

PENNYWHISTLE FOR BEGINNERS: TEACHER'S GUIDE

(Early Classes)

by Bill Ochs

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If you are in a hurry, here is an overview of the key concepts you should know before teaching the first class. Most are covered in Pennywhistle for Beginners and then elaborated on in this guide. Some – such as Labeling Whistles and Classroom Management – are just covered in the guide.

1. Buy File Folder Labels Before First Class and Put on Back of Each Whistle
2. Classroom Management: Establish Playing Policy Before Passing Out Whistles
3. Do the “Cup of Hot Chocolate” Breath Control Exercise (p. 3 below)
4. Divide the Class into Groups or Teams of 6 to 8 Students
5. Use Pads of Fingers, Not the Tips
6. Left Hand Goes on Top
7. Leaks Cause Squeaks!
8. Smooth Tonguing
9. The Balance Finger

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for purchasing my book “Pennywhistle for Beginners.” I hope you enjoy using it!

I have taught the pennywhistle to children and adults in New York since 1973. For a number of years, I was an itinerant teacher in Arts Connection's Arts Exposure program, and gave pennywhistle workshops at elementary schools throughout the five boroughs.

All of the schools I visited had students full of exuberance. Whistles plus exuberance can lead to chaos if not handled skillfully. To avoid that, I will share with you some of the techniques I developed when thrown into a classroom of thirty kids bursting with energy and eager to blow off some steam.

To start, please read the material on pages 3, 4, and 5 of the book.

BEFORE THE FIRST CLASS: LABELING WHISTLES

Each whistle should be labeled with its owner's name. You can purchase labels from an office supply store. Avery 5267 Return Address size 1/2” x 1-3/4” would work well. The labels should be positioned on the back of the whistles between the first hole and the mouthpiece.

The Clarke Meg whistle has a seam on the back. This makes labeling a bit more challenging than it would be on a whistle without a seam. But labeling can easily be done on the Meg by taking a little extra care. Here are three options for doing the labeling:

1. You affix labels to the whistles beforehand; the students write their names. If the writing is done carefully and slowly with pencil, the seam will not be an obstacle.
2. You cut labels with a paper cutter, so each student gets an individual label. The students write their names while labels are on their desks, then affix the labels to the whistles.
3. You computer-print and affix labels beforehand. There are MS Word templates for Avery labels.

Note: over time you may need to use tape as a supplement to the label adhesive.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT & ESTABLISHING PLAYING POLICY

The children will be delighted to receive something wonderful, new, and exciting, so their first impulse may be to try to play the whistle as soon as they get it in their hands. So, one of the keys to classroom management is to establish a firm policy before passing out the instruments. Playing out of turn must be discouraged from the start.

A teacher from Brooklyn goes so far as to make her students and their parents sign a PENNYWHISTLE CONTRACT before she passes out the whistles. She has very kindly shared the contract with us. You can find the contract on the last page of this guide. Feel free to use it or adapt it to your own needs.

1) **Rest position – whistle in pencil trays, hands folded:** Choose three or four monitors to pass out the whistles. Before the monitors pass out the instruments, tell the children that they are to put the whistles in the pencil trays on their desks, fold their hands, and await further instructions. Explain to the children that this is REST POSITION and any time you call out “Rest Position” they will be expected to put their whistle in their pencil trays and fold their hands. Some teachers also have a small STOP/GO sign that they hold up when they want the children to stop playing and listen.

2) **Play out of turn, lose your whistle:** Explain to the children that they will need act like grown-ups when they get their instruments. This means not playing their pennywhistles until instructed to do so.

I tell the students, “The monitors are going to pass out these whistles and some of you may want to play the instruments as soon as you get your hands on them. BUT DON'T DO IT!!!! Anyone who plays out of turn will find himself or herself without a whistle.”

Some teachers just give a warning at the first infraction. Others take the instrument away for a specified period of time. But the consensus in talking to colleagues is that a “One-and-Done” policy is the most effective. That way the children know that you mean business.

