

Four Quick Steps to Better Articulation

It was the night before my first big concert with a high school state honor band and I was in a panic. How am I going to learn how to play something that was beyond my current technical ability?

The object of my fear was Henry Fillmore's *Rolling Thunder*, a very fast circus march with several challenging double tongue passages. By that stage of my development as a trombonist, I had only just begun to learn how to double tongue, and that night the demands of this piece were WAY beyond my level of expertise.

At the rehearsal earlier that day, I had felt intimidated by how the other players around had whipped through the piece, tongues and slides flying around like mad. I was about to learn a lesson every musician eventually must accept: humility can be a great source of inspiration.

I was determined to figure out how to get *Rolling Thunder* up and running to the point that I would not be a detriment to the section on the concert.

Where was I going to start?

In the midst of my panic, a very basic idea dawned on me (or someone had told me this before, but it did not make sense until this moment), Playing the trombone consists of four technical elements that must work together:

1. air
2. buzzing of the lips (sound, resonance and flexibility)
3. the slide
4. the tongue.

Before trying to make these things work at once, I knew I had to make sure each of them were in place, building them up one at a time.

Concentrate on Blowing

This is the most fundamental step. Without a steady stream of air [commonly referred to as "air support"] you are not going to make a group of notes into a phrase. "Support" for years implied a "tight belly" or "more air" to many brass players and teachers. Support meant "strength" but this is not the kind of support that leads to musical brass playing.

The key to good brass/wind playing is an airstream that is constant and constantly available. Without steady support each note/phrase can be a struggle.

Buzzing The Right Notes

It is also vitally important to hear and buzz the right notes and to be on the correct partial. If you can't do this consistently, you have no hope of playing any passage, no matter how fast or slow the piece. Fortunately, the range of this piece was not too extreme. The melody is built mostly in scale shapes and there are not many wide intervals. In other words, I could play every note on its own or slur to and from any note without much trouble.

Moving the Slide

Moving a trombone slide at a fast tempo is a challenge. But I realized I could at least buzz my lips and get my slide moving together near the right tempo. With this pair of skills in place, I could approximate what it would feel what would feel like to articulate it cleanly.

This is exactly what I set out to do first: move the slide and buzz the right notes to make sure that these two elements lined up. Although I began the process quite slowly, I was able to "slur and smear" through the difficult eighth note passages, coordinating the lips and the slide without any tongue, but "in time" and in the way that I would buzz/slide once I figured out how to eliminate the glisses with "just enough" articulation.

Eventually, I continued with this process up to the point where I could blow the notes and move my slide up to tempo. It was far from a "finished product" but the edifice of the part was taking shape!

Throughout this part of of the game, I emphasized keeping the air and slide in motion even though it didn't sound right yet with all those glisses between most of the notes (basically I was striving for a fast, yet unjerky slide that did not move the horn around on my face).

Concentrate on Adding ENOUGH Articulation

Adding the tongue came together relatively fast once I had worked through the first two steps outlined above. Now that my lips and slide were lined up, I just needed to add enough articulation to make it presentable (in this case, I found "tuh kuh" an effective articulation). This process taught me another valuable concept: instead of thinking of the tongue as the initiator of each note, simply add enough tongue to up tempo phrases to get rid of unnecessary smears.

The tongue just provides a little definition to each note as you focus your constantly moving slide and airstream. This works process can be applied to any type of articulation; single, triple, double, doodle, etc.

Eventually, I got the piece presentable for the concert the next day. It was far from perfect , but my experience helped give me a system to work on my single and multiple tongue articulation. I continue to use and expand this four step concept into my whole daily routine to this day.