guide to some essential tips for setting up reeds on your saxophone or clarinet mouthpieces. There are certainly many, many more tricks and secrets to optimizing your reed performance, but I just wanted to get you started with the my top 10.

First, let me introduce myself. My name is Jay Metcalf. I'm a professional saxophone player, educator and repair technician. I have been studying the saxophone for the last 30 years and would like to share some of what I have learned with you. I run a website and YouTube channel called [BetterSax.com](http://BetterSax.com). If you find this helpful, I hope you'll like my videos, subscribe to my channel and visit my website to find more information about becoming a better saxophone player.

# 10 Essential Reed Setup Tips

*get a better saxophone sound*

*make playing easier*

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# 1. Choose the Right Reed Strength

Make sure you are using the correct strength reed. If you are just starting out I recommend using a number 2 strength or soft reed. Have a look at the reed comparison chart below. When purchasing, be sure you are getting the right reed for your instrument. Alto saxophone reeds only work on alto saxophones etc.

## Reed Comparison Chart

Brand	◀ Softer ————— Harder ▶▶▶																
Reserve							2		2.5		3		3.5	4		4.5	
Reserve							2		2.5	3	3+		3.5	4		4.5	
Grand									2.5		3		3.5		4		
Rico Select				2S		2M		2H	3S	3M	3H	4S	4M	4H			
Hempke						2		2.5	3	3+	3.5		4				
Plasticover	1	1.5		2	2.5		3		3.5			4	5				
La Voz				S	MS		M		MH			H					
Rico Royal	1	1.5		2	2.5		3		3.5			4	5				
Rico		1.5		2	2.5		3		3.5			4					
Vandoren	1						2		2.5	3		3.5		4		5	
Vandoren							2.5				3		3.5	4	4.5		5
Vandoren ZZ	1		1.5	2	2.5				3		3.5		4		5		
Vandoren	1		1.5	2	2.5				3		3.5		4				
Vandoren		1		1.5	2	2.5				3		3.5		4	5		

## 2. Optimal Reed Condition

Inspect the condition of your reed. If it is cracked, chipped, or badly warped, it probably won't work very well or at all, and should be discarded. Reeds are expensive, so be sure to handle them very carefully.

The tip is especially delicate, and it's best to avoid touching it. When putting your reed on the mouthpiece, make all your fine adjustments by pressing on the sides and heel of the reed. Familiarize yourself with the different names for parts of a reed using the diagram below

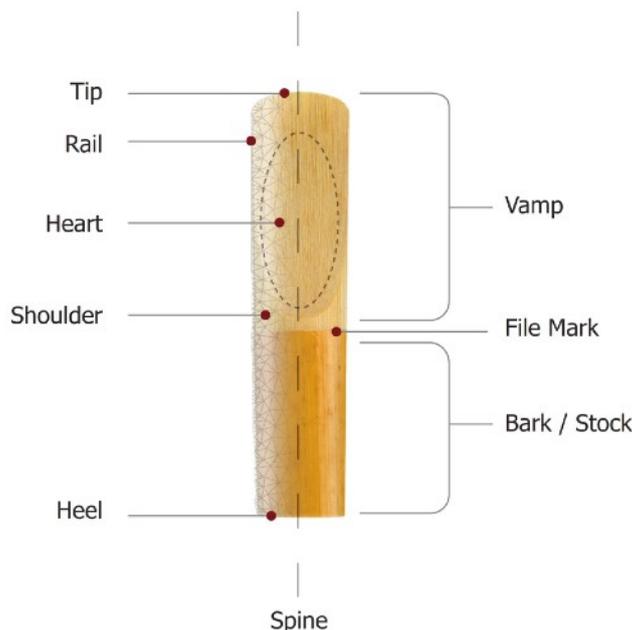
split reed



warped



chipped reed



### 3. Strength (Doesn't) Matter



As you progress, don't feel the need to increase your reed strength to more than a 2.5 or 3. This is the range that most players use.

There is a tendency for younger players to get the idea that they should keep moving up in reed strength as they advance. This is not the case.

You want your saxophone setup to be very free blowing and if your reed provides too much resistance, your sound will become stuffy and you will have to work much harder.

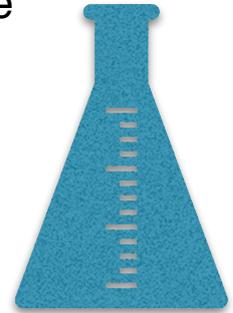
Once you've reached the 2.5 or 3 level, you may never need to move beyond that.



Here are some different reed brands with their strength indicated at the bottom.

## 4. Experiment with Strengths and Brands

Reed strength varies slightly from reed to reed within the same strength and even within the same box of reeds. Which strength is right for you depends on how much you play, and the tip opening of your mouthpiece. A more open mouthpiece needs a softer reed and a more closed mouthpiece needs a harder reed. I recommend experimenting with different strengths and brands to find the best match. You can buy just a few of the different strengths from various makers to test them out, and if some are too hard or soft, you may still use those in the future if you change mouthpiece, or change the amount of playing time. (softer reeds are good for long practice sessions) Harder reeds can be broken in over time.