- 3) **Lose your whistle, play on a pencil:** children who have been disciplined by having their whistles taken away can practice fingerings on a pencil. This may help keep them from acting out further while still getting some fingering practice. Of course, the pencil does not go in the mouth. Children who forget to bring their instruments to school can also play on a pencil.
- 4) **Divide the class:** Before doing any playing with the class, divide the students into groups or teams of about eight to ten players each. In the beginning it is absolutely not advisable to have all the children play at once. Depending on the size of the class and the acoustics of your room, it may not be possible to have the entire class play whistles together until they have gained a good amount of control over their instruments. Groups that are not actively playing can silently practice fingering or play a “wind song” as described below.
- 5) **Silent finger practice and/or playing a “wind song”:** Children in groups that are not playing can practice fingering silently. For optimum balance they should block the pennywhistle’s windway by placing the mouthpiece midway between the chin and the bottom lip. A variation on this is to blow air down into the flue of the whistle — i.e. the window in the mouthpiece. This makes a very soft, breathy sound, but a sound that has pitch. Either technique can be a very effective way to keep the secondary groups occupied and involved while the primary group is playing.
- 6) **Whistle stays in school backpack or book bag when taken home:** This is an obvious strategy to keep students from forgetting to bring their whistles to school. But some students will undoubtedly forget no matter what strategy is used. You can factor in responsibility as part of their grade for the class. If they get a zero for music class every time they forget their whistle, it will affect their overall grade and should motivate them to remember to bring their instrument.

THE FIRST CLASS — BREATH CONTROL; B, A, & G; MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG

- 1) **Breath Control:** Explain that the pennywhistle must be blown very gently in order to sound sweet and musical. With the whistles still in the pencil trays on the desk, lead the children in the following exercise:

Imagine that the palm of your left hand is a cup of delicious hot chocolate! The cup is filled to the brim, but it is so hot that you can't drink it yet. You need to cool it by blowing on it very gently. You must blow gently because you don't want to spill a drop. Spilling the chocolate would not only mean less chocolate to drink, but you might also burn your hand. So, blow very gently until the chocolate has cooled enough for you to drink it.

Always remember to blow the whistle as though you were cooling a brimming cup of hot chocolate. You DON'T want to blow as though you were blowing out the candles on a birthday cake. That's way too much air!

Even after the cup of hot chocolate exercise, some students may over-blow accidentally through inexperience and the unfamiliarity of the instrument. This is normal and should clear up after the children have had a chance to practice at home for a few weeks.

2) **Use the finger pads, not the tips (p. 5):** Page 5 describes the traditional pennywhistle technique of covering the holes with the pad of the finger, rather than the tip. This not only ensures a proper seal of the holes, it also facilitates the playing of ornaments for students who may want to go on to play in the Celtic folk tradition. The fingers should be relatively flat, not curved or bent. And when done properly, the fingers should overlap the whistle. Take care that the middle finger is extended almost to its full length and is not bent.

The fingers should also be almost at a right angle to the whistle. The thumbs should also be almost at a right angle to the whistle as well. The top (left) thumb rests behind the first finger of the left hand: the bottom (right) thumb rests between the first and middle finger of the right hand.

We'll talk about the right pinky in a little while. The left pinky has no function whatsoever in pennywhistle playing. But it is important that it stay relaxed, and not be curled or held tensely. It's best to think of it as the little brother or sister of the left ring finger. It just tags along with the left ring finger wherever it goes, always staying relaxed.

3) **Left hand goes on top:** The importance of using the left hand on top cannot be emphasized too much. Even though the instructions in the book direct the students to start with the left hand on top, invariably some will start with their right hand on top. Playing with the right hand on top is acceptable if one is going to be a folk musician all one's life. But it introduces an unnecessary obstacle to moving on to play a conventional woodwind instrument such as the flute, saxophone, clarinet, or oboe. All these instruments are manufactured with key mechanisms that require the left hand to be placed on top. So, I always insist that children use the left hand on top of the pennywhistle so as to not complicate their future woodwind options.

