

# Flute Teaching Tips for Instant Improvement

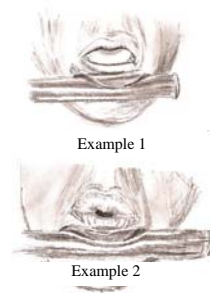
Joanna Cowan White, Professor of Flute, Central Michigan University

When I give clinics around the state, I use concepts that are easy to introduce to help flutists make instant improvements in their playing. I have chosen three ideas or exercises from each of twelve playing categories that students can incorporate right away to jump their flute playing skill to the next level.

## Tone Focus

- Rabbit exercises
- Sonority exercises
- Made up melody

Rabbit exercises, taught to me by Judith Bentley, are the quickest and most miraculous way to improve your sound. Simply put the flute up to play and open your mouth. (Ex.1) Then puff your lips together for short bursts of sound into the flute instead of tonguing. (Ex. 2) While inelegant, this exercise helps you to develop the focus muscles that go all the way around the mouth.



Simple tone exercises, originated by Marcel Moyse, are practiced by flutists around the globe. While there are variants, the basic concept remains the same. Choose one favorite note and make it beautiful. Then slur that note to the next one up or down and make the two notes match. Then match the second note to a third and so on until everything sounds even throughout the range of the instrument. (Ex. 3) I also like to make up a short lyrical patterns or melodies, playing them in many different keys with a singing quality. (Ex. 4)



## Tone Resonance

- Open back teeth
- Use air pockets
- Practice outside

While tone exercises are useful, they do not really help unless you are practicing them with a resonant sound in the first place. Try opening your back teeth more. To learn how to do that, first clench your teeth together. Then put the tips of your forefingers on the outside of your face and push them between your back teeth until the teeth part on both sides of your mouth. Then make an embouchure and play the flute with your teeth apart more than they were.

Walfrid Kujala, of Chicago Symphony and Northwestern University fame, explains how to use air pockets in your cheeks for greater resonance. (“The Benefits of Inflation”, *Instrumentalist*, February 1973) To learn how to do it, put out your flat right hand and hide your thumb in your palm. Then take your hand and place it on your chin with your forefinger resting on your face where the flute goes. Then blow over your hand as if blowing into the flute while letting your upper cheeks inflate slightly with the breath. (Ex. 5) The hand spread out on your lower face keeps the air pockets from creeping to the lower part of your face but allows the mouth cavity to be more open for resonance and lets the vibrato be freer.



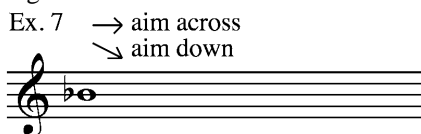
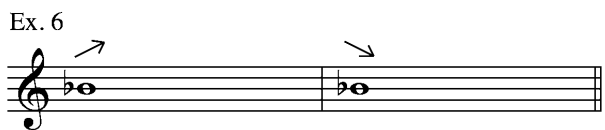
Example 5

The sound you make when you play outside can be fairly small and thin but if you practice outside you can work on resonating in a big space. While not practical in the Michigan winter, I recommend trying this when weather permits. You will be amazed at how much more easily you can fill up a big room with tone after practicing outside. (I learned this many years ago when visiting Yosemite right before a concert. The experience of trying to fill up Yosemite Valley with sound will never be forgotten.)

## Lip Flexibility

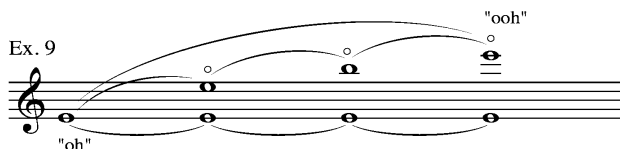
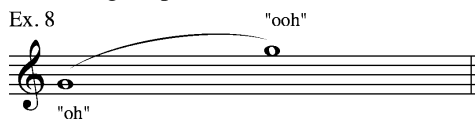
- Pitch bends
- Octave slurs
- Harmonics

