

CLARINET ARTICULATION

5 Techniques You Need to Know

A practical guide to clearer attacks, resonant accents, short staccato, soft attacks, and fast finger-tongue coordination.

Think of articulation as a palette.

Your goal is enough control to choose the sound that fits the music.

Inside this guide

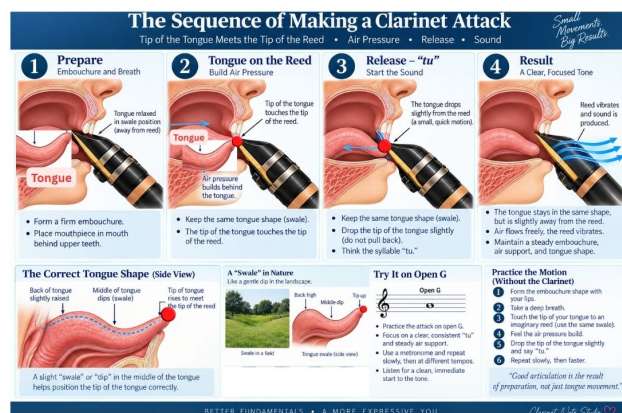
1. The Basic Attack
2. The Ping
3. Short Staccato
4. Soft Attacks
5. Finger-Tongue Coordination

Use this guide with your instrument in hand. Read a concept, try the exercise slowly, listen, and repeat.

Articulation Syllables

The following articulation syllables work well on the clarinet. Think of articulation as “talking on the reed.” **Useful syllables include tu, tee, du, and dee.** Tu and tee tend to give a more focused beginning; du and dee give a softer, more rounded quality. Tee and dee can be especially useful in the throat and upper registers.

Avoid ta, da, tuh, duh, toe, and doe if they cause the tongue to sit too low or move too far from the reed.



1. The Basic Attack

The word “attack” can be misleading. We do not want the tongue to hit or smack the reed. Instead, think of starting a note as a sequence: prepare, build the air, and release.

The tongue does not create the sound. It releases the sound.

A clean attack

1. Form a stable embouchure and take a deep breath.
2. Place the tip of your tongue on the reed. There should be no sound yet.
3. Build a little air pressure behind the tongue.
4. Release the tongue a very small distance from the reed. Think “tu.”
5. Keep the release clean and consistent from note to note.

Practice away from the clarinet

Form your embouchure, place your tongue against the roof of your mouth, build a little air pressure, and say “**tu.**” This lets you feel the basic preparation-and-release sequence before adding the instrument.

On the clarinet

Start with open G. Place the tongue on the reed, build a little pressure, and release.

Then try this exercise slowly, paying attention to the attack on each note. Try to match the attack on each note.



Your goal: each note should begin clearly and consistently. Keep the tongue movement small; it does not need to travel very far.

2. The Ping: A Resonant Attack

The clarinet can produce a ringing, resonant beginning to a note, especially when you want a strong accent. Think of this as a “ping.”

How to create the ping

1. Prepare the note mentally and physically before you play.
2. Place the tip of your tongue on the reed.
3. Build enough air pressure behind the tongue.
4. Release the tongue quickly while keeping the air moving forward.
5. Listen for a clear, resonant beginning rather than a hard “hit.”

PING! = prepare → build pressure → release

Practice

Start slowly on C1. Give yourself enough time to prepare the air pressure before each release.

C1: PING • PING • PING • PING

Ping + note length

The beginning and ending of a note are separate choices. A note can have a resonant ping followed by a short staccato, or the same resonant beginning followed by a longer, gradual decay.



3. Short Staccato: Clip the Note, Not the Air

Staccato means detached or separated, but staccato does not always mean extremely short. Here we're focusing on short staccato because it develops control that transfers to other articulations.

CLIP THE NOTE — NOT THE AIR

The basic idea

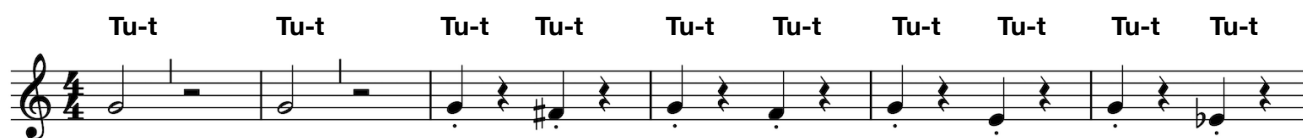
Start the note with “tu.” At the end of the note, bring the tip of the tongue back to the reed to stop the vibration. Keep blowing. The tongue stops the sound; the air keeps moving.

Practice away from the clarinet

Say: tuuu-T (stop) — tuuu-T (stop.) Feel the tongue release and then return to the same general position.