4) **Embouchure (how to hold the whistle between the lips):** This is not described in the book, as it varies from player to player and most of the variations are workable. But in general, the whistle should be held between the lips in a relaxed and natural manner.

Some pennywhistlers play with their teeth almost closed, the air flowing through the teeth. Others open the teeth slightly to let more air through. Opening the teeth is preferable, but one thing to stress with young students is not to bite the mouthpiece. Biting the mouthpiece is not good for the instrument or for their teeth. Later we will learn how to stabilize the whistle without using the teeth.

5) **First notes (p. 6, Track 3):** After demonstrating the proper finger position and talking about how to hold the whistle between the lips without biting the mouthpiece, follow the instructions on p. 6 for playing the first notes. Start on the note B. Recall the cup of chocolate exercise and explain that we want to use "just a whisper of breath." Have each group play the note B.

If some students are still blowing too strongly, whisper the instructions in a very low, dramatic voice and repeat if necessary until they catch on. You can also use hand gestures while they are playing to encourage them to blow softly.

Next play A, and then G. G may be a challenging note for children with small fingers. Tell them to stretch the third finger of their left hand to play the note G. But keep the top two fingers in place.

If students have difficulty playing G, it is usually because their fingers are angled too sharply away from the holes. Remind students to hold their fingers almost at a right angle to the whistle and to cover the holes with the pads of the fingers, not the tips.

It is also important that the students' arms be relaxed at their sides, and that the wrists not be bent. Bending the wrists will pull the fingers off the holes. The wrists should be in a neutral position — not flexed one way or the other.

In short, “Leaks cause squeaks!” If the holes are not completely covered, the tone will not be clear. Please use all of the above information to help your students seal the holes air tight. The pressure on the holes should be firm, but relaxed.

6) **First notes exercise (p. 6, Track 4):** Once the students can play the first three notes clearly, have them try the exercise at the bottom of page 6, one group of whistlers at a time. Play along with CD if desired.

It is important to keep the fingers directly over the holes and close to the instrument. About three-quarters of an inch is the maximum distance that the fingers should be from the holes at any time. Beginners tend to hold their fingers very far from the instrument. Explain that by holding their fingers close to the instrument students will eventually be able to play fast because there will be no wasted motion. You will need to continually remind them to hold their fingers close to the whistle in coming lessons.

7) **Tonguing (p. 7, Track 5):** This technique, which will be familiar to anyone who plays a wind instrument, is described in the book on page 7 and on the CD. Demonstrate the exercise on page 7 or play it on the CD.

The most common tonguing mistake that young students make is to stop the breath between each note. Some students will even separate the notes with individual puffs of breath. The following description may help to smooth out students' tonguing:

Your breath is a big column of air. As the tongue flicks gently to separate one note from the next, the air continues to flow around the tongue. The tongue does not actually stop the air, and the air never stops flowing. It's like throwing a small stone into a flowing stream. The stone will cause a ripple, but the stream keeps flowing around the stone without interruption. Just as the stone causes a ripple in a stream of water, your tongue causes a little ripple in the stream of air. It's that ripple that separates one note from the other. But remember to keep the air moving at all times, except when you take a breath.

8) **First Tune — Merrily We Roll Along, (p. 7, Track 6):** We're finally ready to play a tune using the first three notes. Cue the CD to track 6 and let's go! Each group gets a turn to play.

Many children will probably still separate each note with a puff of air. This is completely normal for young students and it may take weeks before they can tongue smoothly. To further facilitate smooth tonguing, explain that playing a wind instrument is very much like singing. In singing we only breathe at the ends of phrases — not in between words within phrases, or in between syllables within words. To illustrate this, you might sing the words to Merrily We Roll Along, first smoothly, and then in a comically exaggerated staccato fashion:

Merrily we roll along, roll along, roll along, Merrily we roll along, o'er the deep blue sea.

