

Trombone in the orchestra: the stand sheet

Six things to remember when you sit down in the section.

1 There are no fixed positions, only your ear

The seven positions taught to beginners are a starting map, not the truth: the exact spot shifts across the range, because each note sits on a different overtone with its own tendency. Hear the note first and let the arm find it, practising slowly against a drone until the beats disappear. Many notes can also be taken in another position on a different overtone, which avoids a scramble or smooths a legato, and their intonation differs by instrument, so test them on yours.

2 How to slur on a slide

Because the slide travels between notes, a plain slur risks a glissando smearing the two together. The answer is a feather-light lah of the tongue marking each new note while the slide moves as fast as it can, just enough to interrupt the air without sounding like an articulation. Where the slide moves against the pitch, out while it rises or in while it falls, a true natural slur is available instead.

3 Read all three clefs

Bass clef most of the time, tenor whenever the writing sits high, and alto in a good deal of principal repertoire. The two C clefs are the same symbol in different places: middle C on the fourth line up in tenor, on the middle line in alto. They keep high writing on the staff rather than in ledger lines. Read each until you are not translating, because the arm is already doing the work of finding the pitch.

4 The long wait, and the entry at the end of it

You sit through whole movements and then arrive exposed, often loud. A cold instrument plays flat, and the cause is the air inside it rather than the metal: sound travels faster through warm air. Blow through during the rest instead of finding out on the note. And count from something real, because a long rest is counted by knowing what happens inside it.

5 A mute changes the pitch, not only the colour

Most straight mutes push the pitch sharp, and the tighter the mute the more so. The bucket mute is the exception and tends flat, and some modern designs hold the pitch, so check yours against a drone. The slide can absorb the correction as you play, which a valved instrument cannot do note by note, but decide it before the rehearsal rather than hunting for it in the bar. Buy time by going in early and out late, and keep the mute where your hand already is.

6 Ensemble is a matter of sight

Across a large platform sound arrives late, so playing by ear alone puts you behind the beat. Take the beat from the conductor and your ensemble from the principal of your own section, kept at the edge of your vision while you read. Where what you hear and what you see disagree, follow your eyes.

