

# Basic Fingerings for the Saxophone

The chart displays two staves of music. The top staff contains 12 notes, and the bottom staff contains 4 notes. Below each note is a diagram showing the fingerings for the right hand (bottom) and left hand (top). The diagrams use black dots to indicate which keys are pressed. An arrow points to the first note on the top staff, labeled "octave (thumb) key".

## How to Use This Chart

The keys are shown the as they would look to people standing behind you if they could see through both your body and the tube of the saxophone. This will seem natural when you're holding the horn and looking at the chart, but it's a mirror image of what you'll see if you turn the instrument around and actually look at it.

Your right hand goes at the bottom, with your index, middle, and ring fingers on the three circular keys, and your thumb under the hook. The weight of the horn should rest on the strap, not your thumb. Your left hand goes at the top, with the index, middle, and ring fingers resting on the three large circular keys, and your thumb on the pad next to the octave key. The octave key is the only one not shown on the chart — your thumb will find it naturally.

Unlike many wind instruments, the saxophone does not require you to alter your mouth or the way you blow in order to produce different notes. However, beginners using soft reeds may need to tighten their mouths to keep the very highest notes from being flat.

## Basic Sax Playing

### Purpose of this Article

So you want to play the saxophone? Great! This article is meant to help you get started if it's impossible for you to work with a teacher, or to serve as a reference to supplement what you get from your teacher.

### Choosing a Horn

The most popular instruments are the tenor (lower pitched) and the alto (higher). The tenor has a richer tone, but the alto gets more of the solos and melodic parts. The tenor has a crook shaped like a question mark, while the alto has one like a hockey stick. Small children will have an easier time managing the alto.

Many people play both, which is made easy by the fact that the sax is a transposing instrument. If you finger C near the top of the treble clef on a tenor, the note that comes out is actually B-flat just below middle C. If you finger C on an alto, you get E-flat at the bottom of the treble clef. This may sound confusing, but it's really a good thing. Assuming your sheet music has been properly transposed for your instrument, you don't have to read music any differently on either horn. If you're playing tenor in a band, and they say "Let's play a blues in B-flat," you have to figure out that you're going to be playing in C.

Other instruments commonly encountered are the baritone (very low

and soprano (very high). The baritone has a curl in the top, while most sopranos can be identified by the fact that they're completely straight. The soprano is difficult to control, so it's not a good instrument for a beginner.

### Putting it Together and Taking it Apart

Believe it or not, it's important to do all these things in the right order. For instance, it might seem like it would be OK to assemble the horn, attach the strap, and then lift the whole thing over your head -- you'll find out this is a bad idea the first time you ruin your mouthpiece by banging it against a light fixture.

1. Put the strap around your neck.
2. Put the reed in your mouth and let it absorb saliva for several minutes.
3. Put the mouthpiece on the crook. (You'll adjust the angle later.) Once in a while you can grease the cork with cork grease (looks like chapstick).
4. Put the ligature (small metal band that will hold the reed in place) on the mouthpiece. Some are meant to mount with the screws on top, others on the bottom. (They sound the same.)
5. Slip the moistened reed in, with its flat side against the flat part of the mouthpiece. The curved end of the reed should match up perfectly with the curved end of the mouthpiece so that you can just barely see a hair's breadth of the mouthpiece. The ex-

act position of the ligature is not important (although many people will tell you it is); basically it aligns with the end of the labeled part of the reed (or, if the reed doesn't have any label, it should come within a few millimeters of the beginning of the cut part of the reed).

6. Tighten the ligature.
7. Put the crook on the horn and tighten the screw gently. (There are two screws. The other one is for attaching marching-band music on a little holder.)
8. Clip the sax to the strap so that the bell is to the right of your body.
9. Twist the mouthpiece to get the most comfortable playing position, with your neck straight. Adjust the length of the strap so you aren't sticking your neck out like a camel.
10. If any of the notes on your horn stick (C# and D# often do on one of mine), unstick them -- you don't want to find this out when you're up on stage playing your solo!
11. Play music to make the angels weep.
12. Loosen the ligature and put it and the reed away. Push the brush through the mouthpiece and put the mouthpiece away. Push the brush through the crook and put the crook away.
13. Pull the swab (cloth tied to the end of a string) through the sax. (If this is the first time you're using the swab with this horn, try inserting it at the small end to make sure it won't

get stuck inside.) If you use a stuff-it (it can't hurt, but it's not a substitute for a pull-through swab), stuff it in.

