

Maryn Leister - MKL Reeds

THE TOP

10

MOST Frustrating

OBOE REED PROBLEMS

**And How to
Fix Them!**

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Introduction

It's no accident that you are reading this...

For some reason, your oboe journey has brought you right here, to the very spot you are in as you read these words. Although I do not know the exact reason, I **do** know that you have some sort of goal that prompted you to take action and get this short guide. It's that goal that I want to help you achieve.

More about that in just a moment... But first, I want to tell you a little bit about my motivation for writing this.

When I started my company, MKL Reeds, out of my 900 square foot apartment in New York City, I wanted to help oboists who were in need of good reeds. That's all we did. Or that's all **I** did at the time. Oboe reeds. Oboe reeds. And more oboe reeds.

Amid the stacks of reed boxes, my husband and two dogs (one of which was a whopping 80lb black lab), there I sat – scraping, tying, scraping, tying.

You know the drill...

After a while, I realized that good oboe reeds are really only a means to an end. That's not really what I was selling – and it surely wasn't really what my customers were interested in buying. The reeds are only a very small piece of a much larger puzzle. But I didn't get it for a while.

Then it finally hit me: My real goal wasn't **really** great oboe reeds, it was the happiness and success of the oboe player that was the real goal. To see that look on their face and that relaxed sigh that said, “Ahhh... now I can really concentrate on what I love to do – I can just play.”

And that has been the mission of MKL Reeds ever since: **to help create happy and successful oboe players.**

But there is one small twist to this...

I have no idea what being a happy and successful oboe player means for you. And neither does anyone else. You've got to create that goal for yourself.

The thing is, whatever you come up with – whatever definition of oboe happiness and success you create is **exactly** right, for you. And it's not set in stone. You can change it at any time.

Your oboe success might mean playing Principal in the New York Philharmonic. Maybe playing the oboe is the only thing you feel you know how to do – the only thing you **want** to do.

Maybe playing the oboe is something you barely fit in between your day job and your weekend fishing trips. Your oboe happiness might come from teaching your 3rd grade music class songs to sing as you play on your oboe.

Either way, it doesn't matter to me or anyone else.

My goal is the same either way: To help you solve the challenges that might be blocking you from reaching your goal.

For many oboists, oboe reeds are just one of those obstacles.

And so I offer this guide to you to help you move just a little bit closer to your happiness and success on the oboe.

I hope that you will benefit from reading it as much as I have from writing it.

Let's jump right in... After all, your reeds aren't going to fix themselves. :)



Maryn Leister
MKL Reeds

P.S. As you read through this guide, it won't be long before you start to notice a real pattern. The same themes will come back again and again.

Here's why:

Most every oboe reed problem you will ever encounter can be traced back to the same few principles – having a sharp, flat, unstable or (insert reed problem here) reed is really just a **symptom** of the real problem.

Some of these key principles are:

- You need a centered gouge with a sharp blade.
- You need a compatible shape.
- You need a **balanced** reed that has response and stability **built in**.
- Always use a sharp knife and a scraping technique that works **with** the cane, not against it (which will squash and squish the cane as you scrape).
- Use enough air to play the reed.
- You need a well-adjusted oboe.

Here we go...

Frustrating Oboe Reed Problem #1

My Reed Won't Respond!

Response is probably **the** first quality to build into your reeds. And you've got to do it from the very beginning.

It's not as if you should finish your reed, play it, and then wonder why it doesn't respond. That's a surefire recipe for a frustrated oboe player.

When you start turning the blank into a reed, do not go any further if you aren't able to build **immediate** response into it.

A good oboe reed has got to have response or you may as well use it as kindling for your next bonfire.

Of course a reed that leaks is going to give you response problems, just like one where the whole balance of the reed is off due to a poor gouge.

But out of all the causes I've come across for poor response, the one I see most often has to do with the tip being too thick, too long or both.

And a tip that is too thick and/or too long will cause real problems with response. Obviously, you want to thin the tip but the real secret is to thin it **very carefully** – without upsetting the balance of the rest of the reed.

This is easier said than done...