## 5. Vary the Tip Height

The tip of your reed needs to be lined up with the tip of the mouthpiece, but a slight variation in placement can change how the reed plays. Try sliding a soft reed up a minimal amount (no more than a millimeter) so that it protrudes just over the tip. This can increase the resistance, and make it play better. A reed that is a bit too hard, can be slid down to be just below the tip to make it easier to play.



## 6. Centered Ligature

Adjust the placement of the ligature so that it too is perfectly centered on the reed and mouthpiece. {photos good and bad} Have it sit below the filed part of the reed somewhere in the middle. You may vary this position to see if it changes the way your reed plays for you. Some players prefer the ligature to be higher up. Tighten the screws so the reed will not move when you are putting the mouthpiece on the neck cork and turning it back and forth. You can make it pretty tight without hurting anything. Don't go so far that you break your ligature or crush the fibers of the reed though.

Good



A typical ligature well lined up and centered on an unfiled reed. This one has the screw on top.

Good



A simple ligature style well lined up and centered on a filed reed. This one has the screws

Bad



This ligature is on backwards. The screws should be on the right side and with the reed.

Bad



This ligature is crooked. The screws are not centered on the reed.

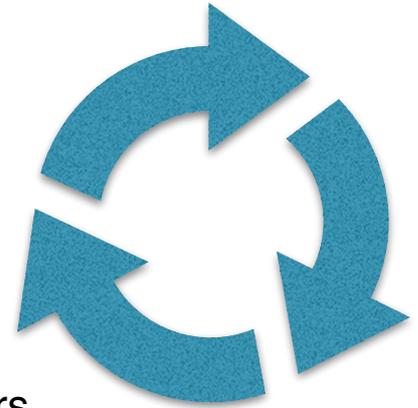
## 7. The Suction Test

Get in the habit of performing the suction test on your mouthpiece each time you've put your reed on and before you put the rest of your horn together. Place the open end of your mouthpiece against the palm of your hand, and suck the air out of the opening with the reed while closing your mouth around the mouthpiece. This should create a vacuum inside the mouthpiece chamber and hold the reed closed for a few seconds making a loud pop sound when the seal is broken again. The better your reed is sealing on your mouthpiece, the better the pop sound, and the longer it will take. If you are not getting this seal, your reed will not play well. Go back and find what needs to be corrected, or change your reed.

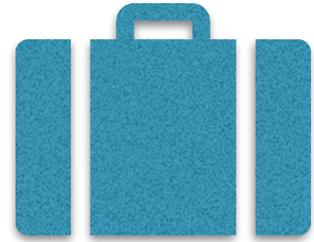


## 8. Rotate reeds

It's a good idea to have a few reeds going at any given time. Since they are all slightly different, you'll notice that some play great right away, but after a short time, they grow weak and there's not enough resistance. Others start out a bit too resistant, but loosen up over time and can be used for much longer. Still others don't seem to work at all. Don't throw these away. There are adjustments you can make on reeds to salvage the bad ones, and even make the good ones play better. Try to always have at least 1 reed that plays great in your rotation, and the others should be getting broken in, or a bit past their prime, but still good.



## 9. Get a reed case



Remove your reed from the mouthpiece every time you finish playing and put it in a protective case. Most reeds come with a disposable plastic case which is better than nothing, but you really want something that seals and keeps some moisture locked into the reed. You can make your own with tupperware, or purchase one. Vandoren and Rico make good affordable reed cases. I prefer and recommend the one made by Rico.



The Rico reed case that holds up to 8 reeds and works with clarinet, alto, and tenor reeds.



The Vandoren reed case that holds up to 4 reeds and only works with one type of reed at a time.

## 10. Try New Reeds

Always be introducing new reeds to your rotation and experiment with different brands. You may find that your reeds can last quite a while if you follow all of the previous tips. This is a great thing, but make sure you try a new reed at least every week or so to either add to your rotation, or replace one that is well past its prime, or never really got to a good playable stage. Sometimes a new reed that plays great can energize your playing and make practicing and performing a lot more fun.

## Summary

There are several equipment factors that directly affect your ability to get a good sound on the saxophone. Reeds are just the starting point in a chain of elements that need to all work well for you to get the best sound out of your instrument. Your mouthpiece and ligature play a very important role in shaping your sound as well. And of course, your saxophone itself, needs to be in top working condition or all is for naught.

Visit [www.betersax.com](http://www.betersax.com) for more articles, downloads and videos about improving your sound, and optimizing your equipment.

Don't forget to check out my [Pentatonic Foundation Course](#), that teaches you how to use the pentatonic scale to learn melodies by ear and improvise in popular music styles.