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# Making a Bamboo Flute

It is best to read and understand all instructions before attempting to create a bamboo flute. And remember, safety should always come first!

We found this PDF file on the Internet, without attribution as to who created the original file. But after some research, it appears that at least some of this information comes from a publication entitled:

“Simple Flutes”  
by  
Mark Shepard

## 1. Choose a flute size

- See sample flutes: can you cover the holes?
- The G flute will best serve the needs of most players.
- Smaller hands will be better off with an a' or b' flute.

## 2. Choose a tube: (sizes in mm)

### The Flute Tube

The *length* of the tube is roughly decided by the flute's low note, which is also its “key.” The longer the flute, the lower that note. This measurement is for the flute interior only--in other words, from the open end of the tube, up to the stopper.

The *inside diameter* (I.D.) of the tube--the distance between the tube walls--must vary with the length, for the sake of range and octave tuning. Longer tubes should be wider. For a simple flute, the best ratio of I.D. to length is about 1 to 23, or 4.35%. A wider tube than that will favor low notes, and a narrower tube will favor high notes. This measurement too is shown in the table.

Tube Size Table		
Key	bore 23:1	Inside Length (min)
C	25	590
D	23	540
E	21	490
F	19	460
G	17-18	410
a	15-16	360
b	13-14	320
c	12-13	285
d	11-12	270

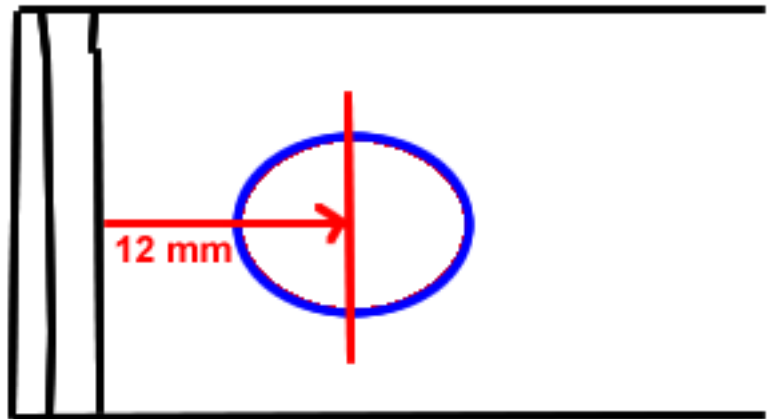
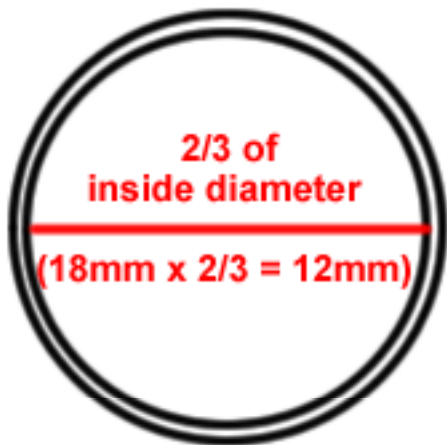
## 3. Clean the tube up:

- The *wall thickness* of the tube is important mostly because it determines the depth of the fingerholes.
- A thin wall helps volume, tone, range, and octave tuning. Aim at 1/16 inch (1.5mm) to 1/8 inch (3mm) for most materials, and never thicker than 5/32 inch (4 mm).
- Rasp and sand out the inside except near the sound / blowhole. Leave the walls as thick as possible there, just sanding slightly to remove loose material.

## 4. Make the Mouth / Sound Hole

The mouthhole must be placed at just the right distance from the flute stopper to give the closest octave tuning, as well as a clear tone. A good beginning guess for this measurement is  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the flute tube's inside diameter--but you will have to experiment. (The distance is measured from the mouthhole center.)

- A larger mouthhole will improve volume and tone.
- But a smaller mouthhole will improve range and octave tuning.
- A good compromise size is  $\frac{7}{16}$  inch (11 mm) or slightly larger. Even better is an oval of about the same area, for an edge better fitted to your blowing. Try 12mm wide by 10mm high.
- Thick tube walls are better: thin tube walls are good for fingerholes, but a deeper mouth-hole produces a more solid tone.
- Burn the hole with a hot iron tool. Then clean it up with a sharp knife to have clean perpendicular edges and be oblong as shown below.



Note 1: we burn holes in bamboo rather than drilling because bamboo splits easily when drilled. When burning a hole, the iron tool should be red hot and generate large amounts of smoke. Try not to breathe the smoke.

