

Solving Tone Problems

Playing the flute can be uplifting but when you are unhappy with your flute sound, practicing can be more frustrating than fun. Use the following list of most basic tone problems to help you pinpoint the cause of the problem, and try the solutions offered to get you back on the road to blissful playing.

Breathy Tone

Not enough of the embouchure hole covered.

Look closely in the mirror to see that you are covering 1/4 to 1/3 of the embouchure hole when you blow. (Closer to 1/3 for the low register and 1/4 for the high. Do not roll in to cover more but pucker lips over, making them closer to the back wall of the headjoint.)

Flute too low or high on lip.

Keep the flute near the bottom of your lower lip so you can aim your air right at the back wall of the flute but you still have a nice cushion of lip for the air to roll over.

Flute not parallel to aperture line in lips when you make an embouchure.

There is no need to keep the flute parallel to the floor, but tone is usually most focused and easiest to control when the lip plate is parallel to the line that the opening of your lips makes when you blow across the flute.

Headjoint rolled out too far when putting flute together.

Main schools of thought advocate placing the embouchure hole even with the main keys on the body of the flute or rolling it slightly towards the player. If the headjoint is rolled out too far it is difficult to focus at the back wall with your airstream.

Flute rolled out too far with hands.

Rolling out makes it hard to focus the airstream at the back wall. Keep your keys parallel to the floor.

Aperture between lips too big.

If you can actually see a hole between the lips, you are not focusing the airstream enough to get a core in the sound. Try blowing through a coffee stirrer to feel the small air stream needed.

Muscles around the mouth need developing.

Try rabbit exercises to strengthen the muscles around your lips. Taking a breath, let your mouth open and puff your lips together to start the sound instead of tonguing, keeping slight air pockets in the cheeks. Play short rabbits up and down the range of the flute to strengthen focus muscles.

Keys need adjusting in relation to each other so they close together.

For many notes, putting one finger down results in two closed keys. If they do not both close at exactly the same time, the tone hole will not be covered completely, making the sound breathy. Student flutes have tiny adjusting screws to adjust the keys in relation to each other, but professional flutes require shims under pads or corks to solve adjustment problems.

Pads worn.

Sometimes you can see torn pads, which must be replaced.

Pads seated unevenly.

If you close a key with one finger and another key is supposed to close as well, insert a feeler gauge or a piece of cleaning paper under the second key. If it slips out while you hold the other key down, the adjustment is off or the pad is seated unevenly. Learn who does the best repairs in your area.

Weak Tone

Not taking in enough air.

Spirometers, available at music stores, come with booklets to tell you how much air someone your size can inspire. Use breathing exercises to help with this. One quick and easy one: Put your hands on your ribcage so you can feel the ribs. (Relax your shoulders when you do this.) Breathe and feel your ribs move apart as you take in air.

Aperture between lips too big.

If you can actually see a hole between the lips, you are not focusing the airstream enough to get a core in the sound. Try blowing through a coffee stirrer to feel the small air stream needed.

Air not directed at back wall of headjoint.

Without your flute, put your forearm up in front of your face with your wrist even with your mouth and blow at different parts of your arm and hand without moving your head. Aiming at the back wall is similar to blowing down at your elbow. (Try using a Blocki device to practice changing angles of air.)

Too much air escaping out sides of mouth.

Try rabbit exercises, described above, to develop focus muscles.

Head down too far.

Put your head way down and roll it up until you feel your head balance naturally. (Our skull balances on our spine.) Then bring your flute to you to play.

Flute not parallel to aperture line in lips.

Flute not parallel to aperture line in lips when you make an embouchure. There is no need to keep the flute parallel to the floor, but tone is usually most focused and easiest to control when the lip plate is parallel to the line that the opening of your lips makes when you blow across the flute.

Not expanding rib cage to breathe in.

Use the simple rib cage exercise at the top of this section to feel how your ribs can move apart as you take in air.

Not enough air carry-through (even breath behind your notes to support sound.)

For breath support in loud playing, practice blowing a piece of paper against a wall, (without your flute,) so it stays as long as possible. For breath support in soft playing practice bending a candle flame so it stays bent.

Constricting chest with left arm.

When you bring your flute up to play, look slightly left with your head and torso so your left arm does not pull across your body.

Caving in body when blowing out.

Stay upright as you blow out.

Keys need adjusting in relation to each other so they close together, pads worn, or pads seated unevenly.

See above section for a brief discussion of these mechanical problems.

Tone not Projecting to Audience

Not taking in enough air.

Use a spirometer to check whether you are taking in enough air. Make sure you are expanding your rib cage when you breathe in. See above.

Not focusing at back wall to get core in sound.

See “air not directed at back wall” above.

Rolling in too far, flute or embouchure

See “rolling in too far” above.

Rolling out too far, (headjoint or flute)

Rolling out too far usually produces a large, breathy tone, but it can also keep you from aiming air at back wall where you can get a strong core of tone so the tone does not project. Avoid rolling headjoint or flute too far out.

Dr. Joanna Cowan White, professor of flute at Central Michigan University, performs as principal flutist of the Saginaw Bay and Midland Symphony Orchestras, and records with her chamber groups, Crescent Duo and Powers Woodwind Quintet on White Pine Music and Centaur Records. She has been Secretary of the National Flute Association and has written many articles for publications. Her teachers include Walfrid Kujala, Janet Woodhams, Judith Bentley, and Leone Buyse