

The Dallas Brass: A Healthy Upper Register on the Trumpet

Garrett Klein

The ability to play in the upper register eludes many young trumpet players and frustrates their teachers. Most people would consider this skill to be “difficult,” but I want to change the way in which we discuss and approach the upper register. Rather than referring to high notes as “hard,” “challenging,” or “difficult,” I advocate a philosophy where the upper register is simply *unfamiliar*. Many students shy away from practicing in their upper register because it is uncomfortable to do so. When students do have to play in the high register, they tend to play with too much pressure, tension, and a lack of air support. This blog post presents a practical approach to teaching a healthy upper register to your students.

“Difficulty” Becomes “Unfamiliarity”

Throwing a ball accurately to another person standing 20 feet away from you seems simple. Hopping on a bicycle and riding down the block is no big deal for most people. Driving your car from home to work is usually a mindless activity. These actions were once “difficult” until we were coached through the process, practiced, and eventually mastered the skill. The same is true for learning any technique that requires muscular coordination and mental focus. Enter the trumpet’s high register. Playing like Doc Severinsen not only takes gusto and style, but it also demands that a player coordinate their embouchure, airspeed, and mouthpiece pressure. Teach your students that they can get those sounds to come out if they are willing to work for it and make the upper register become *familiar*. Here’s how...

The Benefits of Lip Bends

The secret to success in the upper register is through an efficient embouchure. To obtain an embouchure that allows one to have flexibility, a great sound, and a solid high register, doing **lip bend exercises** is essential. Lip bends can be used to help with a variety of issues on the trumpet, from enhancing tone quality to improving endurance. The main purpose of lip bends is really to get the player to pucker their lips forward, creating an embouchure that is efficient.

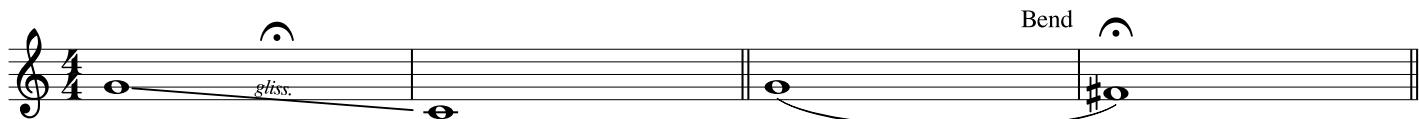
It is worth it for you to take time out of rehearsal to have someone (either yourself or a trumpet professional) to teach your trumpet students how to properly execute a lip bend and explain to them how they should be using these exercises. It is not enough to simply bend a pitch down a half-step and call it a productive practice session. *Lip bends help the most when inserted into other exercises (such as lip slurs, scales, and arpeggios), as well as into repertoire.*

Tip: Look for half-steps in your trumpet players’ music and have them play it as a lip bend (as long as it’s around the middle register).

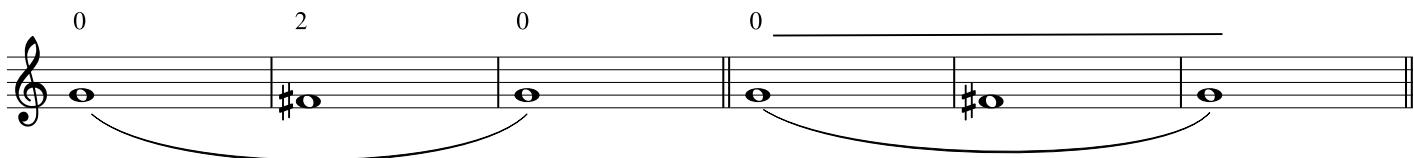
After just a few weeks of concentrated work on lip bends, I’ve seen students play with an easier upper register, better tone quality, improved endurance, and cleaner articulation.

How to Introduce Lip Bends

Start off by having your trumpet players glissando from a middle G to a low C. They should lean into the gliss and have it last as long as possible. This is an easy exercise that all students can do, and it will get them familiar with the feeling of bending a pitch. From there, have them bend down from a G and hold onto that pitch (hopefully an F-sharp).



Then, have them bend from G-F#-G. I strongly advise having them play the bent pitch with the valve first to hear the desired tone quality and pitch.



Next, use this sequence of exercises to show students how to use lip bends in their pursuit of a healthy upper register. Incorporate lip bends into lip slurs and scales first to have the student see immediate results. In no time, they will be able to slur up to notes they have never played before.

Musical notation in G major (4/4 time) showing a three-note lip slur with a bend. The first measure shows a lip slur from a G (open note) up to an A (solid note) and then down to a B (solid note). The second measure shows a lip slur from an A (solid note) up to a C (open note) and then down to a D (solid note). The third measure shows a lip slur from a B (solid note) up to a D (solid note) and then down to an E (solid note).

Musical notation in G major (4/4 time) showing a four-note lip slur with a bend. The first measure shows a lip slur from a G (open note) up to an A (solid note) and then down to a B (solid note). The second measure shows a lip slur from an A (solid note) up to a C (open note) and then down to a D (solid note). The third measure shows a lip slur from a B (solid note) up to a D (solid note) and then down to an E (solid note).

Musical notation in G major (4/4 time) showing a five-note lip slur with a bend. The first measure shows a lip slur from a G (open note) up to an A (solid note) and then down to a B (solid note). The second measure shows a lip slur from an A (solid note) up to a C (open note) and then down to a D (solid note). The third measure shows a lip slur from a B (solid note) up to a D (solid note) and then down to an E (solid note), which then leads into a sharp sign indicating a higher pitch level.

Doing lip bends does more than change the shape of the embouchure. They also create a more focused airstream—perfect for a zippy upper register. Instead of playing with an “ah” or “oh” vowel sound, a perfect lip bend will result in a vowel shape that is best described as “euoooooooooo.”

Tip: Vincent Cichowicz’ famous long tone studies are perfect for adding lip bends. I would suggest using these or similar exercises (that begin with a descending half step) for warm-up material in band rehearsal. It will allow your trumpet players to practice their lip bends and start rehearsal with a healthy approach to the upper register.



Final Exercise

Lastly, students can use this exercise to check if they are able to start a note with a perfect embouchure. The previous exercises emphasized forming a puckered embouchure *after* bending down from the original pitch. In contrast, this exercise has the student playing a bent note straight away. I use this as a diagnostic test to check if my students are setting up with a good embouchure. The bent note should have the same articulation and generally should sound as similar as possible to the preceding note.

A musical staff in G clef. It starts with a note at pitch 2 (B#) with a dynamic marking 'f'. The next note is at pitch 0 (G), indicated by a breve symbol. This is followed by a series of notes at pitches 1 (A) and 2 (B#). Above the staff, numerical markings 2, 0, 1, and 2 are placed above each note. Below the staff, the instruction "Continue down by half step" is written.

This exercise is my favorite because it emphasizes setting up perfectly every time. Good habits in the upper register form when students learn how to play with a good embouchure in the more familiar registers. Lip bends, if done right, can make the upper register “easy” or familiar for your students. When students play in the upper register with the right embouchure, both the pitch and tone quality are improved. Your students will feel accomplished and you’ll have a trumpet section that sounds great no matter what register they are playing in.

Please feel free to contact me [directly](#) with questions, or for additional lip bend material.