

Focus Sheets 1-3 for Beginning Brass Players

Teacher's Guide

by Brian Kay

The Focus Sheets are one-page supplements to any beginning band method. They help focus your students' attention on the most strategic skills first-year instrumentalists can build. I developed these sheets when doing in-school group beginner classes, and have continued to use them in my private lesson teaching.

If your beginning brass students master these three pages of material, they will be in command of near 100% of the motor skills needed to thrive as a first-year player, and a high percentage of the music reading skills as well.

The Focus Sheets are available for free download at <https://BrassStages.com/resources/focus-sheets.html>

About the Focus Sheets:

- Most important skills are together on one page.
- One sheet for each of 3 phases of first-year instruction.
- Available free of charge for Trombone, Trumpet, Euphonium, and Tuba
- Use alongside any standard band method, or beginner book.
- Start each lesson with material from the Focus Sheets.
- Effective as instructional AND evaluation material.
- Focus Sheet #3 also makes excellent review and warmup material for 2nd year players and beyond.

Focus Sheets provide a framework for teaching:

- Note reading
- Tone production
- Tonguing
- The motor skills needed to play successfully
- Scale patterns with tonic and dominant arpeggios

When to use the sheets:

- Focus Sheet #1 is for absolute beginners.
- Move to Sheet #2 at the earliest time you feel your students are ready.
- Move to Sheet #3 after the skills in Sheet #2 have been solidly mastered.

Compatibility

The Focus Sheets for trombone, trumpet, euphonium, and tuba are fully compatible for unison/octave playing, except that one line per page is specific to trombone, or valved instruments (marked with an * after the line number).

Using the Sheets

The power of the Focus Sheets comes from repeating the items in each lesson, so that students build true mastery of a key set of skills.

Some of the most strategic items in the Focus Sheets are the mini scales that flow into tonic and dominant arpeggios. Together, the scale and tonic-dominant arpeggios cover most of the note combinations a student will use to play tunes in a given key. By repeating these patterns each week, students can fully master them. Your students are then primed for success when they go on to play a variety of tunes in that key from their book.

For example, compare the "Mexican Hat Dance" to the corresponding focus sheet line:

Bb Mini Scale and Chord Progression (Focus Sheet #2)



Mexican Hat Dance



Consider also tunes like Skip To My Lou, and The Surprise Symphony. If a student has mastered the focus sheet line in that key, they already are skilled at playing the most relevant combinations of notes.

Skip to my Lou



Surprise Symphony



As you go through the year, you can make a game of finding places where the Focus Sheets line up with items from your book!

More About Using the Sheets

Focus Sheet #1

Start working on Focus Sheet #1 the first day of playing from music. If possible, tape the Focus Sheets inside the cover of students' band methods. Perhaps tape a position/fingering chart from BrassStages.com on a facing page.

Focus Sheet #2

Move to sheet 2 as soon as students are ready to begin playing lines 4 and 5. Add other material from the sheet as soon as students are able. There is no need to review Sheet #1, because the review is built in to Sheet #2.

Lines 2 & 9 "Lip Settings". Shorten or modify line 2 as needed to make sure students are not straining. Line 9 is "extra credit". These exercises will be more accessible if they are "T" tongued, but you can use them to introduce lip slurring, if you wish.

Focus Sheet #3

Move to sheet 3 when #2 has been well mastered. Or when you wish to begin working on the slightly higher range and endurance demands of Focus Sheet #3.

Articulation Work

I recommend that you make it a strong priority to confirm that each student is actually "T" tonguing their notes. Beginning players often think they are tonguing their notes (and say they are), when in fact they are using lip compression ("puh puh"). Sometimes it can be impossible for even an experienced teacher to hear the difference.

Therefore, have students demonstrate repeated "T" tonguing on a stream of air, without their instrument, so you can clearly hear their "T" articulation. Also, ask students, "Exactly what are you doing with your tongue when you start your notes?" Have them play a passage, asking them to really tune in to what their tongue is doing at the start of notes, and report it back you.

There have been times when I thought I was checking on this merely as a formality, and we discovered the student was "puh" articulating their notes! Why go to the trouble to change this, if the sound can be similar for a beginner? Because it will become increasingly unsustainable for the student, as their music gets more demanding, and will be much harder to fix as time goes by!

Using the Focus Sheets for Summation and Evaluation

The Focus Sheets are ideal material for summative projects and evaluations, because they contain comprehensive technical challenges in a succinct format. You could have your students make an audio or video recording of all or part of a Focus Sheet, as an end of term project.

Updates

- Changed order of “see-saws” in sheet 1 to start with easiest. (August, 2023)
- Changed the order of some items in sheets 2 & 3, to facilitate their use as warm-ups. (May, 2023)
- Added “First Note”s to sheets 2 & 3 for warm-up, and as an opportunity to encourage excellence in breathing, tone, and mental conception. “First Note” refers to the first note played in a session. (Optimal first notes may, of course, be modified for individual students.) (May, 2023)
- Added notes and eliminated some rests in the “Tonguing Practice” items of sheets 2 & 3 to encourage two measure phrases in one breath. This encourages ambitiously deep breathing, and a tuneful, musical flow of notes. (May, 2023)
- Tonguing practice in sheet 3 now starts on the upper octave, where students’ tonguing is often cleaner. (May, 2023)

Thank you for using the Focus Sheets.

I hope you will find the Focus Sheets to be a powerful tool in your teaching toolbox. And that they will help you produce thriving brass students!

If you have feedback on the sheets, please feel free to get in touch via email:
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