Using a sharp knife, scrape from behind the tip (don't touch the heart, it is very easy to do without knowing it!) and go all the way off the end of the plaque. The part about going off the end is absolutely crucial. If you skip this and don't scrape all of the way, you'll end up with an even thicker tip than when you started.

Once the tip is thin enough, clip it!

I like to see if I can make a reed respond **anywhere** in my mouth that I choose to place it. You can still “build in” resistance or “darkness” later, but the reed must have this type of response **first**. Build it in right from the start and you'll be a much happier player.

One more thing... If your reed responds well in general but you are having trouble with the low notes, don't rush out and blame your reed. The first thing to do is make sure that your oboe is well-adjusted. If your reed doesn't respond on certain notes (like low E), your oboe might be out of adjustment or in need of a new pad. (Also, on a semi-obvious note, you might want to check that you haven't tied over the tube.)

Frustrating Oboe Reed Problem #2

My Reed Is Too Closed!

When a reed is too closed, you can find the culprit in several places.

Either your gouge doesn't have sides that are thick enough to hold the sides open or you are squashing and squeezing the reed as you scrape it to death.

This may seem a little odd to you at first, but try “lifting” the cane off as you scrape, instead of caressing it and mashing it down. Just make sure that there isn't too much cane taken out of the back. If you've already stepped over the line and taken out too much, there isn't a lot you can do except learn from the experience.

If the reed is too long, just give it a good clip and go from there.

If none of these suggestions help, another possible solution is to try tying on shorter.

For emergency situations (like a sudden and drastic weather change), a quick soak in **hot** water will open up the reed for a little while. Just don't push it... It's a bit like the story of Cinderella. She had to get back before midnight or else...

This “trick” has saved me in several important performances, not to mention the extra practice sessions I have managed to squeeze out of a particular reed I fell in love with.

Frustrating Oboe Reed Problem #3

My Reed Is Too Open!

Reeds that are too open are usually a symptom of a gouge issue or a scraping issue. Funny enough, they usually involve the exact same problem: a dull blade!

Although an open reed can result from a gouge issue, it is more commonly related to trying to scrape with a dull knife. The cane seems to build up at the end of the tip, causing the reed to “gape” open.

If your knife is dull, you will really have a hard time effectively doing the “channels” in the back of the reed. If this is the case, the resulting reed will probably be propped open closer to the tube as well.

If you suspect the blade in your gouger is dull, just pull out your micrometer and measure your cane to make sure. Then take out the blade (make sure you know how to get it back in first:) and check for signs of it being worn.

If you've checked everything and all of your blades are razor sharp, you'll want to make sure that your gouge is centered. Having a gouge that is off-center can cause open reeds as well.

In an emergency, there is another possible solution – but it is dangerous, so tread lightly...

When the reed is **well-soaked** (**not** dry or even damp), you can squeeze the reed firmly (but gently) above the tube to manually close the reed.

I wouldn't recommend you get in the habit of doing this. And if you are one of those reedmakers who depends on this technique day in and day out, I'd really recommend that you focus on finding and solving the real reedmaking problem that is hiding underneath.

You'll be much happier for solving it once and for all.

Frustrating Oboe Reed Problem #4

My Reed Is Too Flat!

Let's check the simple stuff before we really get into this. Just make sure you didn't accidentally or purposefully oversoak your reed. That will balloon the reed with fluid and make it flat.

Still flat? Consider that you need more air! I remember always playing sharp, because I played these little tiny reeds and didn't understand how to **really** blow. Once I figured it out, I needed a more open reed – but that led to me feeling flat... I finally realized that I needed even **more** air to support my “new reeds.”

When in doubt, **BLOW!**

Sounds simple and very much like common sense. Just check it to make sure. Common sense isn't all that common :)

If flat reeds are a consistent problem for you, you might consider using a narrower shape.

And don't forget to make sure that the cane is well shaped in general. If the ears flare too much or too unevenly, you can carefully trim them on the reed. This will help narrow the shape and raise the pitch.

The flat reed culprit that I see more than any other comes from taking too much cane out of the heart of the reed. Sometimes you don't even realize you are doing it – as you scrape the tip, you just keep hitting the heart.

