

Voicing and the woodwinds

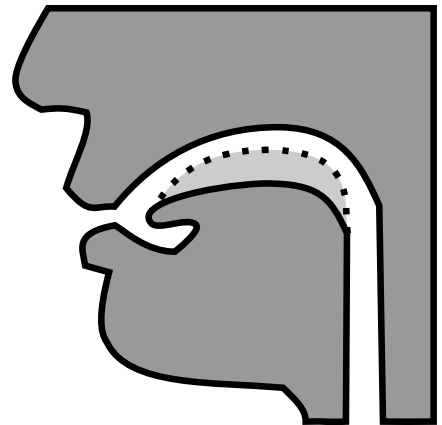
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What is voicing?

“Voicing” is most easily understood in terms of some common ways that we already use it. For example, form a small aperture (opening) in your lips, and, without changing the opening, try the following:

Say “EE”	...then...	Say “OH”
Blow cold/fast air	...then...	Blow warm/slow air
Whistle a high note	...then...	Whistle a low note

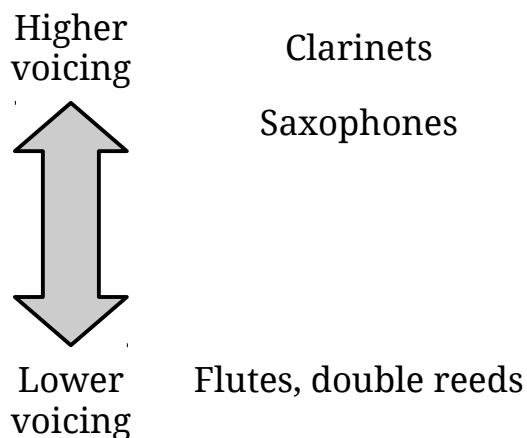
In each case, moving from the left column to the right column involves changing the size and shape of the oral cavity (the space inside your mouth). This is done primarily by changing the position of the back of the tongue. The examples in the left column correspond to a “high” voicing, and the examples in the right column correspond to a “low” voicing. Notice also that you can create many shades of voicing in between: say “AH,” blow air that is a little warm or a little fast, or whistle a mid-range note.



Each of the woodwinds requires a certain voicing in order to get the best results. Tone, intonation, and response are all affected by voicing. At a beginner level, the primary object is to habituate a single “correct” voicing on the instrument, which essentially remains unchanged regardless of register, dynamics, etc. When students have advanced enough to be able to effectively use a variety of tone colors and to adjust pitch for individual notes, they will do so with very small, temporary adjustments to that basic voicing.

Correct woodwind voicings

Clarinets generally require the highest voicing possible without straining, and flutes and double reeds use the lowest voicing possible without straining.



Saxophones are slightly more complicated because the player must hit a precise target in between. To find the correct voicing, play on the mouthpiece alone, with a well-formed embouchure, strong breath support, and at a *forte* dynamic. Without changing those things, adjust the voicing until the correct pitch is produced.



Diagnosing voicing problems

Too low

A *too low* voicing is a common problem on clarinet and saxophone. It generally results in:

- Tubby, unfocused tone
- Poor response, especially in upper register
- Flat/unstable pitch

Too high

A *too high* voicing is a common problem on flute, oboe, bassoon, and saxophone. It generally results in:

- Thin, weak tone
- Poor response, especially in lower register
- Sharp/unstable pitch