Note 2: If you have trouble getting a note, there may be loose material inside the tube; clean it out with a sanding stick. If the mouth hole is so wide that it cuts into the sides of the tube, the mouth hole may not work.

## 5. Cut to length

Play your flute, and see what note it plays on the tuner. It should be lower (flatter) than what you want for your final tuning.

Now you will cut off small sections of the tube until the note is just a bit flat of what you want.

Check the octave tuning.

Final adjustment can be done by sanding.

# 6. Tuning

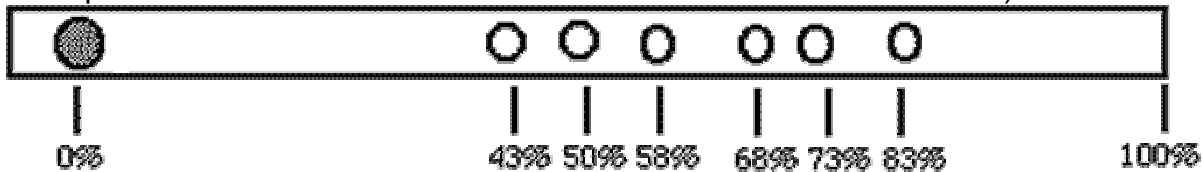
## The Fingerholes

- Large fingerholes give better volume, tone, range, and octave tuning.
- Smaller holes are easier to cover, and also to reach, because they wind up closer together.
- A good general hole size is 3/8 inch to 7/16 inch, depending on the flute's size and the player's fingers. But the holes don't need to be all the same size. Individual holes can be made as large as 1/2 inch, as long as you can reach and cover them.

The holes also don't need to be in a straight line. You may want to offset them to make fingering easier. On longer flutes, you could place the bottom hole under your little finger, instead of your ring finger, for better positioning and an easier reach..Tuning The notes of the flute are determined chiefly by the size and placement of the fingerholes.

The pictures below gives a rough guide to where to put the holes for some tuning possibilities. The chart measurements are shown as percentages of distance from the mouthhole or soundhole (from center of the hole for sideblown flutes, the lower edge of the hole for fipple or notch flutes). So carefully measure this distance on your tube and look up the measurement on the charts of hole placement. All measurements are to finger hole centers, not edges. The charts provides a starting point only. From there, you will have to experiment with final placement and hole size, using the tuning techniques we'll now discuss.

**Western major scale tuning** with the Key starting on the lowest or Root Tone of the tube. This will give the standard *do re mi* tuning (whole step, whole step, half step, whole, whole, whole, then half step from the top hole back to all holes covered and the second octave overblow)



### Measure:

- Use the precalculated measurement charts and mark your flute tube carefully.
- Before burning, compare with a finished flute of the type you are making and the images above to be sure that you have not made a major marking error.

For flutes in G and below, I burn the hole with it's lower edge right on the marked line. For flutes above G, I burn the hole centered on the line. The higher the key or root note, the less room there is for error.

### Burning:

- Do the bottom 3 holes first and when they are close but still slightly flat, do the top three.
- Burn the holes small to start with, check the tuning and then increase the hole size to bring the hole into tune. I use the burner to increase the size and a knife to clean up the burned part. You can move the center of the hole up or down as needed as you increase the size.

The percentages of the acoustic length are set to be a bit flat to start out. If you go too quickly and make the note sharp, it is very hard to lower the note.

Here are the two most important rules for tuning:

- A hole will give a higher note if it is placed closer to the mouthhole. It will give a lower note if placed farther away.
- A hole will give a higher note if made larger. It will give a lower note if smaller.

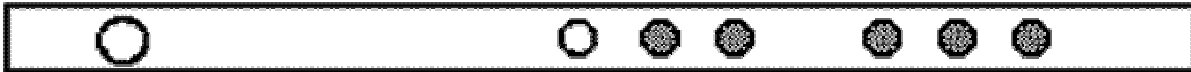
These rules mean you can “raise” a note by enlarging the hole *or* by placing the hole closer to the mouthhole. You can “lower” the note by using a smaller hole *or* by placing the hole farther from the mouthhole. It also means you can change the hole size *and* its placement *without* changing the note. A larger hole could be placed farther from the mouthhole, or a smaller hole placed closer to the mouthhole. The tuning of any fingerhole’s note is also affected by:

- The depth of the hole--in other words, the thickness of the tube. The deeper the hole, the lower the note.
- The open fingerholes farther from the mouthhole. The more and larger these fingerholes, the higher the note.
- The size and depth of the mouthhole. The larger the mouth-hole, the higher the note. The deeper the mouthhole, the lower the note.
- The placement of the stopper. The closer to the mouthhole, the higher the note.
- The width of the tube. A wider tube produces a lower note.