Be sure to look at your reed in backlighting and see what the heart damage is. You'll likely find an answer to your flatness problem hiding there.

Of course, your gouge could also be the one wreaking havoc on the pitch of your reeds. Having a gouge that takes off too much in the center of the cane and not enough on the sides can often end up in flat reeds.

The way that **you** scrape can also cause this problem. So just like I recommended a few pages back, focus on **lifting** the cane off of the reed with a sharp knife, instead of caressing it off.

And make sure that your plaque is in top condition so that the blades don't come farther apart than they have to while scraping.

One last thing... Your flat reed might also be because your cane is cracking, cracked, or about to crack. I had this crazy thing happen my first years in college when I started using the “communal guillotine.”

It was used to process **a lot** of cane. And you really had to whack it to get good results.

I clearly didn't put enough “umph” behind the whacking because almost every reed I made would crack right down the middle very early on.

It took some real detective work to figure out that the guillotine was causing my reeds to crack. Knowing that my reeds were *about* to die by cracking wasn't nearly as hard to identify. The reed would slowly but surely get flatter and flatter until its death.

So the next time you have a reed that is uncharacteristically flat, put a plaque in and see if it is cracking or has a weak line down any part of it.

Frustrating Oboe Reed Problem #5

My Reed Is Too Sharp!

In many cases, your reeds are probably sharp simply because they aren't done – you just haven't taken enough wood off of your reed yet for it to vibrate at a lower pitch. Start with that and count your blessings. Having to take more wood off of a reed is a whole lot easier than having to put some back on!

If you feel your reeds are really finished and they still feel consistently sharp, consider gouging your cane a bit heavier or even using a wider shape. Success on the oboe is often about turning yourself into a willing participant in as many “experiments” as you can dream up.

Try different shapes, different lengths to tie on... Eventually you'll find the right combination for you.

Sharpness can also be a sign that your oboe is gaining in years. As oboes age, the bore can start to wear out and cause “overblown-ness.” This will add to your sharpness problem.

Like I said before, I struggled with this for several years.

It was a combination of things that finally solved it once and for all. For starters, I bought a new oboe. (That always helps :) I also began making reeds that were more substantial than I was used to. I tried a bunch of different shapes, and finally found one that, for me, allowed me to blow “up” to it.

As I said before, I had to use **a lot more air**, which took some getting used to. Ultimately it felt a lot better than what I had before – which was a constant struggle to get the pitch down.

So reconsider how you are using your air.

If you feel you are always trying to fight being sharp, you might find a permanent solution in changing the **way you play** and then finding a new type of reed to match.

Frustrating Oboe Reed Problem #6

My Reed Is Too Easy To Play!

Believe it or not, this is a **real** problem.

Having a reed that is way too easy is actually harder to play and will tire you out a whole lot faster the more you play it. The bottom line is this: You need **some** resistance in a reed.

The simple explanation for this is that the reed simply has too much vibration happening. As my teacher used to say, “You need to put up roadblocks.”

You can do this by kind of digging in on each side of the heart, and/or gently swiping all 4 sides of the reed on very light sandpaper to give it some resistance. You can also put up “roadblocks” by scraping on the sides of the spine in the window/back area.

Just be sure that you don't dig in, or scrape the spine.

You could also clip the reed, just be aware that you will also be changing the pitch and overall balance of the reed when you do.

When you clip the reed, you want to make sure that you clip it at an angle so that the bottom blade is slightly shorter than the top one. You'll find that this will add some much need resistance.

Also consider trying a heavier gouge.

Frustrating Oboe Reed Problem #7

My Reed Is Sharp AND Flat!

This problem is known as being “**flarp**.” A more scientific explanation would be that your reed is pressure sensitive. Either way you choose to describe it, it stinks...

A reed that is flarp has too many vibrations happening in the wrong places. When you play it, you never really know where it will go – it's simply all over the place, and **your sanity** pays the price.

“Flarpness” can often be caused by an off-center gouge, especially if you notice that this is a consistent problem. If not, look at the heart of your reed for some clues.

You might find that there is just a little too much taken out of it. This will create a “wild” reed pretty easily.