With very young children I would stop here the first week. With older children depending on how much time is available, I would probably do the next three notes or possibly even complete the scale. But for now, let's save that for the second class.

THE SECOND CLASS: F#, E, D & Twinkle, Twinkle

1. **Reminder — LEFT HAND GOES ON TOP!**: Some children may have forgotten.
2. **Three More Notes (p. 8, track 7)**: Follow the procedures in the book for playing these notes. On some brands of pennywhistles the low D can be very sensitive and may easily over-blow to the second octave if the children blow too hard. Ask them to blow more softly if their lower notes are jumping to the second octave. And explain that we use progressively less air as we work our way down the scale.

Leaky fingers or a clogged mouthpiece can also cause low D to be unclear. Work individually with children who have finger coverage issues, if possible. Start back at B and work down the scale until you discover the problem note and the finger that is not covering completely.

To clear the mouthpiece, put your finger firmly and completely over the slot in the mouthpiece so that the instrument will not sound, and clear the mouthpiece by blowing forcefully.

3. **Exercise and Twinkle, Twinkle (p. 9, tracks 8 & 9)**: When the children have mastered F#, E, & D, they will be able to play these pieces. For young students I would end the lesson here. For older students I might include one or both of the practice tunes.

THE THIRD & FOURTH CLASSES:

Practice Tunes (p. 10, tracks 10 & 11): These tunes reinforce the techniques the students have learned so far.

Reminder: LEFT HAND GOES ON TOP!: some children still may need to be reminded of this.

THE FIFTH CLASS: Completing the scale with C# & D';

The Balance Finger

1. **Completing the Scale — C# and the balance finger (p. 12, track 12)**: C# and D' are special notes that require a little more effort to finger and play in the best possible way.

Please study page 12 carefully, as the concept of the balance finger is very important to achieving fluid and relaxed pennywhistle playing.

Though C# is shown on most fingering charts as played with all holes open, in reality most whistlers stabilize the instrument with an additional finger on the instrument. As the book explains, covering the bottom hole of the whistle with the right ring finger is a method that works well for many people. Covering this hole will not affect the pitch of the C#.

Players with longer pinkies may find it more convenient to balance the whistle by keeping the pinky on the whistle in the area below the lowest hole. If the pinky is so long that it extends beyond the joint of the right ring finger, it can usually be used in this way to balance the instrument below the lowest hole.

One pitfall to avoid is moving the fingers in and out laterally to accommodate for stabilizing the instrument. Fingers should only move up and down — never from side to side.

Some players may try to avoid using a balance finger by biting down on the whistle's mouthpiece. This is not good for the instrument or the teeth. And if the player needs to take a breath on a C#, the whistle could drop. So please see that your students balance the whistle using one or the other of the methods recommended above.

It is also important to use a balance finger on other upper hand notes to gain stability for faster playing. See the following examples.

O = Open Hole; X = Closed Hole

Use a balance finger for the note A, like this:

X
X
O
O
O
O
X

Finger B like this:

X
O
O
O
O
O
X

Again, as noted above, if a student's pinky is long enough, he or she can leave the bottom hole uncovered and stabilize the instrument with the pinky BELOW the bottom hole. Players using this method can also keep the pinky down for G.

I can't possibly stress enough the importance of using a balance finger, not just for C#, but for the other left hand notes as described above. Players who don't use a balance finger may not reach their full potential or be able to play with speed and fluidity because the instrument will never be as stable as it could and should be. So please stress this concept to your students and repeat it as necessary.

2. Completing the Scale — High D (p. 12, track 12): As anyone who experiments with the whistle discovers, high D can also be fingered the same as low D and just overblown. While this is useful as an alternate fingering in fast passages, I would not encourage its use at the beginning. The fingering shown in the book with the top hole open is the preferred fingering.

