

Deconstructing Trombone Legato

presented by

Dr. Bruce Faske - Arkansas State University

March 30, 2017

We should first define *all* characteristics of great trombone legato:

1. A soft, rounded articulation on the front of each note. (dee, dah, doh, doo),
2. Efficient, well coordinated position changes, moving as late as possible AND as fast as possible between notes *without disturbing the legato quality*.
3. Fully sustained note values, with *no break whatsoever between notes*.

In my experience, most players are good at #1, but need work on #2 and #3!!!

Articulation Syllables

Beginners: At this level, students are playing in the middle register of the instrument. Beginning with the syllable *dah* will give them what they need and it will not have to be “retaught” later.

As their playing ranges expand in both directions, playing range dictates vowel choice. For the lowest notes, use *doh* or *doo*; for higher notes, use *dee*. The higher tongue arch made when saying *dee* will create the compression and air speed needed to help students play the higher notes.

Slide Technique

In staccato passages, the trombonist actually has more time to move the slide, because they are not sustaining the note right up to the beginning of the next note. In legato playing, trombone slide technique can be summed up in one phrase: “*Wait longer, then move faster.*”

There should be no lazy slide movement between notes. Make the elbow the primary hinge for any movement greater than one position change. The wrist should be relaxed, but not loose. *A consistent slide grip is more important than the choice of slide grip.* I hold the slide with two fingers and a thumb; the ring and pinky fingers are out of the way. My wrist is somewhere between facing my body and facing the ground.

Sustained Tones

In my experience, the vast majority of students can actually take a large enough breath, but they cannot control that breath to sustain anything beyond the students who are shallow breathers, often expelling everything on the first 2 or 3 notes of each phrase! Flutter tonguing, mouthpiece playing (buzzing), and singing passages can all promote better control of the airstream.

Two Roads Diverge

Your choice of trombone legato teaching technique is a choice between *now* or *later*. There are two options available, each with advantages and disadvantages.

Approach #1: "Articulate every note change." (Denis Wick)

Advantage: A blanket rule to cover a multitude of scenarios. Easier learning curve.

Disadvantage: Can result in a legato that is less smooth – a bumpy legato.

Approach #2: "Articulate only to prevent glisses." (Emory Remington)

Advantage: Results in a smoother, "purer" legato.

Disadvantage: Requires more "homework" from the student and takes longer to master.

The first approach (tongue everything *dah*) is more immediately transferrable to what they've already been doing! Simply replace one syllable (*tah*) with the other (*dah*) and they are halfway there. This can get your students in the ballpark, but in my opinion, you are simply kicking the can further down the road. If you currently teach this approach, and feel that your trombonists' legato needs some help, then it might be time to reconsider your approach.

The second approach is a little more complex, and has more rules to follow:

1. If interval and slide move in the same direction, it will result in a gliss between notes.
2. If the interval and the slide move in opposite directions, a "natural slur" or "bump" will be produced *without any additional help from the player*, provided that they move the slide in a coordinated manner and sustain the air through the notes.

Using the first two measures of Cimerá's 55 Phrasing Studies for Trombone (reprinted with permission from the publisher) I will demonstrate what I mean:



In the first two notes of measure 1, the Ab and Bb is an ascending interval with an ascending slide movement from 3rd to 1st position. Therefore, if the player doesn't articulate the Bb, they will produce a gliss between these notes.

However, the Bb to C is an ascending interval with a descending slide movement from 1st to 3rd position. This movement crosses from the 4th partial (Bb) to the 5th partial (C) which creates a natural slur or "bump" without any assistance from the tongue.

If you can make your articulations sound like your natural slurs, you will be well on your way to mastering a legato technique that will serve the student well for the remainder of their playing life, from 4 years to 40 years.

How Do I Get My Students to Match Articulations with Natural Slurs?

We have a wonderful “answer key” built into the trombone to show us how our legato should sound: **lip slurs!** By removing the element of the slide temporarily, we can focus on the sound of the note changes within the lip slur.



Once the lip slur is even, incorporate slide movement into the exercise, striving to match articulations across the phrase, *so that legato tongued notes and natural slur notes sound even.* Take this example from the James Stamp Warmups + Studies for trumpet, adapted for trombone:



Two Roads Converge

I can understand why “dah tongue everything” may appear to be the clear choice for anyone responsible for multiple instruments under the constraints of limited instructional time. It provides a simple, clear directive, and requires less work up front to produce a useable legato. If you use this approach and are happy with the results, then please continue using it!

The second approach does require more work, but in my opinion, it is an approach that encourages continued practice towards better overall playing. If you have the opportunity to work with students on an individual basis, you can lay the groundwork for a better trombone section in the future.

Recommended Materials for Further Study

Below are several etude books I have used successfully with students to improve their overall technique, which improves legato technique. If you play trombone, the best book you can use with students is a duet book! Give them a sound and approach as a model!

Middle School/Junior High:

Cimera ed. Mixdorf – 55 Phrasing Studies (Belwin/Cherry Classics Publishing)

Concone ed. Shoemaker – Legato Studies (Carl Fischer)

Fink – Introducing Legato (Accura Music)

Raph – Introductory Melodious Etudes (Carl Fischer)

High School:

Arban ed. Alessi/Bowman – Complete Method for Trombone and Euphonium (Encore Music)

Bordogni/Rochut – Melodious Etudes, Book 1 (Carl Fischer)

Fink – Studies in Legato (Accura Music)

Hunsberger – Remington Warm-Up Studies for Trombone (Accura Music)

H. Voxman – Selected Duets for Trombone or Baritone Volume 1 – Easy to Medium (Rubank)

H. Voxman – Selected Studies for Trombone (Rubank)

Questions? I would love to chat with you! 870-680-8028 or bfaske@astate.edu.