

*Reprints from the*

# International Trumpet Guild® Journal

*to promote communications among trumpet players around the world and to improve the artistic level of performance, teaching, and literature associated with the trumpet*

**itg journal, jr.**  
**MARTIN SAUNDERS, COLUMN EDITOR**

October 2008 • Page 64

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## SIPPING STRAWS AND THE BEGINNING TRUMPET PLAYER

JENNIFER S. FLETCHER, BOISE, IDAHO

**I** remember the day I graduated from Arizona State University with my trumpet performance degree. I felt confident in my newfound knowledge and skills as a performer and instructor. I had decided to teach private lessons full-time. My goal was to teach primarily beginning students so that I could ensure their young success.

Despite my good intentions, however, I found that teaching beginners was much more difficult than I had imagined. I still struggled to adequately communicate elementary concepts to my younger students. As a result, the first few lessons were often frustrating. In an attempt to teach my students the difference between a low C and mid-line G, I would try walking them through embouchure formation, tongue positioning, and air support with minimal success. Rather than solving the problem, this surplus of information seemed to overwhelm them so that they could not focus on any one of my detailed instructions. I knew what I wanted my students to do but I had a difficult time communicating to them how to do it. Finally, in an attempt to spare my students from information overload, I decided to find a way to simulate the feeling associated with high playing versus low playing. So I brainstormed until I came up with a rather clever solution.

After contemplating my teaching dilemma for weeks, I realized that I could use different sizes of sipping straws to mimic the feeling of air compression required to play different registers on the trumpet. I started introducing the straws during the second lesson, after we had covered hand position, trumpet maintenance, and embouchure formation in the introductory lesson. I stopped trying to explain air control or tongue position to my beginning students because my “straw technique” caused them to actually do these things automatically!

At the start of the lesson, I provide three different-sized straws: a large straw, a regular sized straw, and a tiny straw. I constructed the smallest straw by cutting a regular straw down the center, rolling it in, and taping it to the desired size. I cut all the straws to about two inches in length. Beginning with the largest straw, I ask my students to put one end into their

mouth, take a deep breath, and take exactly ten seconds to blow all of their air out through the straw. We repeat the process using both the regular and then the tiny straw.

(Note: it is imperative that students pace themselves so that they are out of breath at the same time; *e.g.*, ten seconds, for each straw! They are then able to feel the difference in compression for each.)



Following this exercise, I ask my students which of the straws required the most air. Following their reply, I explain that all the straws use the same amount of air! The only difference, of course, is the *speed* at which the air flows through the straws. I then ask my students to pick up their

trumpet and play it like they are blowing through the largest straw. The result was an easy low C. Immediately following this demonstration, I ask them to play again, but this time as if they are blowing through the medium straw. This produces a fairly strong second line G. Finally, when I ask my students to play the trumpet like they are blowing through the tiny straw. This would nearly always result with a third-space C!

I have felt ultimate satisfaction from watching the smiles wash across my students’ faces at the culmination of this exercise! Students are amazed at how easy it is to perform low C to middle C after using the “straw technique.” This technique offers a strong basis for the beginning trumpeter and provides the initial confidence needed for continued motivation and improvement. This method of teaching is plain, simple, avoids confusion, requires minimal explanation, and has worked for all of my students without fail!

*About the author:* Jennifer Fletcher holds a BA in Trumpet Performance from Arizona State University, where she studied under David Hickman. Jennifer has also studied extensively with John Marchiando, Michael Arndt, Marcellus Brown, Brad Peters, and Gary Leopold. While teaching private lessons is her passion, she also enjoys arranging and composing. Fletcher’s composition *Fanfare of the Bells* for six trumpets was performed at the Festival of Trumpets concert at the 2008 ITG Conference.