The solution lies in changing the overall balance of the reed. It is simply too late to add any wood to the heart. Thin the tip and clip it so the heart “seems” thicker in comparison.

Be sure to keep close tabs on your knife as you scrape, because any “accidental” scraping on the spine will also contribute to your “wild” reed.

Another place to look is the spine. Does your reed have one? Does it stay intact from top to bottom? A spine that has been scraped or pressed with a knife can add to the instability of your reed.

Being **flarp** is an interesting problem in that sometimes you don't even know you have it. There can be a lot of good in your reed – even good response. But you might find you are really tired from playing the reed or that sometimes you are unpredictably out of tune.

If you are used to really “holding on” to your reed, you might be fooled. You really shouldn't have to grip or bite your reed and increasing the air going through the reed **shouldn't** add to the chaos. In the end, the reed **must be stable**.

Play the reed from anywhere on your embouchure. Blow a little. Blow a lot. Play at the tip. Play it further down. If the reed is wild when you barely hold on, and/or when you test out the reed in these other ways, it is probably not stable enough.

Don't be fooled!

This is one of the hardest problems to acknowledge in your own reeds and is common even among the “best” reedmakers. Fixing this problem can take concerted effort, but nothing will do you more good than playing on a **truly** stable reed.

Frustrating Oboe Reed Problem #8

My Reed Sounds Good, But It Is Wearing Me Out!

This may be a problem you think you have, but if the reed is not comfortable then it probably doesn't sound as good as you think it does.

The quickest path to success is to be **honest** about its function and worry later about how it sounds. If the reed is making you tired, figure out where this problem is really coming from.

We oboists are often so good at obsessing about the “sound” of a reed that we forget about its **function**.

If the reed has any kind of attack issues or feels unbalanced, back-up and get the core qualities in the reed **before** you even consider what it sounds like. If the reed feels really good but is just hard, consider this:

Using a **very** sharp knife, do a tiny bit on the very, very end of the sides of the tip.

Now check the reed.

Is there **response**? As in **immediate** response at the very tip?

Does it leak?

If your reed **is** leaking, you can try to seal it with some beeswax. If that doesn't work, just make a decision for you and your reed to part company, because it will probably **never** be any good. If it's not leaking, try taking the whole bulk level of the reed down a notch. Just be sure to keep the overall balance of the reed and stay away from scraping the sensitive areas like the heart.

If you need to do more, very quickly (but carefully) scrape the entire reed once or twice in a single stroke. This just removes some of the bulk of the cane off without affecting the balance too much.

If you just can't seem to fix what's going on, double check again that the reed isn't leaking at all. Sometimes, even the best reeds develop a leak and exhibit pretty strange characteristics.

Frustrating Oboe Reed Problem #9

My Reed Felt Great Yesterday, But Now It Feels Terrible!

This is a good thing to think about because, depending on the season, your gouge and a whole bunch of other things, your reeds will probably fluctuate from day to day.

I happen to find this part of the oboe life pretty annoying, so I've come up with the following response:

Try to get the **core qualities** in your reed first and foremost. If they are in there from the start, you'll have less fluctuations, whether or not the reed is finished.

Each day, you can finish it a bit more, or adjust it – but it will **never** stop functioning.

To get the core qualities, always go for **response first**.

Do this with the tip and only the tip, and when you put a reed away for the day, you should be able to get a focused “peep” out of the very, very tip when you crow it. If you **always** put reeds away that can pass this test, I promise you that the next day they will not be too much different.

Dramatic changes, like the sides opening up overnight, are probably due to a bad gouge. Maybe the blade is old, but more likely it's just not centered. Remember that a good gouge will (and should) produce a consistent reed **every time**.

It's really not too good to be true, so get skilled at adjusting your gouge if you aren't already.

Even with a great gouge, really drastic weather changes can mess with your reeds. Even so, I **still** stand by my mantra that a good reed is a good reed. I remember touring the U.S. with a quintet a few years back and can honestly say that my really good reeds worked everywhere.

