

Woodwind Fingerings

Every woodwind instrument works the same way underneath: cover the tube from the top down and the note falls; uncover it from the top up and the note rises. Left thumb and left fingers one, two and three sit above; right fingers one, two and three sit below. Learn that ladder on one instrument and you have half-learnt the rest – the differences are keys and registers bolted onto the same idea.

HOW TO READ A DIAGRAM

The square is the left thumb; the first group of three is the left hand, the second the right. Filled means down, open means lifted. Gold words are named keys pressed as well.



ONE LADDER, THREE INSTRUMENTS

Thumb and three left fingers give G on flute and recorder; the left fingers alone give it on the sax, whose thumb sits on a rest. The right hand then fills in downward.

THEN THE REGISTER CHANGES

Above that octave you overblow rather than keep lifting; the flute blows faster, the recorder vents the thumb hole, clarinet and sax press a thumb key.

The first octave, instrument by instrument

All notes as written on the player's part · lowest at the foot of each column

FLUTE · IN C, SOUNDS AS WRITTEN

C [♯] ₅	□	○○○	○○○
C ₅	□	●○○	○○○
B ₄	■	●○○	○○○
B [♭] ₄	■	●○○	●○○
A ₄	■	●●○	○○○
G ₄	■	●●●	○○○
F [♯] ₄	■	●●●	○○●
F ₄	■	●●●	●○○
E ₄	■	●●●	●●○
D ₄	■	●●●	●●● + E [♭]

The right little finger holds the E[♭] key down almost always – treat it as part of holding the flute. The thumb comes off the B key for C. The second octave uses the same fingerings, blown faster and narrower.

ALTO SAXOPHONE IN E[♭] · SOUNDS A MAJOR SIXTH LOWER

C [♯] ₅	□	○○○	○○○
C ₅	□	○●○	○○○
B ₄	□	●○○	○○○
A ₄	□	●●○	○○○
G ₄	□	●●●	○○○
F ₄	□	●●●	●○○
E ₄	□	●●●	●●○
D ₄	□	●●●	●●●

The plainest system on this sheet – and written C is the left middle finger alone, which surprises everybody. The thumb sits on a rest and presses the octave key: hold any fingering, add it, and the note sounds an octave higher. Below written D the little fingers reach the low C[♯], B and B[♭] keys. Tenor and soprano use the same fingerings.

DESCANT RECORDER · SOUNDS AN OCTAVE HIGHER THAN WRITTEN

C ₆	□	○●○	○○○
B ₅	■	●○○	○○○
A ₅	■	●●○	○○○
G ₅	■	●●●	○○○
F [♯] ₅	■	●●●	●○●
F ₅	■	●●●	●○● + 7th hole
E ₅	■	●●●	●●○
D ₅	■	●●●	●●●
C ₅	■	●●●	●●● + 7th hole

A seventh hole serves the right little finger, often doubled so it can be half-covered. F is the forked one – right first and third down, second lifted – and it catches everybody out. For the second octave crack the thumb hole open a sliver. The treble recorder uses identical fingerings a fifth lower.

CLARINET IN B[♭] · SOUNDS A MAJOR SECOND LOWER

Take the clarinet's chart from the instrument itself, and know why. Everything else here overblows an octave; the clarinet overblows a twelfth. The gap of notes between its two registers had to be given keys of their own – which is why it carries more keys than any other woodwind in the band.

The chalumeau	The bottom register, from written E below the stave upward. Lifting the right hand and then the left walks you up it, exactly as on the flute and saxophone.
Throat tones · the break	G [♯] , A and B [♭] use the thumb plus the small side keys under the left first finger. Crossing from throat B [♭] to the B above it is the hardest thing a young clarinettist learns.
The register key	The thumb key above the thumb hole. Hold any chalumeau fingering, add it, and the note sounds a twelfth higher – the whole second register.

The bass clarinet uses these same fingerings and reads the same treble-clef part, sounding an octave lower again.

What every woodwind player has to know

The things a fingering chart cannot show you

Cover completely	A hole half-covered plays flat, breathy or not at all. Use the pads of the fingers, flat and relaxed, not the tips.
Fingers stay close	Lift a millimetre, not a centimetre. Wild fingers make late notes – the commonest fault in a wind section.
Alternatives exist	Charts give one answer; players choose between several for tuning, smoothness or trills. Pencil the choice into the part.

INSTRUMENT	WRITTEN IN	SOUNDS
Flute · piccolo	Treble	As written · piccolo an octave higher
Oboe · bassoon	Treble · bass	As written
Clarinet in B [♭]	Treble	A major second lower
Bass clarinet in B [♭]	Treble	A major ninth lower
Alto sax in E [♭]	Treble	A major sixth lower
Tenor sax in B [♭]	Treble	A major ninth lower
Baritone sax in E [♭]	Treble	An octave and a major sixth lower