

Articulation

GOAL: To use your tongue in a relaxed but crisp manner to achieve a clear and focused "ping"

Articulation is just a big word for tonguing. Articulation on any wind instrument is accomplished by using the tongue. Brass players put the tongue behind the upper teeth and say the syllable "tah". Don't get stuck on that syllable. It could be "teh" or "tih" or "toe" or, best yet, "t". This is the sound of an explosion of air, pressurized air, out across the lips and into the mouthpiece. To be perfectly clear about what I mean by pressurization, it is a momentary interruption in the airstream because of a blockage, the tongue. The tongue then stops up the air for just the slightest moment, causing a rise in pressurized air. When the tongue releases the air, you get that distinctive clear articulation pop.

If you have difficulties with articulation, find a teacher that has great articulation. I was fortunate to sit next to a player who had flawless articulation. To be honest, I did not know how to recreate that precision on one note. When I had my first summer vacation from the orchestra (yes! I won a big orchestra job with lousy articulation!), I spent the entire time learning how to properly tongue on the horn. So listen to those who can, so that you can mimic their precision and discipline.

To articulate you must line up three things:

- **tongue release**
- **supported air**
- **embouchure**

If the synchronization is off, problems will arise. Typically, you will hear air attacks or delayed attacks.

Synchronization issues can weaken the air burst for the attack. Try to first coordinate the air and the lip buzz. Attack notes without the tongue for this exercise, saying "who". Even use a metronome so that you form your embouchure just at the right time that your supported air arrives. You should be able to "who" on time. Once that works, you are an honorary citizen of Whoville. Then repeat the exercise with all three: supported air, embouchure formation and tongue. Feel the same air and embouchure rhythm from the first exercise while trying to add in the tongue. The tongue should arrive just in time for the most relaxed articulation. This bodily rhythm helps you have momentum and consistency when you are attacking.

Double check the location of where your tongue actually touches in your mouth. Perhaps your tongue is too wide to articulate cleanly, saying "thah", or the tongue is back from the upper teeth. It is possible to think that you are putting the tongue behind the upper teeth but really have it in a "dah" position. Also, do not let the tongue smooch up into the roof of your mouth like you do when you say the letter "n". It is only the tip of the tongue that is needed to do this job. The motion of the tongue saying "t" may feel like it is going backward or maybe back and down. Either concept should work fine. Most of the tongue is rather docile as you articulate. The focus should be on the tip. This keeps the back of the tongue relaxed so that you can articulate with less stuff to piston around for a faster articulation.

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Another common dilemma is that the player is just not enunciating enough. The tongue is slow or lazy. Tongue speed is a concern as to how quickly the it releases away from the teeth. Use your tongue in a similar way that you would enunciate words clearer. Remember elementary school? Say your consonants tighter and cleaner. Your tongue motion will then gain some pop and sizzle.

I have had difficulty with keeping my air going forward right after the attack. I let out just a small burst of air to start the note, but then I don't keep the air going. The remedy I found helpful is to first play a mock attack while releasing a full air stream, "tooooo". Concentrate on that marvelous support and air stream. Then I just breathe in and repeat that approach while attacking the note. Fixed! Feel that same air stream. To be honest, whenever you go for a first attack, focus on the air stream. Let's hear it for air!

As in all techniques on the horn, supported air (air speed) is critical for great articulation. Never forget that panacea.

Too little air support can mess things up. The air must have speed in order to buzz the lips quickly. When the air is lazy, the attack is lazy. Concentrate on a firmer support set up to fix this problem.

Air pressure needs to be right behind the tip of the tongue, not back in the throat or deep in the mouth cavity. The air needs to be ready to pop. So support your air forward in the mouth just behind the upper teeth. Try a sharp "tih" syllable.

Problems arise in the high register because of the extremes it takes to play up there. We naturally want to get rather tense and then the tongue follows along and gets tense. By this point in the book, you know that that is wrong. Keep the tongue as relaxed above the staff as it is in the middle of the staff. The tongue may rise higher in your mouth cavity

to help produce the higher tones but **add no tension**. Your syllable will be "tee" and free. Play a scale up to high C and hear how your tonguing works.

In the low register the tonguing can get labored and thick. The goal will be to show the listener no difference in the clarity of the articulation from high to low on the horn. Extra care may be needed in the embouchure setting. If the lower lip is soft or weak, then the articulation will be delayed. Read the chapter on low range. *NOTE: The air burst is still critical to get the vibration going for low articulation.* The trick to further help low range articulation is to let the tongue touch away from the roof of the mouth. Yes, allow the tongue to leave home. You will now be saying more of a "thah" syllable. So, the tongue cheats downward, little by little, note by note, somewhere starting near a first line E. Then by a low C you are talking and tonguing like Daffy Duck. I am not kidding!! Give it a try. Just to be clear, I do not recommend that you ever use your tongue to work between the teeth, touching the back of your buzz surface. Very few people make that work.

Moving up a little in the range, the F side of the horn plays less crisply than the Bb side because of the extra length of tubing. You will need to play with a more focused airstream on the F side to get the proper effect as well as a sharper tongue motion. The air will feel more like a fine steam of air as opposed to a wide stream of air, laser air instead of "blowing-out-the-birthday-cake" air. This procedure tightens the mid-low articulation.

The last issue is one I call tongue lock. It is when the tongue is all set to pull the trigger, but then the back pressure and your nerves combine to freeze the tongue right there in your mouth. That is one helpless feeling which is related to the synchronization discussion. The defense against this is to never press the tongue into the upper teeth.

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Don't force the tongue forward. Instead, place the tongue lightly behind the teeth and prepare to recoil the tongue back without feeling any forward push of the tongue.

It may be helpful to relax as much as possible, particularly the tongue. Focus on the air flowing through your embouchure. And don't forget that you are coordinating several physical actions which require a natural rhythm. Review from above. Try not to break your natural pattern.

And that reminds me of nasal lock. That is another malady that I had to fight through. When setting your support, don't pressurize your sinus cavity. That pulls the focus of the support up your nose! How gross! Even today I need to release air pressure through my nose before a high attack to keep me from repeating this bizarre procedure. Man, how did I get a job with all of these problems!

Articulation Checklist

- **The tongue touches at the roof of the mouth behind the upper teeth.**
- **The tongue recoils quickly like the teeth are really hot.**
- **The air is supported right behind the tip of the tongue.**
- **The tongue releases in a short recoil either back or back and down.**
- **The embouchure is relaxed for easy and clear buzz response.**
- **There is proper synchronization between the air, the lip and the tongue**
- **The back of the tongue is relaxed.**
- **NEVER stop the note with your tongue—"tut"**
- **Strive for a percussive "pop" on the attack**
- **Keep the embouchure soft to help articulation clarity**
- **Keep the air moving**
- **The tongue floats in the air stream**