Occasionally, a 70 degree day followed by a 20 degree day can cause some problems. You can scrape the reed to fit the climate if you think the weather will stick around for a bit. But if the weather is constantly changing, just keep your reeds as they are and you'll start collecting reeds for all climates!

English Horn Reed Tip

Although we're concentrating on oboe reeds, this type of situation is even more common with English horn reeds. Because they are thicker and involve more cane, the change can be quite drastic in terms of how heavy they feel from one day to the next.

My solution to English horn reeds that seem to “grow” cane overnight is this:

First, a **good gouge** and a compatible shape are key. Although I don't have an English horn gouger, I will only use cane gouged on a Ross gouge.

I really hate to use cane that splits at the tip after I fold it to shape. It **always** seems to make a reed that is too open. So I try really hard to soak the cane enough and gently fold it.

Once I have the blank ready, I scrape just like I do with oboe reeds. I want response first, and I barely scrape the back of the reed **at all** (much less than with oboe reeds).

I put the reed away as soon as it barely crows. 9 times out of 10, it is **exactly** the same tomorrow. I find that the reed changes less when I **wait** to add wire until the 2nd day.

Frustrating Oboe Reed Problem #10

My Reed Functions Well – I Just Don't Like the Sound!

Depending on the quality of cane, some reeds just don't sound as nice as others. Sometimes you get cane that is old, mushy or “shreddy,” and the sound that results just isn't like your other reeds.

If your reed needs some warmth and resistance, try clipping a tiny, tiny bit off the tip with the reed **really** angled up as you clip. You can also try putting more “channels” in the back of the reed – just make sure you don't hit the spine. There is also the **magical** “sweet spot” (as my teacher calls it) at the blend between the sides of the heart and the tip. Magic!

At times like this, I always go back to my mantra,

“If the core qualities of **function** are in your reed, you will probably sound just fine.”

So first, make sure you are being honest about the reed's function. Notice how many times I've mentioned this exact tip? Maybe the reed isn't really functioning as an independent reed, but as a “crippled” reed that needs a lot of assistance. The problem is that giving a reed a lot of help **while** you are playing can be difficult and undesirable – and it usually ends up sounding that way in your playing.

On the other hand, remember, not everyone is an oboe player. And so your reed will not be a concern to anyone but you **unless** you can't play it. If you can play it, then it will allow your musicality to come through – that is **really** what tone is all about.

Tone is **your musical voice**. It's not just what a piece of wood sounds like when air is running through it.

That said, here are some quick things you can play around with to experiment with your sound:

- try different staples (brass, silver, etc.)
- try a whole bunch of different shapes
- try different brands of cane

In all of your experiments, **function** is really the most important thing. Understand that “your sound” might sound different to you than anyone else. So you've got to determine just **what** it is that you feel your sound is missing...

Are you lacking **depth**?

Do you need more **projection**?

More **brilliance**?

Once you can articulate what you want, then put on your problem solving and experimenting hat and work on getting it. It's just a matter of time before you find it.

There really are so many factors that come together to creating the sound you imagine for yourself in your head. Your physical characteristics, your instrument, the way you blow...

But you will be off to a great start simply by giving yourself a **functioning** reed.

And from that point, you can spend the rest of your days figuring out **how** you want to sound and creating your own recipe to get there.

That's the **ultimate** reed “problem” to have.

As with any of these reed “problems,” I encourage you to find your own answers.

I personally credit my reedmaking successes to a few very specific things: having amazing reedmaking colleagues, our joint reedmaking efforts, our trading of oboe reed “secrets” and the friendly critiquing of each other's reeds.

The powerful combination of these factors has helped me solve countless reed problems.

Everyone goes through reed ruts – even professionals aren't immune. And it's usually the simple stuff (like not going for **response first**) that trips us up.

We all need to be reminded no matter how many reeds we've made. So create your own reed school by having another oboist look at your reeds, as well as scrape them. You'll likely get much more help than you ever thought possible.

Enjoy your journey!

Happy playing,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Maryn Leister".

Maryn Leister
MKL Reeds

P.S. If you have any comments or questions, don't hesitate to contact me at info@mkltreeds.com Or, just look us up on the web. You'll find our website at <http://www.mkltreeds.com>