Harder reed.

Eventually, most saxophonists chose a 3, 3.5, or even softer, less resistant piece of cane. Softer reeds have a shorter 4-strength of the same reed brand or model. It is simply made of a softer, less resistant piece of cane. Softer reeds have a shorter play life. Eventually, most saxophonists chose a 3, 3.5, or an even harder reed.

Contrary to common belief, a 2-strength reed is not thinner than a 2 or a 2.5 on a mouthpiece with a small to medium tip opening. A reed that is too soft will close up and not respond at all. A reed that is too soft will close up and not respond at all. Conversely, a mouthpiece with a large tip opening will play easier with a lighter reed.

For beginners the best choice often is a medium-soft reed, such as a 2 or a 2.5 on a mouthpiece with a small to medium tip opening.

Tip openings are usually stated in thousandths of an inch. Most popular alto sax mouthpieces have a tip opening between 70 and 100. Popular tenor sax mouthpieces typically have a tip opening between 90 and 120.

Pick harder-playing reeds when humidity is very high, or when you play in resonant or large venues. A lighter-playing reed works better in dry air, dry acoustics, and small rooms. The reed that sounds great in a small, insulated practice studio may not be the best reed for your next concert.

TIPBOOK TIP 11: French & American Cuts

There are two style of reeds: French cut and American cut. French cut reeds, mainly used by classical saxophonists, have a thinner tip and are a bit thicker in the heart area. Reeds with an American cut usually feature a slightly thicker tip and less heart, producing a fuller, focused sound.

TIPBOOK TIP 12: French Filed Cut

Reeds with a file cut or “double cut” have an extra strip of the bark removed in a straight line, just below the vamp area. This allows for extra flexibility and a fast response.

TIPBOOK TIP 13: American Un-filed Cut

A ‘regular’ or unfiled cut, sometimes referred to as “single cut,” helps produce a powerful tone.

TIPBOOK TIP 14: Different Series

Most makers offer several models of reeds. The best way to find the right reed for your sound, playing style, and mouthpiece is by trying each. Reed makers provide useful information on the characteristics of their reeds. For example, Rico makes eight different models of saxophone reeds.

RICO ROYAL

French filed for flexibility and fast response

LA VOZ

Unfiled for powerful tone

FREDERICK L. HEMKE

Dark tone, quick response

PLASTICOVER

Resists changes in moisture and climate, fast response

GRAND CONCERT

More wood in the heart, great projection, articulation, and response

RICO SELECT JAZZ (filed)

Huge sound with powerful projection

RICO SELECT JAZZ (unfiled)

Powerful projection combined with fast response

RESERVE

A premium reed made from high-density cane to produce a highly consistent reed
TIPBOOK TIP 15: More Than One

Even though high-end reed makers produce reeds with a consistent quality, you shouldn’t judge an entire series of reeds on one single reed. Always play a couple of them.

TIPBOOK TIP 16: Premium Cane

The quality of the cane is important for a reed’s longevity and a consistent response and playability. Premium reeds such as Rico Select™ Jazz offer a higher yield of playable reeds because the cane is more carefully selected.

WETTING REED TIPS

TIPBOOK TIP 17: Wet It First

You won’t know how good a reed is until you have been playing it for a while. A dry reed doesn’t vibrate properly, so always wet it first.

TIPBOOK TIP 18: Water or Saliva

To wet a reed, keep it in your mouth for a while or put it in a glass of clean, lukewarm water for a few minutes. Using water can help extend a reed’s life. Storing a reed at the proper humidity with products like Reed Vitalizer™ help reeds moisten faster and play more consistently.

TIPBOOK TIP 19: Use A Mirror

You can also wet a reed by laying it on a wet piece of glass or mirror. Some reed cases have a special bottom for this purpose however, these cases do not allow for an even flow of air.

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