14. Put everything away in the case.

### Basic Technique: Producing Your First Note

#### *Getting ready*

There are some basic steps to producing your first note. You need to practice them all separately first. If you don't do them you'll end up sounding bad, or your body will start feeling like you spent the day cutting sugar cane with a machete.

1. *Get in the right position.* Refer to the basic fingering chart. Your right hand goes at the bottom, with your index, middle, and ring fingers on the three circular keys, and your left thumb under the hook. The weight of the horn should rest on the strap, not your thumb. Your left hand goes at the top, with the index, middle, and ring fingers resting on the three large circular keys, and your thumb on the pad next to the octave key. The octave key is the only one not shown on the chart — your thumb will find it naturally. Your fingers should be curved, relaxed, and gently resting on the keys without actually moving the keys from their resting position.

2. *Relax,* and check for strain on your body. The sax is a heavy instrument, and you'll exhaust yourself quickly if you aren't letting 100% of its weight rest on the strap. Systematically relax all the muscles in your

hands, arms, shoulders, back, and neck.

3. *Learn to breathe correctly.* There are two ways your torso can expand to take in air: by using the diaphragm muscle to push out your belly, or by expanding the flexible cartilage of your ribcage. You want to use the diaphragm. The feeling is like if you're lying on your back and bouncing a baby up and down on your belly. Contrast this with the wrong method: you fill your chest with air while tightening your belly as if expecting a punch in the stomach. Check your relaxation again.

4. *Learn to make an embouchure.* Now practice the position of your mouth, called your embouchure, using two fingers in place of the mouthpiece. Your top teeth rest on the top of your fingers. Your bottom lip is just slightly curled back into your mouth, so it, not your bottom teeth, is what's touching the bottom of your fingers (the reed). Drop your jaw a little, and lower your tongue as if you're saying the vowel "oh." Squeeze the corners of your mouth in a little. Widen your throat a little, as if you're yawning. Check your relaxation again. If this feels like a painful form of buddhist meditative chanting, you're probably overdoing it; just relax and identify all the things that you can control, because they can all affect your tone later.

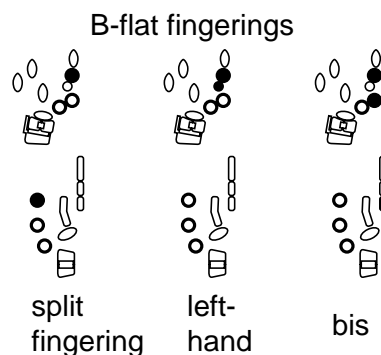
#### *Your first note*

OK, now you're ready to play C#. This is the simplest fingering: you

don't hold and keys down at all. Normally when a note comes after a rest, you begin it by tonguing, but for now you can just initiate the note by starting to blow. Experiment with every variable you can control and listen critically to see how it affects your tone: how deep you put the mouthpiece in your mouth; the angle of the mouthpiece in your mouth; lowering or raising your jaw; tightening or loosening the corners of your mouth.

### **Alternate Fingerings**

There can be more than one way to finger a note. The basic fingering chart only shows the most common way to finger each one. In general, it's a mistake to concentrate too much on alternate fingerings at first. Many professional woodwind players advocate using almost nothing but standard fingerings except in a few situations. Alternate fingerings tend to move your hands out of position, and it may be difficult to connect groups of notes if they use different types of fingerings.



The main issue you need to know about early on is B-flat fingerings. Contrary to what some people will tell you, they all play in tune, so the only issue is which is easiest to finger in a given situation. The split fingering is the best default, because it doesn't require you to move your hands from their normal position. The left-hand fingering is useful in passages that don't contain any B-naturals, and for example makes a G-minor arpeggio easier to execute quickly. The bis fingering is mainly useful for the A-B-flat trill.

Another fingering issue to be aware of is that you can hold down the A-flat pinkie key while playing other notes in passages that don't contain any A naturals, and likewise with E-flat. This can be useful in rapid playing, but beware of losing the mobility of your hands by doing this habitually.

### **Online Resources**

Your best starting point for saxophone resources on the web is Netscape Open Directory's sax category:

[dmoz.org/Arts/Music/Instruments/Winds/Woodwinds/](http://dmoz.org/Arts/Music/Instruments/Winds/Woodwinds/)

Very complete and detailed woodwind fingering charts are available from Timothy Reichard:

[www.wfg.sneezy.org](http://www.wfg.sneezy.org)

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