On the clarinet

1. Play an open G for a half note.
2. Keep the air moving and use the tongue to stop the sound.
3. Keep the tongue on the reed during the rest.
4. Keep the embouchure firm but relaxed and the air pressure consistent.



As the notes get shorter, do not stop the air. The tongue simply becomes faster at stopping and restarting the vibration.

Watch out for

Do not bite the reed or collapse the embouchure to make a note short. Short should not mean weak or pinched.

4. Soft Attacks: The “Whoo-Too”

This concept is based on Larry Guy's wonderful book *Articulation Development for Clarinetists*, available through CAMCO Music. The “whoo-too” is a useful way to practice very soft attacks, especially in the upper register. The key difference from the basic attack is that the air starts moving before the tongue creates the attack.

Basic attack: tongue → build pressure → release → sound

Whoo-too: air starts → tongue enters the airflow → sound

Practice away from the clarinet

1. Form your embouchure.
2. Start the air and say “whoo.”
3. Keep the air moving.
4. Bring the tongue into the airstream and say “too.”
5. I personally like to start with my tongue on the reed and start the air first (Whoo), then release my tongue from the reed (Too). Try both ideas and see what works for you.

On the clarinet

Try a very soft upper-register note. You may hear a small amount of air before the note speaks. The goal is for the air to already be moving when the tongue creates the attack.

WHOO → TOO → soft, clean note

Practice idea

Choose several upper-register notes and start them repeatedly at pianissimo. Focus on keeping the air moving and avoiding excess lip pressure.

Listen for

The note should speak softly without sounding fuzzy, late, or pinched.

Air Starts -> Tongue



*Opening passage from C.M. von Weber's *Concertino for Clarinet*.

5. Finger-Tongue Coordination

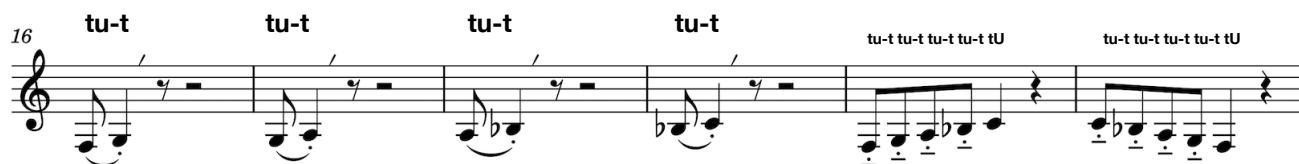
Fast staccato is not just about moving the tongue faster. Your fingers and tongue have to coordinate so the next pitch is prepared while the current note is still sounding.

Prepare the next fingering while you are still playing the current note.

Practice

1. Start slowly with a simple pattern, such as F–G–A–B.
2. While one note is sounding, begin preparing the next fingering.
3. As the tongue returns to the reed to stop the current note, the fingers should already be moving toward the next pitch.
4. Keep the air pressure consistent.
5. Gradually increase the tempo and reduce the space between notes.

F → G → A → B
slow → faster → clean and coordinated



Once comfortable

Practice in different keys, then use scales, arpeggios, broken thirds, and fast staccato passages from your repertoire.

The goal

Your fingers and tongue should feel coordinated rather than like two separate jobs.

Quick Reference: Your Articulation Toolkit

Use these five techniques as tools. The goal is flexibility—not one single articulation for every situation.

Technique	Think	Main focus
1. Basic Attack	Prepare → pressure → release	Clean, consistent starts
2. The Ping	Prepare → build → release	Resonant, energized attack
3. Short Staccato	Clip the note, not the air	Stop the sound without stopping the air
4. Soft Attack	Whoo → too	Air begins before the tongue; soft, clean starts
5. Finger-Tongue Coordination	Prepare the next fingering early	Fast, synchronized staccato

Daily 5-Minute Practice

- 1 minute — Basic attacks on open G
- 1 minute — Ping attacks
- 1 minute — Short staccato: half → quarter → eighth notes
- 1 minute — Soft “whoo-too” attacks in the upper register
- 1 minute — Finger-tongue coordination with a simple scale or pattern

Listen first. Practice slowly. Keep the air moving. Let the tongue stay small and efficient.

A note about experimentation

These are tools to explore rather than rigid rules. If you encounter a different approach from another teacher or method, try it, listen carefully, and keep the approach that produces a clear, comfortable, musical result for you.

Friendly Word of Advice: If the tip of your reed is too thick, it doesn't matter how well you articulate, your reed will not respond. Good articulation is based on a good relationship between articulation skills/fundamentals and reed response.

0.004 in.
0.007 in. • • 0.007 in.

Ideally, the tip of your reed should be close to these measurements. If the center tip of the reed is over 0.005 in., you will probably find it difficult to articulate cleanly on the the mouthpiece.

Tip of the Tongue to the Tip of the Reed
or
Keep Tongue Forwardly-Placed in the Mouth