Generally, anything that “opens up” the tube wall and allows the air to vibrate more freely will raise the note. Anything that “closes” the wall and resists air vibration will lower it.

How you play the flute will also affect the tuning. When checking the tuning of a note, play at a medium loudness, with your fingers at a medium height over the fingerholes, and without bending over the mouthhole. Try your best not to “bend” the notes into tune, as you would during normal playing.

Also keep in mind that the first note in both the second and third octave is fingered differently from the flute’s low note. Instead of covering all the holes, you should leave the top hole uncovered as a “vent,” as shown below.



The tuning of these two higher notes is affected by both the flute length and the size of the vent hole. Enlarging the vent hole or placing it closer to the mouthhole will sharpen the first note of the second octave. It will *flatten* the first note of the *third* octave. For tuning, the notes of the flute can be compared to the notes of a piano, pitchpipe, or other tuning instrument. Play your own note first, so you aren’t tempted to “bend” your note to match the other. Or you can simply tune the notes of the flute to each other, in the *do-re-mi* pattern, with the low note as *do*. If you tune this way, check each note against the flute’s low note, so you don’t “drift” out of tune.

Whichever way you choose, remember that the notes of the flute aren’t supposed to be *exactly* in tune, but only close enough to.”bend” into tune when you play them. This is because simple flutes seldom have perfect octave tuning.

To make sure both the first and the second octave are tuned well enough, the first octave must normally be tuned a little sharp, and the second octave a little flat. You may also have to smooth out differences in “out-of-tuneness” between holes of different sizes. Tuning is the chief art in simple flutemaking. It will become easier, and you’ll get better, the more you do it.

<b>Major C</b>														
<b>542</b>	<b>544</b>	<b>546</b>	<b>548</b>	<b>550</b>	<b>552</b>	<b>554</b>	<b>556</b>	<b>558</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>562</b>	<b>564</b>	<b>566</b>	<b>568</b>	<b>570</b>
233.1	233.9	234.8	235.6	236.5	237.4	238.2	239.1	239.9	240.8	241.7	242.5	243.4	244.2	245.1
271.0	272.0	273.0	274.0	275.0	276.0	277.0	278.0	279.0	280.0	281.0	282.0	283.0	284.0	285.0
314.4	315.5	316.7	317.8	319.0	320.2	321.3	322.5	323.6	324.8	326.0	327.1	328.3	329.4	330.6
368.6	369.9	371.3	372.6	374.0	375.4	376.7	378.1	379.4	380.8	382.2	383.5	384.9	386.2	387.6
395.7	397.1	398.6	400.0	401.5	403.0	404.4	405.9	407.3	408.8	410.3	411.7	413.2	414.6	416.1
449.9	451.5	453.2	454.8	456.5	458.2	459.8	461.5	463.1	464.8	466.5	468.1	469.8	471.4	473.1

<b>Major C - D</b>														
<b>512</b>	<b>514</b>	<b>516</b>	<b>518</b>	<b>520</b>	<b>522</b>	<b>524</b>	<b>526</b>	<b>528</b>	<b>530</b>	<b>532</b>	<b>534</b>	<b>536</b>	<b>538</b>	<b>540</b>
220.2	221.02	221.88	222.7	223.6	224.5	225.3	226.2	227.0	227.9	228.8	229.6	230.5	231.3	232.2
256.0	257.0	258.0	259.0	260.0	261.0	262.0	263.0	264.0	265.0	266.0	267.0	268.0	269.0	270.0
297.0	298.1	299.3	300.4	301.6	302.8	303.9	305.1	306.2	307.4	308.6	309.7	310.9	312.0	313.2
348.2	349.5	350.9	352.2	353.6	355.0	356.3	357.7	359.0	360.4	361.8	363.1	364.5	365.8	367.2
373.8	375.2	376.7	378.1	379.6	381.1	382.5	384.0	385.4	386.9	388.4	389.8	391.3	392.7	394.2
425.0	426.6	428.3	429.9	431.6	433.3	434.9	436.6	438.2	439.9	441.6	443.2	444.9	446.5	448.2

