**[Buying woodwind instruments](http://bretpimentel.com/buying-woodwind-instruments/)**

# [Bret Pimentel](http://bretpimentel.com/)

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**General advice**

The information on this page is intended for beginning and intermediate players, including woodwind doublers who already play another instrument. Here are some rules of thumb:

* Get the advice of a good teacher, preferably one that doesn’t get a sales commission from a music store. It’s okay to ask advice before starting lessons. A good teacher wants you to have a good, working instrument.
* In fact, be very skeptical of anything you are told by music store salespeople. My students frequently begin lessons with poor, non-working woodwind instruments that were highly recommended by the guitar player working behind the counter. Ask the salesperson to demonstrate the instrument. If they can’t do it, there’s little reason to take their recommendations.
* The most important consideration for a beginner’s instrument is its condition. Woodwind instruments use pads made of leather, skin, or cork that MUST seal properly. Poorly adjusted instruments are one of the top causes of frustration in beginning players. Don’t waste your time fighting with a leaking instrument. Cosmetic flaws like worn or scratched finish or small dents (except in vital spots such as a flute’s head joint or saxophone’s neck) do not necessarily affect an instrument’s playability, but may be warning signs of larger problems. It is possible to buy a non-working instrument and have a good technician restore it to playable condition, but it would be a good idea to get their appraisal of the instrument before you buy it.
* Don’t buy musical instruments from department stores, megastores, or warehouse stores. These temptingly cheap instruments are made from inferior materials and are almost always in poor adjustment. Good repair shops won’t even work on them because they tend to break under the normal strains of routine maintenance.

**Flute**

* Materials: The most inexpensive flutes are made of nickel. Don’t be fooled if the salesperson says “nickel *silver*,” it’s still just nickel. Nicer flutes are at least plated with silver, or, even better, made of solid silver. Sometimes the head joint will be solid silver and the body silver plated. Generally, it is thought that the more silver, the more “ring” there will be in the sound (though [acoustical studies](http://bretpimentel.com/does-material-affect-tone-quality-in-woodwind-instruments-why-scientists-and-musicians-just-cant-seem-to-agree/) have failed to verify this). Professional instruments are sometimes made from other materials (platinum, “rose” gold, etc.), but the nuances of these metals are lost on all but the finest flutists. Some flutists experience irritation where the lower lip contacts the instrument; a gold-plated embouchure plate may help (for some extra money).
* Keywork options: The only significant options for flutists buying less than a custom instrument are inline versus offset G, and the split E mechanism. Some flutists find the inline G key more ergonomic, and some prefer offset. Hand size is one factor, but try both to see which is a more comfortable, less tense reach. Offset G flutes are much more likely to have the split E mechanism, which makes the difficult high E respond more easily.
* Keys with open holes are popular with American flutists, but realistically make little difference in the instrument’s sound. Still, many flutists insist that open holes improve tone and/or pitch, and facilitate some extended techniques like microtones and pitch slides. Closed holes are a little easier for beginning flutists to cover with their fingers. Removable plugs for open-holed flutes are commercially available, but if you have an open-holed flute you might as well learn to play it “unplugged.”
* Student instruments usually have a foot joint that is keyed down to a low C. More expensive instruments often (but don’t necessarily) have a low B foot joint, which stabilizes and adds resonance to some notes. The low B itself is occasionally used in flute solo music, but the beginner or casual doubler won’t miss it and might like the lighter weight of a C foot joint.
* For more information, see my [flute](http://bretpimentel.com/woodwinds/flute/) page.

**Oboe**

* Materials: Generally, cheaper oboes are made of plastic, and more expensive ones are made of grenadilla wood. All else being equal, the tonal advantages of wood are [minimal at best](http://bretpimentel.com/does-material-affect-tone-quality-in-woodwind-instruments-why-scientists-and-musicians-just-cant-seem-to-agree/), but oboes of superior design and workmanship are almost always made of wood. (This doesn’t mean that just because an oboe is made of wood, it’s a good one!) Wood instruments require careful maintenance to avoid cracking. Previously cracked oboes, if expertly repaired, are perfectly playable but drop significantly in resale value. Keywork on cheaper instruments is nickel plated; more expensive instruments may have shinier silver-plated keys.
* Keywork options: Oboe keywork options are staggering. Pay for the most complete keywork you can afford. I would prioritize the “extra” keys in roughly this order: F resonance, left F, low B♭, split-ring D, low B♭ resonance, third octave key. American oboists should avoid ring-key models, fully-automatic octave mechanisms, and thumb plate oboes.
* For more information, see my [oboe](http://bretpimentel.com/woodwinds/oboe/) page.

**Clarinet**

* Materials: The wood vs. plastic discussion in the [oboe](http://bretpimentel.com/buying-woodwind-instruments/#oboe) section applies here.
* Keywork options: Clarinets, thankfully, have little variation in their keywork. Beware “full-Boehm” instruments, which are favored by a few professionals but rarely used in the United States.
* For more information, see my [clarinet](http://bretpimentel.com/woodwinds/clarinet/) page.

**Bassoon**

* Materials: The wood vs. plastic discussion in the [oboe](http://bretpimentel.com/buying-woodwind-instruments/#oboe) section applies here. Wooden bassoons are made of maple.
* Keywork options: Above the most basic student instruments, bassoon keywork options are perhaps as complicated as with the oboe. Advancing players will find use for a high D key, Ab/Bb trill, and whisper lock, and may find optional rollers to be handy.
* For more information, see my [bassoon](http://bretpimentel.com/woodwinds/bassoon/) page.

**Saxophone**

* Materials: Saxophones are made of brass. Sometimes professional instruments are made with special alloys or plated with silver or even gold, but the differences, [if they really exist](http://bretpimentel.com/does-material-affect-tone-quality-in-woodwind-instruments-why-scientists-and-musicians-just-cant-seem-to-agree/), are too subtle to matter much to most players. The color of the lacquered finish has no effect on the instrument’s sound—don’t be concerned about a lighter or darker gold color. Cheaper instruments sometimes have nickel-plated keys, but this doesn’t affect playability in any way.
* Keywork options: A high F♯ key is present on most newer high-quality instruments (but also some of lower quality), but is not a high priority for a beginner. Some professional saxophonists don’t use the high F♯ key anyway, preferring alternate fingerings. An articulated low C♯ key is usually present on higher-end instruments and eases navigation of the low register.
* For more information, see my [saxophone](http://bretpimentel.com/woodwinds/saxophone/) page.