

# Setting the Strength of a Chanter Reed

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Setting the strength of a chanter reed is one of the most important tasks for successful and enjoyable playing. When the reed is correctly set it will allow the player to play comfortably without having to strain the arm and restrict the fingers of the top hand. Too hard and you risk a hernia. Too easy and it is liable to change pitch at the drop of a hat. Such variables as mouth size, cane density, length of reed and whether the reed is to be played in a band or for solos must be taken into consideration.

When playing in a band it is necessary to blow tone. In other words, once the chanter has been tuned with the others in the band, to blow the instrument at the correct pressure to produce a note that is consistently the same pitch. It takes a lot more control and skill in a band situation to control the pitch of the reed when it is easy, as an easier reed will change pitch with smaller pressure changes than a hard reed. The aim should be to find a reed that offers some resistance that maintains its pitch with small changes in pressure, and that is comfortable to blow for extended periods without fatigue.

There are many different views on the best way to break in a new reed. The approach that is taken will also need to vary from reed to reed as each make of reed will have its own idiosyncrasies and will need to be dealt with in its own way. Some people think that the only way to break a reed in is to spend weeks blowing in a huge reed breaking or losing various parts of your anatomy along the way. This is unnecessary and counterproductive. The strength of a new reed should be set at a pressure just a little stronger than the ideal strength required for the individual. This can be achieved in different ways.

One of the major factors influencing strength and pitch of a reed is the mouth size. Too large and the reed will be flat and hard to blow. Too small and the reed will be easy, sharp and liable to squeak at any opportunity (normally during a performance!). So the first thing to do when using a new reed is to check the mouth size. If it is too large it will need to be reduced and if it is too small it will need to be enlarged.

There are various methods for achieving the correct mouth size. If the mouth size is too large the reed can be squeezed shut by applying pressure with the fingers before and during playing. This will have to be repeated until the mouth sets at the required size. It can take a long time, as the reed will naturally return to its former shape especially when wet. An elastic band wrapped around the reed and pushed up above the binding is the preferred method for some pipers. This will close the mouth and raise the pitch as well as easing the reed. If this technique is employed it is important to remember to slide the band back down onto the binding after playing as constant pressure will tend to collapse the reed. The best method is to close the mouth by using pliers. This is achieved by applying pressure to the top of the staple (the top of the staple is where the binding ends) and squeezing until the mouth is closed to the correct size. A gentle squeeze is all that is required but if you go too far you can re-open the mouth using a mandrel. This method is the one that gives the most control and the quickest results. If the mouth size is too small when you receive a new reed it will need to be enlarged using a mandrel.

Once the mouth size is set the reed must be blown in the mouth to test for free-ness or ease of vibration. When blown the reed should produce a simultaneous high and low pitched sound. If the reed produces only a low-pitched noise when mouth blown it is too long and will need to be reduced in length. If the reed merely makes a high-pitched “crow” and is still hard to blow, restrictive or tight it means that some cane will have to be removed. The methods for achieving this will vary between makes of reed. Generally speaking there are two types of reed. The ridge cut reed and the conventionally cut reed. Ridge cut reeds have a very thin tip therefore any adjustments made must be on the main body of the reed above the binding. Either scraping or sanding cane from either side of the reed or by rounding off the edges of the reed until it is free will make the reed easier. With a conventionally cut reed the above process will also work but in there is also scope for thinning toward the tips of the blades as necessary. Carry out any cane removal a little at a time until the reed produces the correct “crow”. Once played and exposed to moisture the reed will change and further alterations may be necessary. When initially breaking in a new reed it is advisable to play it for no more that 10-15 minutes at a time gradually increasing the blowing time as the reed settles in. When not being played the chanter should be removed from the bagpipe and placed in a sealed cap so that the reed doesn’t dry out completely.

When learning to adjust reeds it is advisable to experiment on old reeds first to gain understanding of cause and effect. It might be that reeds, which were once consigned to the wastebasket, are perfectly usable when correctly adjusted.

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