<b>Major D</b>														
<b>482</b>	<b>484</b>	<b>486</b>	<b>488</b>	<b>490</b>	<b>492</b>	<b>494</b>	<b>496</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>502</b>	<b>504</b>	<b>506</b>	<b>508</b>	<b>510</b>
207.3	208.12	208.98	209.8	210.7	211.6	212.4	213.3	214.1	215.0	215.9	216.7	217.6	218.4	219.3
241.0	242.0	243.0	244.0	245.0	246.0	247.0	248.0	249.0	250.0	251.0	252.0	253.0	254.0	255.0
279.6	280.7	281.9	283.0	284.2	285.4	286.5	287.7	288.8	290.0	291.2	292.3	293.5	294.6	295.8
327.8	329.1	330.5	331.8	333.2	334.6	335.9	337.3	338.6	340.0	341.4	342.7	344.1	345.4	346.8
351.9	353.3	354.8	356.2	357.7	359.2	360.6	362.1	363.5	365.0	366.5	367.9	369.4	370.8	372.3
400.1	401.7	403.4	405.0	406.7	408.4	410.0	411.7	413.3	415.0	416.7	418.3	420.0	421.6	423.3

<b>Major C</b>														
<b>542</b>	<b>544</b>	<b>546</b>	<b>548</b>	<b>550</b>	<b>552</b>	<b>554</b>	<b>556</b>	<b>558</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>562</b>	<b>564</b>	<b>566</b>	<b>568</b>	<b>570</b>
233.1	233.9	234.8	235.6	236.5	237.4	238.2	239.1	239.9	240.8	241.7	242.5	243.4	244.2	245.1
271.0	272.0	273.0	274.0	275.0	276.0	277.0	278.0	279.0	280.0	281.0	282.0	283.0	284.0	285.0
314.4	315.5	316.7	317.8	319.0	320.2	321.3	322.5	323.6	324.8	326.0	327.1	328.3	329.4	330.6
368.6	369.9	371.3	372.6	374.0	375.4	376.7	378.1	379.4	380.8	382.2	383.5	384.9	386.2	387.6
395.7	397.1	398.6	400.0	401.5	403.0	404.4	405.9	407.3	408.8	410.3	411.7	413.2	414.6	416.1
449.9	451.5	453.2	454.8	456.5	458.2	459.8	461.5	463.1	464.8	466.5	468.1	469.8	471.4	473.1
<b>Major D</b>														
<b>482</b>	<b>484</b>	<b>486</b>	<b>488</b>	<b>490</b>	<b>492</b>	<b>494</b>	<b>496</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>502</b>	<b>504</b>	<b>506</b>	<b>508</b>	<b>510</b>
207.3	208.12	208.98	209.8	210.7	211.6	212.4	213.3	214.1	215.0	215.9	216.7	217.6	218.4	219.3
241.0	242.0	243.0	244.0	245.0	246.0	247.0	248.0	249.0	250.0	251.0	252.0	253.0	254.0	255.0
279.6	280.7	281.9	283.0	284.2	285.4	286.5	287.7	288.8	290.0	291.2	292.3	293.5	294.6	295.8
327.8	329.1	330.5	331.8	333.2	334.6	335.9	337.3	338.6	340.0	341.4	342.7	344.1	345.4	346.8
351.9	353.3	354.8	356.2	357.7	359.2	360.6	362.1	363.5	365.0	366.5	367.9	369.4	370.8	372.3
400.1	401.7	403.4	405.0	406.7	408.4	410.0	411.7	413.3	415.0	416.7	418.3	420.0	421.6	423.3
<b>Major E</b>														
<b>452</b>	<b>454</b>	<b>456</b>	<b>458</b>	<b>460</b>	<b>462</b>	<b>464</b>	<b>466</b>	<b>468</b>	<b>470</b>	<b>472</b>	<b>474</b>	<b>476</b>	<b>478</b>	<b>480</b>
194.4	195.2	196.1	196.9	197.8	198.7	199.5	200.4	201.2	202.1	203.0	203.8	204.7	205.5	206.4
226.0	227.0	228.0	229.0	230.0	231.0	232.0	233.0	234.0	235.0	236.0	237.0	238.0	239.0	240.0
262.2	263.3	264.5	265.6	266.8	268.0	269.1	270.3	271.4	272.6	273.8	274.9	276.1	277.2	278.4
307.4	308.7	310.1	311.4	312.8	314.2	315.5	316.9	318.2	319.6	321.0	322.3	323.7	325.0	326.4
330.0	331.4	332.9	334.3	335.8	337.3	338.7	340.2	341.6	343.1	344.6	346.0	347.5	348.9	350.4
375.2	376.8	378.5	380.1	381.8	383.5	385.1	386.8	388.4	390.1	391.8	393.4	395.1	396.7	398.4
<b>Major F 1</b>														
<b>430</b>	<b>432</b>	<b>434</b>	<b>436</b>	<b>438</b>	<b>440</b>	<b>442</b>	<b>444</b>	<b>446</b>	<b>448</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>452</b>	<b>454</b>	<b>456</b>	<b>458</b>