Just as athletes must be flexible to perform well, flutists must have lip flexibility to make easy changes in register, dynamics, and intonation. You can start with a pitch bend or two. Popularized by Trevor Wye in his *Practice Book 1*, Tone; pitch bends help the lips to be supple. Simply play an easy-to-bend note like a low Bb on the staff and go up above the pitch by angling the lips with the lower lip more forward than the upper lip and with the chin up, using the vowel sound “U”. Then bend the note down by angling the lower lip back and the upper lip more forward. (Ex. 6) Open the back teeth, angling the air more in to the flute and using the vowel sound “oh”. When you bend the pitch down, the tongue needs to be lower in the mouth as well. (Ex. 7)



Octave slurs are a good every day exercise. (Ex. 8) Start on low G and slur to the middle octave by making the opening in your lips smaller and changing the vowel sound in your mouth from “oh” to “ooh”. Your lips come out over the embouchure hole ever so slightly. Do this instead of using more air to change octaves because if you do it by adding air, you will always play louder in the upper register. To move to the upper octave, close the aperture in your lips slightly and angle the air slightly higher. You can

understand this concept by blowing at your hand with your mouth open a bit and then again with the lips more closed. The small-aperture breath is faster because the air travels through a smaller space, speeding up the vibrations. By definition, faster vibrations make a higher pitch.



Now try slurring up through a harmonic series in the same way. Play a low E natural. Make the aperture smaller and the angle of air higher with your lips coming out a fraction more over the embouchure hole until the low E becomes a middle E. Keep getting smaller and higher until the fifth above, a B natural, pops out, and eventually you will get a high E. (Ex. 9) You could also slur up through the harmonic series by blowing harder but, again, you would always have to play louder as you got higher which would not be very convenient.

### Breathing In

- Hands on ribcage, then chest and abs
- Breath while raising arms, then lower
- Use breathing devices: spirometer, breath builder, etc.

While there are numerable breathing exercises, a few simple ones can make an immediate impression. Put your hands on your ribcage (not on your sides but on the actual bony ribs) and take a breath. Feel your ribcage expand as you take in air. This can give you the feel for taking a deep breath. Now put one hand on your chest and the other hand on your abdominal area and breath again. Feel both hands move out together. The upper hand shows you how your ribcage expands to make room for more air in the lungs and your lower hand shows how everything inside you moves out when the diaphragm muscle descends.

Try taking a breath while raising your arms over your head at the same time. Then lower your arms *without* letting out your breath and notice that your ribcage is still expanded.

Some people benefit from using a spirometer, which measures how much air you can take in (like a peak flow meter) or a breath builder which teaches you to blow out forcefully. (This is the device with the ping pong ball in it.) These items as well as others are now available at many music stores.

### Blowing Out

- Hold breath with mouth and throat open
- Blow paper against wall
- Blow candle flame

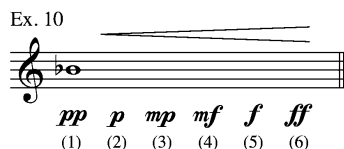
The previous exercises for taking air in help all wind players, but flutists have the added problem of not letting the air out too quickly since we do not have the natural resistance of a reed or mouthpiece. Try holding your breath with your mouth and throat open to get the feeling of not letting the air escape too quickly. For practicing breath support, (steady air behind the tone,) for loud playing, try blowing a piece of paper against the wall for as long as possible. If you blow too hard you are done too quickly and if you blow too softly the paper falls. For breath support for soft playing, blow (or imagine blowing) a candle flame until it bends. If you blow too softly the flame does not bend and if you blow too hard...you can imagine the result.

### Dynamics

- Cresc/decrec with tuner
- Loud, then soft with tuner
- Number dynamics

It is important to be able to play in tune as you change dynamics on the flute. The following simple concept helps students understand the principle behind the dynamic-to-intonation relationship. You need to blow more air to play louder. But if you merely blow more air without changing anything else, the pitch will rise because more air is being forced through the same opening and the vibrations get faster. So as you add air to play louder, increase the size of the aperture to accommodate the extra air. This means as you go from soft to loud, you will be going from vowel sound “ooh” in your mouth to vowel sound “oh” as you add air. A decrescendo is the opposite: decrease the air and go from “oh” to “ooh”. The other reason this works is that when you say “ooh” your lips move ever so slightly farther out over the embouchure hole making the distance to the back wall shorter which makes the vibrations faster. Once you can crescendo and decrescendo with a tuner registering on zero, try playing separate notes with different dynamics without pitch dips or flares.

