
EDITOR'S PAGE

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FINE-TUNING YOUR POSITION(S)

The trombone as analogue for professional movement

A new school year is upon us. There you stand, ready to embark on this journey. Emotions run high and wild, with the lingering effects of summer's hiatus giving way to fall's feverish pace. You're mostly set, feet in the starting blocks, raring and ready to go. But before you launch into the great wide open of music education once again, firmly dedicated and full tilt, consider the essential need to recalibrate. There's no better time than the present to fine-tune your position, and there's no better analogue than a trombone in action.

First position

As the great Paul Simon sagely sang, "The nearer your destination the more you're slip slidin' away." One of life's great truisms, it's a line that's wholly applicable to the subject and instrument at hand. With both our professional travels and the trombone, nothing is closer to home and heart than our first position. Everything starts there. It's locked in, something of a given, bonded to what we are and what we know best. Rookie educators — the teaching profession's *tabula rasae* — find joy in discovery there, and for new trombonists it's all fresh and accessible.

Branching out

Leaving that comfortable reality of our first position, we stretch and grow a hair while trying to discover *exactly* where to go, how things work and the process of playing in tune within new realities. Our second position — perhaps an elementary band director moving to the middle school, a high school orchestra teacher broadening his or her job description by picking up guitar and music theory, a middle school choir teacher taking on some general music, or any number of other tweaks — Isn't *quite* as far as we think. It's one small slide adjustment — only a half step from

home — but, nevertheless, a notable shift in the offing.

Once you've made that transition, investigating a new position in full, moving *again* after that isn't so bad. You've developed a sense of personal adjustment — sound transitional skills, literally and figuratively. And in doing so, you've acquired the understanding necessary to grab hold of that next step — that *third* position, with the bell as a nearby marker separating the defined from the unknown.

Further afield

Moving a great(er) distance away from your first few positions, perhaps into music administration or with a massive change in district, area and/or level, things can get trickier to navigate. You're in a foreign land, a long way from where you started. Things aren't so familiar. You're past the point where there's anything to lean on or much to reference. Sure, if you stretch yourself to your limits — 6th or 7th position, depending on your arm's reach — you'll know just how far things can extend. But before you go there, you're in an undiscovered country. That difficult proverbial fifth position of life is a space we all encounter at some point, personal, professional and all, and the truth about conquering this shaky ground — and this odyssey as a whole — is fairly simple: just listen. Really, I mean that. Listening is key.

Partial truths, alternate realities

Once the ins and outs of each positional possibility have become clear, you quickly discover that every single one has different partials or layers to explore. The manner by which you approach any one of them can and will result in differences — varied notes, changes in tone, a broadening of skill set(s). And beyond distinctive growth in that department, we discover alternate positions or ways to tackle the job

that, while not the go-to or first choice, prove pragmatic and useful. There's almost always more than one way to get things done right, and it's important that experienced educators, paralleling those seasoned trombonists, keep that in mind.

Resonating with others

With the matched cases for individual instrument and professional pathway now made clear, it's worth considering how none of this is really about any one player or pedagogue. Sure, we need to learn how to function on our own, developing technique(s) and making adjustments all the while, but getting things together all by our lonesome is only part of the gig. You have to learn how to blend and balance with others. It's not just about being in tune with yourself, but with finding a way to do so with others. Harmony doesn't exist with singulars, and the definition of what we do in the classroom isn't bound to our own being(s), so make those micro adjustments to benefit the macro and move your slide and mentality a bit to resonate to the fullest potential.

Everything's fluid

In closing, and in getting my own feet firmly planted for the school year ahead, I leave you with something to remember that's pertinent and essential to this entire discussion: everything is fluid, so adjust accordingly. There are no valves or sealing pads to speak of with trombones or explanations, only flexible play with slides and presentation. So, whether you need to make little changes or massive, glissando-like shifts as you're navigating position(s), it's quite alright. Make things the way they need to be to best serve your students and your own needs. My best wishes for a wonderful 2026-2027 school year. ||