184.9	185.8	186.6	187.5	188.3	189.2	190.1	190.9	191.8	192.6	193.5	194.4	195.2	196.1	196.9
215.0	216.0	217.0	218.0	219.0	220.0	221.0	222.0	223.0	224.0	225.0	226.0	227.0	228.0	229.0
249.4	250.6	251.7	252.9	254.0	255.2	256.4	257.5	258.7	259.8	261.0	262.2	263.3	264.5	265.6
292.4	293.8	295.1	296.5	297.8	299.2	300.6	301.9	303.3	304.6	306.0	307.4	308.7	310.1	311.4
313.9	315.4	316.8	318.3	319.7	321.2	322.7	324.1	325.6	327.0	328.5	330.0	331.4	332.9	334.3
356.9	358.6	360.2	361.9	363.5	365.2	366.9	368.5	370.2	371.8	373.5	375.2	376.8	378.5	380.1
<b>Major F G</b>														
<b>400</b>	<b>402</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>406</b>	<b>408</b>	<b>410</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>416</b>	<b>418</b>	<b>420</b>	<b>422</b>	<b>424</b>	<b>426</b>	<b>428</b>
172.0	172.9	173.7	174.6	175.4	176.3	177.2	178.0	178.9	179.7	180.6	181.5	182.3	183.2	184.0
200.0	201.0	202.0	203.0	204.0	205.0	206.0	207.0	208.0	209.0	210.0	211.0	212.0	213.0	214.0
232.0	233.2	234.3	235.5	236.6	237.8	239.0	240.1	241.3	242.4	243.6	244.8	245.9	247.1	248.2
272.0	273.4	274.7	276.1	277.4	278.8	280.2	281.5	282.9	284.2	285.6	287.0	288.3	289.7	291.0
292.0	293.5	294.9	296.4	297.8	299.3	300.8	302.2	303.7	305.1	306.6	308.1	309.5	311.0	312.4
332.0	333.7	335.3	337.0	338.6	340.3	342.0	343.6	345.3	346.9	348.6	350.3	351.9	353.6	355.2
<b>Major G</b>														
<b>370</b>	<b>372</b>	<b>374</b>	<b>376</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>386</b>	<b>388</b>	<b>390</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>394</b>	<b>396</b>	<b>398</b>
159.1	160.0	160.8	161.7	162.5	163.4	164.3	165.1	166.0	166.8	167.7	168.6	169.4	170.3	171.1
185.0	186.0	187.0	188.0	189.0	190.0	191.0	192.0	193.0	194.0	195.0	196.0	197.0	198.0	199.0
214.6	215.8	216.9	218.1	219.2	220.4	221.6	222.7	223.9	225.0	226.2	227.4	228.5	229.7	230.8
251.6	253.0	254.3	255.7	257.0	258.4	259.8	261.1	262.5	263.8	265.2	266.6	267.9	269.3	270.6
270.1	271.6	273.0	274.5	275.9	277.4	278.9	280.3	281.8	283.2	284.7	286.2	287.6	289.1	290.5
307.1	308.8	310.4	312.1	313.7	315.4	317.1	318.7	320.4	322.0	323.7	325.4	327.0	328.7	330.3







## 7. Cleaning and Finishing

Bamboo needs only a light sanding, to remove dirt. A bottle brush will clean the inside. You can decorate the flute by burning in an insignia, or running a torch over it to darken it, or even by inlaying.

A bamboo flute will crack and split when the inside of the tube expands much more rapidly than the outside. This can happen when you take a flute outside on a cold day and blow your warm breath into it. It can also happen anytime the flute absorbs moisture from your breath too quickly. To resist moisture and guard against cracking, bamboo requires finishes inside and out.

### Finishes

You have many choices. Wooden orchestra instruments are finished with bore oil, which is nothing but light mineral oil. Be careful not to use too much on the outside of your flute, because it never dries! Almond oil is used by many flutemakers. Buy it at a natural foods store. If you prefer an oil that dries, you can use walnut oil.

