



Playing Legato on the Trombone: A Primer

Walter Barrett

[Download a PDF of this article](#)

[Download a PDF of the Cross-Grain Slur Exercises](#)

What most other wind instrumentalists refer to as "slurring" from one note to the next, trombonists call *legato*. This is because where a trumpet player can slur by just blowing and moving the valves, a trombonist must often make use of a light tonguing motion, called *legato* tonguing, to avoid "smearing" from one note to the next.

Trombone players often use the terms *legato* and slur to mean the same thing. Indeed, the goal for both is the same - play two or more notes with a seamless connection, and free of smears. In fact, trombonists have many options when it comes to playing slurs.

Most trombonists at one time or another have trouble executing a clean, singing *legato*. Beginners have the hardest time of it, due to the fact that almost every method book on the market introduces slurs very early, before the young trombonist has developed the coordination necessary to achieve results gotten much more easily on other wind instruments.

There are five possible ways to slur on the trombone:

- **Lip Slurs.** This is where the slide stays in one position, and the embouchure does the work, slurring either up to a new note, or down to one.

Example 1. Lip slur in first position



- **Cross-Grain Slurs.** These are used when the slide is moved in the opposite direction from the new note. No tongue is needed, just a quick smooth slide motion and supporting air-stream.

Just for Beginners
@trombone.org

Articles

Just for Beginners Cross-Grain Slur Exercises

These exercises should be played with an embouchure change for the first note of each slur. Remember to keep the air moving at all times. In measures 1 & 2 slide up for the notes for the next slur. In measure 3 & 4 repeat the slur up to a fourth. If you find that you are not going to play an slur on one position a good second slur will produce a slur. The 4th slur has the embouchure in first. The 5th slur has the embouchure in first. The 6th slur has the embouchure in first. The 7th slur has the embouchure in first. The 8th slur has the embouchure in first. The 9th slur has the embouchure in first. The 10th slur has the embouchure in first.

A

B

C

D

E

F

G

© 2000 Just for Beginners, All Rights Reserved

Example 2. Cross-grain slurs



- **Tongued Slurs.** When the slide and the new note move in the same direction, the trombonist must lightly tongue (*legato* tongue) to avoid a smear from one note to the next. This slur is the hardest one to coordinate.

Example 3. Tongued slurs



- **Valve Slurs.** Only possible with an F attachment, these work just like slurs for valved brasses.

Example 4. Valve slurs



- **Glissando.** This is simply playing a note and moving the slide in or out, also called a "smear." No attempt is made to articulate any pitch after the first one, they just all run together.

Example 5. Glissando or "smear"



Of the five types of slur, the first three are the most important in everyday playing. However, they are best learned in sequence, so that the beginning player builds upon a previously learned skill, rather than the attempted mastery of three distinct elements at once.

Three Steps to Better Slurring

The first step to a great *legato* is air! There needs to be a continuous, unbroken, smooth and plentiful supply of air from the beginning of the slur to the very end of the last note. The "Harmonic Series and Flexibility Studies" from Emory Remington's *Warmup and Daily Routine* (available from [Hickey's Music](http://www.hickeymusic.com)) are excellent for lip slur practice. Try singing or buzzing the mouthpiece as a way to visualize that smooth airflow.

Once lip slurs feel and sound good, the next step is a smooth, fast slide motion. (No tonguing allowed yet!) Practicing cross grain slurs will help you to improve this technique. Keep the air going like you did with the lip slurs, only now we're adding the slide. Make sure that your slide is aligned and is a dent-free zone. It is very difficult to play smooth lines with a dented or dirty slide.

Check your hand position, and stop holding up the horn with your right hand, okay? Your **left** hand is for holding, your **right** is for sliding! The slide has to move just as quickly going from 1st to 6th position as it does from 1st to 2nd position. That takes a good bit of practice. Once you've mastered lip and cross grain slurs you're ready for the tongued slurs!

Tongued slurs use the **air** from lip slurs, and the **fast slide** from cross-grain slurs, with a wee bit of **tongue** (the third step) to disguise the slide change. That's a lot of balls to juggle all at once, but if you've put in the time, you won't have to think (so much) about the air, and fast slide stuff, and you can contemplate your tongue. Here's the sequence of events:

You play the first note, and now it's time for the next note. Your tongue comes up to put a dent in that big fat stream of air, you move the slide and/or change your lip for the next note, and then your tongue comes down out of the way. Timing, in legato and life, is everything! If you got it all right, you've slurred! HUZDAH! Watch out for too heavy a tongue stroke, try a syllable like dah or lah or rah, and *never stop the air!* Just dent it.

Tongue with just your tongue, not your whole jaw. (Try this: Say dah-dah-dah. Now touch your finger to your chin and do it again. It moved, am I right? Keep your finger there, and do it without moving your jaw.) Some people prefer to tongue on cross grain slurs to make them match the other slurs; it wouldn't hurt to be able to do it both ways. Keep singing and buzzing to remind yourself how the air needs to flow. There are lots of good etude books out for working on legato; I like the ones by Reginald Fink, Alan Raph, and of course, Johannes Rochut.

Some Words of Wisdom

Legato study should be part of your daily routine. I've been working on Rochut Study #2 since I heard Charlie Vernon play it in 1983, and I'm still learning stuff from that one exercise!

And, as always, be sure to work with either your school music teacher or a private trombone teacher on slurring. It's well and good to read about it here in the *Online Trombone Journal*, but the real improvement comes when you have a live person giving you personal feedback on all the aspects of your playing. There is **no substitute** for studying privately with an accomplished player and teacher. You will improve much faster, and be a more solid player if you take just one lesson a week!

Walter Barrett performs as a free-lance musician throughout the New York area on Alto, Tenor & Bass Trombones, Bass Trumpet, Euphonium, and Tuba. He is a Yamaha Performing Artist/Clinician, is on the faculty of Hoff-Barthelson Music School, and is listed in "Who's Who in American Music".

[Home](#) | [Articles](#) | [Departments](#) | [Resources](#)
[About](#) | [Contact](#) | [Search](#) | [Sponsors](#)

All material © 1996-2000 Online Trombone Journal : All Rights Reserved
Report technical problems to the [Webmaster](#)
[Online Trombone Journal Privacy Policy](#)