It is generally more stable, easier to ornament, and also conforms to flute fingering. So, I always teach students to use the preferred fingering from the outset and leave the alternate fingering for later.

Once the students have practiced the notes C# and high D separately, practice going from C# to high D. The transition can be described as follows:

We are going from all the holes open except the bottom one, to all the holes covered except the top one.

(This assumes the use of the right ring finger for balance. It will be slightly simpler for students who use the pinky for balance.)

This is the most difficult transition that students will have to learn, and some will not be able to do it immediately in class. That's okay. Just go over it a few times and tell the students to practice it further at home.

3. **Practice the Scale (p. 12, track 13):** Stress the importance of using the balance finger.

4. **Review the older tunes:** Go back over the first tunes, now incorporating the balance finger for the upper hand notes.

All the above will get you started on the basics. Once the kids catch on to how little air is required for the first octave, they may be able to play in increasingly larger groups. But acquiring skill with breath can take weeks or even longer.

Sticking with small groups playing at any given time for as long as is necessary is a good policy, depending on the size of your space. You might try larger groups playing outside or in such places as the gym. Or have one group play percussion while the other plays whistles. Or mix the whistles and percussion in each group. We have some excellent suggestions for making percussion instruments from found objects at the "Homemade Drums" page of the Pennywhistles for Schools website.

Teacher Resources

Additional copies of this Teacher's Guide can be downloaded for printing at:

www.pennywhistlesforschools.com/guide/

The CD media download location <https://www.clarketinwhistle.us/cd/> is printed on the inside of the cover of the book. If any of your students don't have adequate internet access, or have problems with the download, you have our permission to burn copies of the CD for them. We do still sell physical CDs for \$1.50 to those who want them.

Attached is a sample contract for students.

Pennywhistle Class Student Contract

By following this contract, you will have fun while you improve your pennywhistle playing and your musicianship. However, if you do not follow this contract, you will not be allowed to take the instrument home.

Please read these rules carefully.

I promise...

- To take my pennywhistle home every Friday (or last day of the school week) and bring it back every Monday (or first day of the school week).
- To take my pennywhistle music home with me when I bring home my instrument.
- To leave my pennywhistle in my backpack until I get home.
- I will only play my pennywhistle with a clean mouth. I will not chew gum or eat while I am practicing.
- To practice three times every weekend, for 10-15 minutes each time.
- To only try to make GOOD SOUNDS when I play. I know I must always try to play with good tone, and I will NOT blast or squeak on purpose.
- To clear out the spit by covering the sound hole and blowing hard. I will not forget to cover the sound hole.
- To only play my pennywhistle at home or at music class. I will NOT play in the hallways at school, other classrooms, at recess, or on the school bus.
- I will NOT write in the letter names of the notes on my music. I know writing in the letter names will not help me learn how to read music. I WILL make my best effort to figure out the notes and ask [teacher's name here] for help when I need it.
- To keep track of my pennywhistle. I will not lose it, or I will have to pay to replace it.
- I will make ONLY safe choices for handling my pennywhistle. I will only use it as an instrument, and I will only use it correctly.

Pennywhistle Class Student Contract

I, _____, of class _____, promise to follow all of the rules of this contract whenever I take my pennywhistle out of the music classroom. I understand that playing the pennywhistle is a privilege and that there are many children who do not have this privilege. I promise not to abuse this privilege. I promise to make good choices with my instrument so that I can have fun, be safe, and become a better musician.

Child Signature (script or print)

I, the parent/guardian, promise to make sure my child follows all of the rules of this contract. I understand that:

- Playing the pennywhistle is a required and fun part of the music curriculum at [school name], and I promise to support my child when s/he practices.
- My child risks losing his/her privilege of taking this instrument home to practice if s/he does not follow these rules.
- My child will not grow as a musician if s/he cannot (or does not) practice at home.
- I am responsible for paying to replace the pennywhistle if my child loses it.

Parent/Guardian Name (print)

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date