Thinking out of the box!

By Edward Palanker (revised 08)

Reed adjustments made easy, sort of. Fix reeds in minutes not hours.

1 - First day wet for seconds only, play for seconds only, nothing else.
Second day play for several seconds, seal bottom on the back of sand paper. Use #600, #400 or #320 wet dry sand paper or a bastard file if the reed is hard. Careful not to press on the tip of the reed and keep the pressure even.
Third day, play for several minutes; make small adjustments as needed. See the diagram on the other sheet for hints on adjustments.
Fourth day, play for several minutes; make adjustment if needed.
Fifth day, play for no more then 15 minutes and determine if it is a concert, rehearsal or practice reed. Make adjustments as needed again.
Wet – Dry sand paper, 320 or 400 for sanding, 600 for polishing to finish and very fine adjusting, or a bastard file to finish or seal. Use a plate of glass to assure smooth a base when sanding or sealing the bottom of the reed. (Grand Piano top is a pretty good substitute.)

2- How long to wet in water? Several seconds will suffice in most cases. Press tip against mouthpiece to flatten the tip if it has curves.

3-Why a reed sounds good one day and not the next?
Fibers weaken or pores open and do not close or reopen the same as they were before.

4-Humidity control. See other article.

5-Never wet the Bark portion of the reed you can't keep the bark wet during playing. Will also help prevent warping. See other article.

6-Why do people close the pores to prevent the reed from getting water logged and then soak them to absorb water? Good question.
Why use water and not saliva? Water does not have acid to break down cane; it's thinner and will not clog the fibers. Unless you only lick the reed for a few seconds and don't "soak" it in your mouth.
Less chance of sounding water logged.

6-Balancing: See diagram. Touching feely - Feeling the tips of the reed to determine which side is harder or play it with more pressure on one side then the other to determine which side vibrates better, and then take off some wood from the harder side. Remember, the density of the cane is more important than the thickness so you have to determine which side of the tip is vibrating less or more in order to balance it.

7-Why clip a reed? To get more resistance not necessarily to make the tip harder. To help get a more focused or darker, richer sound.
Clipping: Taper the reed first to keep the same proportions. Taking off just a tiny bit of cane from the curve of the tip to the tip, I call it "peach fuss. "This will eliminate the "rough" sound often associated with a clipped reed and keeps the response better. It makes the tip thickness about the same as it was but closer to the thicker part of the reed making it more resistant. Make sure the corners are rounded, not pointed or squared. Use 600 sand paper or emery board to round the corners.

8- Cuts on the back of the vamp and bark, instead of taking wood off. It will not make the low register flat or tone bright as if you were to take cane off the lower portion of the reed. It will only produce a slight difference but will not have any adverse effect. It either helps or does nothing. Usually mellows the sound a tiny bit, takes a little brightness off and gives a better response.

9- Sanding the sides of the reed to "fit" the width of the mouthpiece will often make the tone brighter and more brilliant. Sometimes having the reed slightly wider than the mouthpiece adds mellowness or darkness to the tone. (This is the reason the Vandoren German cut Bb reeds work well on the Eb clarinet and some players use regular Bb reeds instead of Eb reeds to get a darker tone.) Slightly oversized reeds can add body to the sound but I am not advocating using wider reeds nor am I recommending making a reed narrower either. Round off the corners if you do this.

10- Open one box every few weeks as needed, that way you will never be without a good reed. Save the very best ones for important occasions, rehearse on next best, practice on the mediocre, experiment of the worse.

11-See the sheet and diagram for adjustment suggestions. You have to use something in order to take wood off to make these adjustments and you need

a reed clipper or trimmer. Most players use a reed knife, sand paper or reed rush. The ATG tool is a good tool that uses sand paper for general use and the Reed Wizard is helpful for balancing the portion of the reed below the tip where you can't determine which part needs balancing

12- Remember, you can't make a bad piece of cane into a good reed. You should use the poor reeds to practice fixing reeds on to learn by trial and error. You have to have patience and to learn the few steps that work best for you so you don't spend too much time fixing reeds. Break them in slowly, take at least four or five days to break them in and make minor adjustments each day, don't do anything drastic at one time, just a little at a time. Rotate your reeds to make them last longer. Never practice on a reed for more then a half hour at a time to preserve it's life.