

# Saxophone Vibrato for Beginners

By Brian Kane

Vibrato is perhaps the most important and the most underutilized tool in middle and high school saxophone sections. There are two ways of playing vibrato on saxophone: lip vibrato and diaphragm vibrato. Lip vibrato is the most widely used as well as the most practical vibrato for beginning saxophonists.

## Creating a lip vibrato

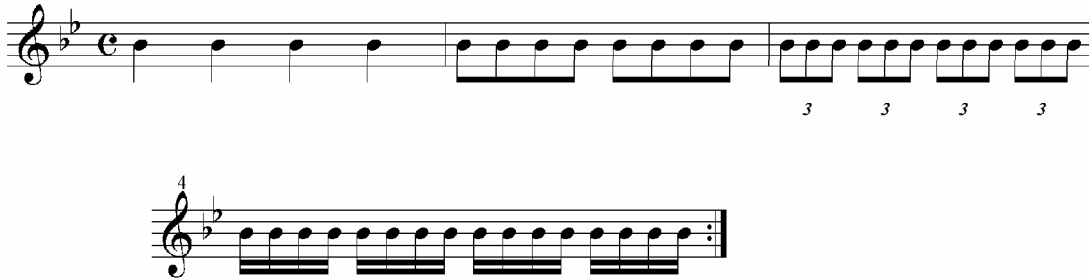
Lip vibrato is best described as tiny embouchure movements that create controlled pitch pulsations.

On saxophone, generating a quality vibrato can be as easy as speaking. I use word phrases to help students remember key concepts. Try the following steps with your students to begin learning vibrato:

1. Have students say "Doo-woo-woo-woo-woo" etc. The "Doo" sound is the legato articulation that begins the note. Many wind players prefer to use a "T" sound for articulations. If you prefer students to use "T" sounds for articulations, have them say "Too-woo-woo-woo" etc. The "woo" sound represents the actual physical motion that the embouchure makes to generate vibrato. The motion should be small and rhythmically consistent. Make sure the vocal chords are not used. Students should simply use their embouchures to imitate the sound of "Doo-woo-woo-woo-woo" etc. or "Too-woo-woo-woo" etc.
2. Have students practice playing long (sustained) notes and while pulsing the pitch. Students shouldn't worry about controlling the rhythmic pulsations at first. The goal is to just get used to creating vibrato.
3. Have students experiment in different registers of the instrument. Vibrato can feel quite different in the low register than the high register.
4. Have your saxophone section play the following exercise to help them gain control and fluency with vibrato. They should play the rhythms in the following exercise using only vibrato, not articulations.



## Vibrato Exercise (play at MM: 60):



### What speed should my vibrato be?

The vibrato exercise allows students to practice vibrato at a variety of speeds. Eventually most students ask: "How fast should my vibrato be in this song?" Here are two general guidelines students can follow when choosing the speed and feel of vibrato used in music:

- ◆ Jazz and Swing - tends to use a triplet or eighth note vibrato. Vibrato tends to sound slightly "looser" and slower with varying pitch pulsations.
- ◆ Classical - tends to use an eighth note or a sixteenth note vibrato. In classical styles the vibrato tends to be more regulated with faster and more even pitch pulsations.

### When should I play vibrato?

Encourage students to use vibrato all of the time. Make vibrato a habit. Here are three simple guidelines for students.

Use Vibrato when:

- ◆ The note is held 2 beats or longer.
- ◆ The note occurs at the end of a phrase, is not short, and is followed by a rest.
- ◆ Any other place where you feel it might be appropriate or beneficial.

### How do I make Vibrato a Habit?

The greatest challenge that student musicians face when learning vibrato is simply remembering to do it! Often, student musicians are focused on playing the correct notes and rhythms and forget about using vibrato. Have students write reminders in the music where vibrato should be played to help them create a "vibrato habit". Simply write the word "Vibrato" over the appropriate notes or just draw a squiggly line.

When students are sight reading or learning new music they will not remember to play vibrato. Encouraging students to write reminders is a good way to create positive habits. Eventually, students will automatically play vibrato in the appropriate places. But until that time, a simple reminder may mean the difference between success and failure.

### **When to start teaching Vibrato?**

Begin to teach vibrato to students as soon as they can generate a reasonably steady sound through two octaves of the instrument. This typically occurs after 4-6 months of playing. Developing the muscle control to play quality vibrato may take several more months. Introducing students to the vibrato exercise will actually improve embouchure muscles.

Students should practice vibrato in rhythm to build muscle control. However, when integrating vibrato into music performance, students should not play vibrato in a strict rhythmic pulse (as per the learning exercise). Vibrato should sound natural. The rhythm should not be metered, but variable. In a saxophone section, individual players should not try to match (meter) vibrato.

Each player's vibrato should be slightly unique in order to create a warm and vibrant section sound. Teachers who delay teaching vibrato miss an amazing opportunity to teach young students musicality, expression, and high level listening skills. It is important for students to know that simply playing the correct notes and rhythms does not make beautiful music. The expectation from the earliest ages should be for students to play with a beautiful, expressive, and dynamic sound in addition to playing the notes and rhythms!



Brian J. Kane attended the Berklee College of Music on a full scholarship, graduated magna cum laude in 1995, and later received his master's degree from Bridgewater State College. As a professional saxophonist and flautist, he has performed in over 2000 live performances. His articles on music education have been published by IAJE, The Saxophone Journal Magazine, Choral Director Magazine, Jazz Ed Magazine, and Music Teacher International Magazine. He is the author of nine books including the hit vocal technique books, **Singing Tongue Twisters A-Z** and **Sing After Me**. Learn more about Brian at [www.jazzpath.com](http://www.jazzpath.com).