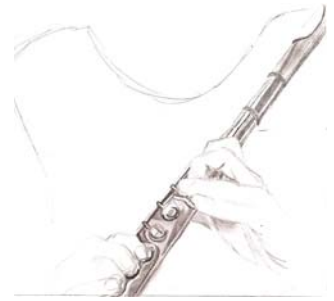
Oboist Marcel Tabuteau used numbers to practice dynamics. Try a simplified version as shown in the diagram. (Ex. 10) Choose one pitch and play two quarter notes at each number. (Ex. 11) Can you play the full dynamic range of number one to number six smoothly?



## Fingers

- Down/Release
- 1-5-1
- Use note grouping

Practicing the down/release exercise from flutist Tom Nyfenger is a magical way to improve technique. Curve your fingers and move each as a unit from the knuckle on the hand. Start with your head joint resting on your left shoulder so you can see your fingers on the keys and finger a low F. (Ex. 12) Now, instead of lifting your right first finger to get to G, simply release the muscle you used to depress the F key so that the key opens but you are still touching the key. Try it a bit faster and then very fast like a trill but stay touching the key so that motion is efficient. Now that you have done this while watching your fingers, actually play the same thing. Then try E to F and other two-note combinations. Try two-finger combinations like E to G. Try three notes in a row like E-F-G-F-E. Now you are ready for notes 1-5 in a row and back down in every major key. (Ex. 13)



Example 12

Ex. 13

each played slow to fast

Another way to get your finger technique stronger is to work on the mental and musical aspect of technique by using William Kincaid's note grouping across the bar-line idea when the phrase or scale continues to the downbeat of the next bar or past. This attention to the anacrusis creates musical motion and gets your brain thinking forward across the bar-line in technical passages. (Ex. 14)

Ex. 14

1 [2 3 4 1] [2 3 4 1] [2 3 4 1] [2 3 4 1]

## Double Tongue

- Koo Koo, then Koo Too, then Too Koo
- Keep notes long and then speed up
- Give the tongue a workout each day

This surefire approach to double tonguing never fails. The tongue is a muscle so strengthen the weaker part of it by playing passages using all "koo koo koo koo". Keep notes steady and long and coordinate fingers and tongue, only gradually speeding up. Now put the weaker syllable on the strong beak with "koo too koo too". Finally try real double tonguing but keep the notes long, even, and coordinated, working up the tempo gradually.

- 1) koo koo koo koo
- 2) koo too koo too
- 3) too koo too koo

Each day work a bit longer after your tongue gets tired to make the muscle stronger. It is like working up to one hundred sit-ups; most people cannot just start at one hundred. You need to develop the stomach muscles (or tongue muscle in this case.)

## Vibrato

- Tongue a pattern, then use breath staccato to play it.
- Expressive melody
- Divide a quarter note by smaller and smaller increments

Tongue a pattern such as eight eighth notes. Then play it slurred with breath accents only and then try smoothing it out. (Ex. 15)

Ex. 15

Divide a quarter note by two vibrato wavers (a change in pitch and dynamic). Then divide the quarter note by three. With the metronome on quarter note equals 60, gradually work your way to divisions of nine. (Ex. 16) (Apple, blueberry, alligator, opportunity, follow-the-yellow-brick, autobiographical, alligator-alligator, blueberry-blueberry-blueberry)

Ex. 16

ap - ple blue - ber - ry al - li - ga - tor op - por - tun - i - ty fol - low the yel - low brick  
au - to - bi - o - graph - i - cal al - li - ga - tor al - li - ga - tor blue - ber - ry blue - ber - ry blue - ber - ry

Almost all flute vibrato is produced in the throat with the larynx; only exaggerated slow and wide vibrato comes from the abdominal muscles. Now make a short melody and put the fastest vibrato on the expressive peak of the melody. (Ex. 17)

Ex. 17

## Intonation

- Check unisons and octaves with a tuner
- Play melodies in unison and octaves with others
- Work on vertical intervals: start with perfect 5ths and major 3rds

Check each note on your instrument with a tuner to see the tendencies of your instrument and then check the octaves as well. To get good at matching unisons and octaves, play scales and melodies in unison with someone who has a good ear.

