



TEACHING

Bowhold TO YOUNG STUDENTS

by *Elise Winters*

I used to teach the “beginning bowhold” with the thumb underneath the frog. The promise from my teacher trainer was that it was easy to teach, natural for students, and ensures a perfectly bent thumb once the thumb moved to its real position under the stick. And I do agree with her — it is definitely easier to see when it’s outside the frog! No more crawling on the ground, peering up under students’ bow hands to check their thumb.

But, here is what happened: First, my students’ thumbs were always straight, even underneath the frog. Sigh. Second, when it was time for them to move the thumb “inside,” they were resistant and constantly reverted back to their familiar bowhold. More reminders. Third (and most frustrating of all), they still had the characteristic “banana thumb” that I’d wanted to avoid in the first place!

So, I began to ask myself ... why *does* that thumb always turn into a banana?

It turns out that it’s not because this shape is *easier*.

It’s because this straightened-out shape is the natural, correct shape of the thumb when playing at the point. Students simply don’t have the agility and awareness to recover their original bowhold shape when returning to the middle.

I finally did discover a bowhold sequence that yields consistently good results and looks like a mature, adult bowhold from the very beginning (no rabbit faces here). I’ve used it for years with students of all ages, and it has yet to let me down.

Most importantly, I’ve coupled that with an exercise to train the bow hand to extend, then recover its original curves. Voilà! No more banana thumb. Even my five-year-old students can now play full bows with nice hand flexibility.

One more tip for using any bowhold with beginners: I do suggest locating the bowhold at the upper edge of the silver winding (a bit below the balance point), for the first few months. This causes the bow to feel lighter and avoids placing load on the pinky before it’s built up strength. The whole bow hand will be more relaxed with this placement. Once the student is ready, it’s no big deal to slide the bowhold down to the frog. (Basically it’s as though they’re simply getting a longer bow.)

Hope this method makes bowholds easier and more fun for you and your students!

Warmly,

Elise

P.S. If you have questions, feel free to email elise@discoverviolin.org. It may take me a little while to respond depending on the week, but I answer every email!

Forming the Bowhold on a Pencil

This method of creating the bowhold tailors the bowhold to the individual student's hand shape.

- ① Hold the pencil upright in the left hand (“helper hand”).

NOTE: An octagonal pencil is much better than a round one for bowhold purposes.



- ② Form a tall “egg” between the middle finger of the right hand and the thumb.

If needed, practice these three shapes with the right hand:

1. Bird’s beak (thumb and finger straight);
2. Circle (thumb and finger rounded), and
3. Egg (thumb and fingers pulled toward the palm).



- ③ Open the “egg” and insert the pencil between the fingertips of the thumb and middle finger. Make sure the wrist is straight, that the thumb and finger still form a circle, and that the pencil is resting on the *tip* of the thumb.

It works best if the hand is at chest level, and the elbow hanging below, so that the wrist is straight. (The student below should drop the elbow a bit lower.)



- ④ Drop the ring finger next to the middle finger in a place that feels natural. *These two fingers are the “two ducks.”*

While these fingers may be spaced close together for some students, this should not be over-emphasized. Striving to push them together will introduce undesirable tension in the hand, creating imbalances later on.

- ⑤ Allow the index and pinky fingers to drop onto the pencil in a natural way, also on the fingertips.

There should be a little extra space between fingers 1–2 and 3–4. Have the child blow air through these spaces — they enjoy this.

The pinky is the “little bird” sitting on the “tree branch” (pencil). It is the only finger that will always stay sitting on top, on its tip.



⑥ Drop the middle two fingers over the front of pencil, keeping them curved while doing so. The index and pinky should remain on their tips. *The amount of draping should be whatever is comfortable for the child's hand.*

- The middle finger may touch the fingernail side of the thumb.
- The two middle fingers are now “snuggling” around the front of the pencil.
- We can also say that the “ducks” have just their feet in the water. Make sure not to push them all the way underwater.



⑦ Extend the index finger *slightly* and wrap it around the pencil. *This is the “raccoon” sleeping on a log by the pond.* Observe these details:

- The pencil should rest in the first fold of the finger, not on the second fold. In other words, make sure the raccoon doesn't fall in the water!
- The index will be slightly on the side (leaning), rather than on the bottom (perpendicular).
- There should be a slight space between middle finger and the index.



⑧ Turn the bowhold sideways. Do the thumb and index finger form a “C” shape? *This is the bear cave; make sure the ceiling is tall enough for the bears to be comfortable.*

Also check to make sure there are TWO strong bends in the pinky, and ONE strong bend in the thumb.

⑨ FLAPPING THE WINGS

Once your child has established a quick, reliable bowhold on the pencil, this exercise will ensure that they have the agility and awareness to maintain this once they are actually playing.

The skill is keeping the index curved while the pinky extends. Doing this is challenging because our fingers like to copy each other!

Keep the arm still and the wrist straight as you perform the following steps on a pencil:

1. Beginning with a perfect bowhold.
2. Extend (or gently release) the pinky curve. The pinky fingertip should keep its spot on the pencil, and not “hop” or lift. A gentle extension is best (not too far). *The little bird is flapping its wings.*
3. As the pinky extends, the thumb must extend as well. *The bear cave becomes a crescent moon.*
4. Make sure the index finger does *not* extend. *The raccoon wants to flap its wings too, but he needs to stay snuggled around the log and not fall into the water.*
5. Finally, re-curve the pinky finger and the thumb.

Perform this extension-retraction activity in the following 4-beat rhythm: “One, two, three, CHECK.” The movements which accompanies these words is 1:Extend, 2: Curve back, 3: Extend, 4: Curve and Stop.

After each sequence, child should use their eyes to check:

1. Does my pinky have TWO bends?
2. Does my thumb have ONE bend?
3. Is my index finger still on the first fold?

Re-set the bowhold as needed and repeat.

This exercise should be practiced many times a day for several weeks to build muscle memory, so it becomes fully natural and effortless.