

Summary of some important tests I use when making reeds, plus some general advice

Do the sides close? Is the plaque held firmly by the cane, or does it fall out easily? Good reeds don't come from bad tying.

Once the reed is vibrating, use a breath attack and normal playing air to check pitch. The reed should consistently produce a "C" – if it doesn't, clip and rework. Don't waste time trying it in the instrument.

Check the crow – put the reed in your mouth up to the thread and don't try to use an embouchure. The pitch should be somewhere in between a C and C#, unless you have a particularly flat or sharp oboe. The majority of my reeds wind up crowing a sharp C (not C#). The crow will be higher in pitch than the previous test, but shouldn't be more than a ½ step higher.

A two octave crow should be heard in a reed that's started to play. The high octave should speak first, with the lower part entering as you increase air speed.

Once you move the reed to the oboe, continue to use some breath attacks to check notes. High C is especially important. Does it sag? Is it unstable? This may be an indication you have gone too far in scraping a particular part of the reed, and it may need to be reworked or disposed of.

After adjusting your reed for a while, put it in the oboe and check the pitch of middle C and middle B. Are they flat? Check the crow – it will likely be sagging as well. Clip and rework. If C and B are flat, you'll have to fight other notes on the oboe as well. If you have to fight to raise the pitch with your embouchure and air, many musical tasks on the instrument are made harder, or even impossible.

Depth of sound. This is achieved a number of ways, but one of the most fundamental is by scraping the back ("channels," "windows," etc.). A reed that has sufficient depth of sound will almost always respond well to a breath attack on a low D. Test this when you feel that your reed is nearing completion. If it plays low D reliably using breath attacks, you are likely nearing that particular reed's maximum depth of sound. Don't try to make it into more than it's capable of, or you may waste all of the time you have spent on it. It's said that you can't put cane back on. THIS IS TRUE. Learn to gauge a reed's limits. If you try to go beyond them, you'll likely ruin it.

Do not be afraid to "waste" cane. If something doesn't look right, it probably isn't right. Your time is more valuable than the cane is. Find something better. If a reed doesn't show promise fairly quickly, discard it. Your time is more valuable than a bad reed. Spend time on good reeds, not on the usually fruitless exercise of making a bad reed not as bad.

It is often said that it doesn't matter what a reed looks like, it only matters how it plays. THIS IS TRUE. However, a good-looking reed often has good fundamental construction. A reed with good fundamental construction has a better chance of sounding good, because there's probably less wrong with it. When learning reed-making, try to make good-looking reeds.

Stability vs. flexibility. How much of one are you willing to give up in order to get the other? This will differ for each player, and will also depend on the repertoire being played.

Don't try to make a great reed. Just make a reed. Great reeds will come.