But then you need to realize that playing in tune goes beyond the tuner. Pure intervals in nature sound better when the notes are tuned in “just intonation” instead of in equal temperament. A perfect fifth for example sounds jangly or dissonant when both notes are in tune with a tuner because the slightly audible difference tone, the mathematical difference between the two frequencies, clashes. If you widen the interval slightly by having the upper person raise the pitch, (just two cents which is two hundredths of a half step), the chord sounds consonant and beautiful. So try making a perfect fifth in every key sound good by widening the interval slightly. Then try major thirds where the top note needs to come down fourteen whole cents. (Ex. 18)



Can you do that in every key? The ability to make these consonant intervals sound good makes a player sound more advanced.

Just Intonation Chart			
Distance	Interval	Adjust from tempered by approx.	
5 half steps	Perfect Fourth	narrower	- 2 cents
7 half steps	Perfect Fifth	wider	+ 2 cents
4 half steps	Major Third	much narrower	- 14 cents
3 half steps	Minor Third	much wider	+ 16 cents
9 half steps	Major Sixth	much narrower	- 16 cents
8 half steps	Minor Sixth	much wider	+ 14 cents
2 half steps	Major 2nd	wider	+ 4 cents
1 half step	Minor 2nd	much wider	+ 12 cents
11 half steps	Major 7th	narrower	- 4 cents
10 half steps	Minor 7th	much narrower	- 12 cents

### Body Alignment

- Drop head and roll up until balanced
- Make head and arms go opposite way for several seconds
- Use Lea Pearson’s *Body Mapping for Flutists*.

The simplest exercise for tension free playing only takes a minute. Roll your head down with chin toward chest. Then slowly roll the head up until the moment the head feels balanced (on the spine) and you do not have to tense your neck muscles to hold your head up. Then, while turning your head and upper body slightly to the left, bring your flute all the way to you instead of bringing your head to the flute.

Since we turn our head and upper body to the left to play the flute and since our arms go to the right, it feels good and helps prevent injury to reverse the movement several times during a practice session. Simply put your flute down, turn your head and upper body to the right and bring your arms up to the left as if you were playing a mirror image flute. This lets you stretch the opposite way and releases any tension.

Since understanding how to play flute without creating extra tension in the body can help you to sound good and can prevent injury, Lea Pearson’s invaluable book, *Body Mapping for Flutists*, helps us to understand the body in relation to holding and playing the flute.

### Lip Care

- Stay hydrated
- Apply lip products when lips are wet to seal in the moisture
- Remove lip products before playing

Since our lips are our reeds, it is very difficult to make a good sound with chapped lips so it is best to keep them from getting dry in the first place. The secret is to put lip products on when the lips are wet so you are sealing in the moisture instead of sealing in the dryness. But you will need to wipe products off before playing. Drinking plenty of water also helps to keep lips from drying out.

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**Joanna Cowan White**, professor of flute at Central Michigan University, and principal flutist with the Saginaw Bay Orchestra and Midland Symphony, also performs with the Powers Woodwind Quintet, Eclectic Trio, and Crescent Duo. The chamber groups can be heard on Centaur Records (*Flights of Fancy*, *Bremen Town Musicians*, and *The Clarinet Chamber Music of Alvin Etler*,) and White Pine Music (*Woodwind Echoes*). Joanna White teaches in the All-State orchestra program at Interlochen and writes many articles for publication. With degrees from the University of Southern California, Northwestern University, and the University of Michigan, her flute teachers include Walfrid Kujala, Janet Woodhams, Patricia Garside, Roger Stevens, Thomas Nyfenger, Judith Bentley, Clement Barone, and Leone Buyse.

Illustrations were drawn by **Kailey White**