

# The Four Bassoon Fundamentals

This is an introduction to what is most important to sounding good on a wind instrument—using the wind!

I talk a lot about “fundamentals,” these are just the different physical processes that we manipulate to create sound on the instrument. I divide these into four basic skills:

- The Breath
- The Abdominal Support
- The Voicing
- The Embouchure

These elements are used in every aspect of playing the instrument. Time invested developing control over these will yield great improvements in everything you play. Because of this, I teach my students to begin every day with dedicated time for these in the form of a **Daily Routine**. (For the full Daily Routine, see the section by that name)

**The Breath-** consists of two parts: an exhale and an inhale.

The exhale should empty all of the old air from your lungs, and simultaneously release tension in your body—relax!

The inhale should completely fill your lungs, with the air cueing your abdominal engagement as it reaches the bottom of your lungs.

A good inhale can happen either slowly or quickly, depending on the character of the music and how much time there is to breathe.

A good fast inhale has a sound that naturally diminuendos—this means that your lungs are actually full and the inhalation wasn't prematurely stopped.

**The Abdominal Support-** your abs are the muscles that control how the air moves into the instrument

Try pushing in on your stomach with your right hand while you play the bassoon with your left, can you push against your hand with your abs?

Can you feel your obliques and lower back muscles too? All three areas work together to support the airstream.

The *volume* (or amount) of air moved through the instrument determines your dynamic volume. The speed of that air determines tone quality. That is why it is so easy to have a full tone at a loud dynamic, moving a large volume of air through a tiny aperture like a bassoon reed automatically creates a fast airstream.

It is much harder to have a fast airstream at a soft dynamic, this is where the abdominals come into play. By engaging them outward you can increase the air speed and improve the tone quality at all dynamic levels.

**The Voicing-** like putting your thumb over a hose, the position of your throat and tongue shape how fast the air moves through them—**and** affects your pitch and resonance!

Put one hand on your throat and yawn, can you feel it open and relax? Try playing a low note with that position.

Can you sing middle C above the staff? Try playing that note with the same voicing as when you sang it.

If you play a note with the same position in your oral cavity as if you were singing it, it will naturally be more in tune, with a fuller sound.

This is true even for notes outside of your range! Pretend to sing a low C, feel how ridiculously open you would have to be to sing that note. Now play it with that same position.

Another aspect of the voicing is your vowel shape. Sing a progression of uh-oh-ah-ay-ee on a single pitch. As you move to higher syllables, your tongue moves higher in your mouth, the higher your tongue is, the smaller (and sharper) your oral cavity is, and the faster your airstream tends to move over it. Generally, the higher you play on the instrument, the higher your voicing should be.

Vowel shape also affects tone color, using a lower syllable will flatten and darken the sound. Increase the abdominal support to raise the pitch while keeping the darker sound.

**The Embouchure-** your lips affect how the reed vibrates!

The reed is the real instrument, your bassoon is just a very expensive amplification device. Because of this, the reed deserves great care and attention independent of your practice time!

The lips should add supporting pressure to the reed from all sides evenly, the goal is to cushion and support it without choking off vibrations

This is easy to do on the top and bottom but hard to do on the sides

So focus on the sides! Bring in the corners like you're saying "ooh"

How far to roll your lips in or out depends on how big your lips are, what range of the instrument you're playing, and on the reed itself, be flexible!

How much reed you take in your mouth also affects the way it responds on the instrument. We should be flexible in this regard, have a "standard depth," but be willing to slide in or out to suit your range.

Generally, low notes respond better with less reed in your mouth (making the instrument slightly longer) and high notes respond better with more reed in your mouth (making the instrument slightly shorter).