

Tips to Make Your Reed Last Longer

by Dr. Richard Ramey

- Always soak your reed in water, not your mouth. The blades of the reed need to vibrate at a speed of hundreds of vibrations per second. Saliva is of a thick consistency and when it permeates the blades of the reed, it dampens these vibrations. Soaking the reed in the mouth is comparable to soaking the reed in molasses. The blades will eventually become more pliable but the medium in which you are soaking the reed—the molasses—will not allow the blades to vibrate freely. Saliva contains enzymes that break down cane fibers over time (this is the reason why reeds go down hill in terms of performance). It is best to soak your reed in water for 2 minutes before playing on it. Get in the habit of putting your reed in your soaking cup before assembling your instrument and getting your music organized. By the time you are ready to practice, your reed will be adequately soaked.
- Make sure that your mouth has been rinsed clean of any food and beverage that you have recently consumed. Food particles and certain types of beverages will either coat or permeate the blades, cutting down on the reed's ability to vibrate properly.
- Always rinse your reed before you put it away after your practice session. You can do this simply by placing it back in your soaking cup, leaving it there while you disassemble your instrument and pack up your music. The last thing that you should do is put your reed in your reed case. Remember to wipe off the blades with your thumb and forefinger before putting it away. Do this each time you practice or rehearse.

- Never allow your reed to soak in water longer than 2 minutes (don't leave it in your soaking cup for 5, 10, 15 or more minutes). Doing so will waterlog the reed and help to break down the cane fibers quicker.
- If you buy a reed that comes in a plastic vial or box, do not store it in the same container. These containers are meant only for shipping to the point of purchase. They are air tight and placing wet reeds in them will allow mold to grow. Mold destroys a reed's ability to vibrate correctly. Buy a designated reed case that holds 5 to 10 reeds. Make sure that this case has venting holes which will allow air to circulate.
- Always have a selection of reeds from which to choose. Rotate the playing of these reeds regularly to help break them in and so they will last longer. Playing on the same reed day after day takes a toll in terms of the constant saliva blown through the cane fibers and the amount of time the blades are exposed to vibrations. Letting the reed sit for a few days between playing sessions is the best way to extend its life. Keep in mind that a reed will respond differently each time you play on it. A reed that was working great one day will probably not play the same the next time you play on it. Reeds are subject to the changes in weather that happen each day.
- Develop a habit of regularly replacing the reeds in your reed case. Don't allow yourself to play on reeds that are months old. You will have a much more enjoyable time on the instrument if your reeds are in good working order and not worn out. Don't be concerned about the cost of a replacing a reed. It's a necessary expense when you play the bassoon.

- If you play on a reed with string wrapping, check to make sure that this wrapping is tight around the reed tube. As a reed ages, this wrapping may become loose. You can recoat the wrapping (from 2nd wire to the butt end) with Duco cement or nail polish to make it adhere to the reed tube. It is important to have the wrapping remain tight on the tube so that it creates an airtight seal. A loose wrapping will also allow the blades to shift slightly, creating response problems.
- Always hold the reed by the tube section and not by the blades. The blades are very delicate and can chip or crack quite easily.
- Never leave your reed on the bocal when taking a break. Always remove it and place it on your music stand or in your reed case.
- Learn how to make small adjustments to the blades during the life of the reed. Adjusting the wires on a bassoon reed is easy and the results are reversible if you make the wrong adjustment. You should have a small pair of pliers in your case or accessory bag at all times for this purpose. Another adjustment that you can make to the reed is to sand the blade with a 600-grit wet/dry sanding stick or sandpaper. During the sanding process, you can concentrate on specific areas of the blade or simply sand the entire area. You'll need a plastic plaque and holding mandrel for this adjustment process. Reeds become less responsive (harder to blow) as you continue to play on them. Bassoonists need to know how to apply these simple adjustments. Please visit desertrosereeds.com the Bassoon Resources page and Books/Booklets page) for helpful articles concerning reed adjustments.

How long should my reed last?

It depends....

If you play on one reed exclusively (that is, not rotating through your reeds) then it will serve your needs for only a few days before it becomes too hard to play. Rotating your reeds will allow them to dry out and rest between playing sessions. They'll also be able to adjust to the ever-changing weather patterns. Always soak your reed in water for 2 minutes before playing and then rinse it in the same soaking cup as you disassemble the instrument. Make sure that your reeds dry out adequately each day (by placing them in a proper reed case with venting holes). Never store your reed in a plastic shipping container. Don't allow your reed to soak for longer than 2 minutes. Make sure that your mouth has been rinsed clean of any food and beverage that you have recently consumed.

A new reed will need to go through a break-in period. This is simply a process where you play it, let it sit for a few days, then play it again, let it sit, and so on. The first time that you use a reed, play it for only 15 minutes, rinse in water 1-2 minutes, then put it away. Let the reed sit for a day or two, then play on it again for 15 to 30 minutes maximum. Rinse in water and put it away for another day or two. In the next playing session, you can use it for a longer time. Always remember to rinse the reed prior to putting it in the reed case. You should never play on the same reed two days in a row; always rotate through your supply to make them last longer.

Is there anything I can do to make an old reed play better?

Yes there is. Try adjusting the blades with either a reed knife or sandpaper. You can also adjust the wires with pliers. If the reed seems to be beyond playing quality, then there is one last-ditch solution which may allow the reed to respond better for a very short time before finally giving out. That solution is to soak the reed in hydrogen peroxide, commonly available over the counter at drug stores. Place the entire reed in the hydrogen peroxide, and let it sit for 5 minutes. You will see bubbles appear as the solution cleans the reed. After soaking, place the reed under running water to rinse it for a few seconds, then put in separate container of water to complete the rinsing process (let it sit for 3 minutes). The reed may respond better. Hydrogen peroxide actually breaks down the cane fibers in much the same general way that saliva does.