Avoid using commercial finishes from hardware stores on the outside of your flute, because they almost always have toxic additives. However, they work well *inside*, sealing against moisture better than most natural finishes. One way to apply a finish inside only is to seal the flute holes with masking tape and pour in the finish.

Other options for the outside include shellac and petroleum jelly. Organic wood finishes are sometimes advertised in fine wood-working magazines.

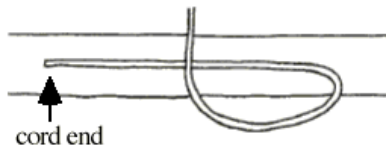
## Binding.

You should also bind the flute, at least once below the mouth-hole and once at the open end. See the illustration following. You can't pull the cord tight enough with your fingers alone, so use one or more dowels, sticks, or extra bamboo pieces for wrapping, pulling, and levering. The finished binding must be tight enough that the end loops don't spread out when you nudge them with a finger.

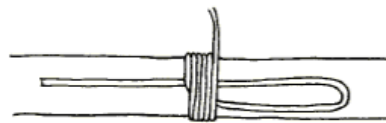
You can find a wide variety of cords for binding at hardware stores and craft shops. Your cord must be strong, not slippery, and attractive. One favorite is waxed flax (linen). Another is waxed nylon, available from leather supply and shoe repair shops. Synthetic cords become tighter and stronger when the air is dry. Natural cords become tighter and stronger when the air is humid--but hot, humid weather also shortens their life. Waxed cords aren't as affected by changes in humidity, and last longer. Among natural fibers, cotton and jute are too weak. You can make your bindings even stronger by coating them with epoxy or melted wax.

### Binding a Flute

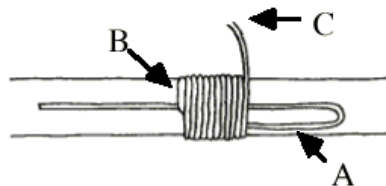
(from "Simple Flutes" by Mark Shepard)



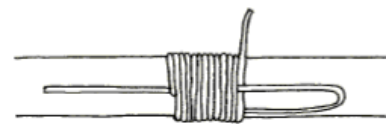
Make a loop.



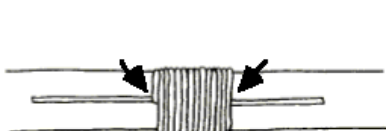
Wind the cord around the bamboo and the loop. Pull each winding tight!



Pull tightly at A until B is tight. Also pull tightly at C and cut off.



Insert the new end through the loop, then pull both ends so that...



the loop is pulled under the wrappings, where it is held by friction. Cut the ends flush with the wrappings.

# Tools:

## Step 1:

Sample flutes to test for ability to cover holes.

Step 2: You can purchase cut bamboo flute tubes from various sources.

Or grown, harvest and cut your own poles using a good saw.

You can also purchase large uncut bamboo poles from various sources.

## Step 3:

Round rasps and rat-tail files (these can be hard to find)

sanding sticks: use contact cement to glue pieces of sandpaper around the ends of sticks. Glue heavy grade paper on one end, finer grade on the other for finish sanding. Be sure to use the contact cement properly (apply it to the stick and sandpaper in a thin layer, and let it dry 15 minutes before sticking the paper onto the stick. I use large rubber bands to hold the paper in place while the glue finishes setting).

## Step 4:

Metric ruler in millimeters

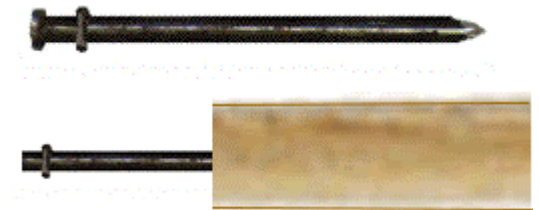
pencil

thin stick (to find the exact depth of the tube stopper to place the mouth hole properly)

burning tool: I use double headed nails driven into a wooden dowel handle (a piece of old broomstick will do), and then cut the top head off with a hacksaw.

gas camp stove

sharp knife



## Step 5:

cheap electronic instrument tuner: I am using a and a.

hacksaw with 10" blade and 10 teeth / inch (rotate the tube as you cut to keep from knocking splinters out of the bottom edge of the tube)

## Step 6:

measuring chart

good metric yardstick in millimeters

burning tool

gas camp stove

sharp knife

electronic instrument tuner (or a good set of ears)

## Step 7:

damp cloth

fine sandpaper

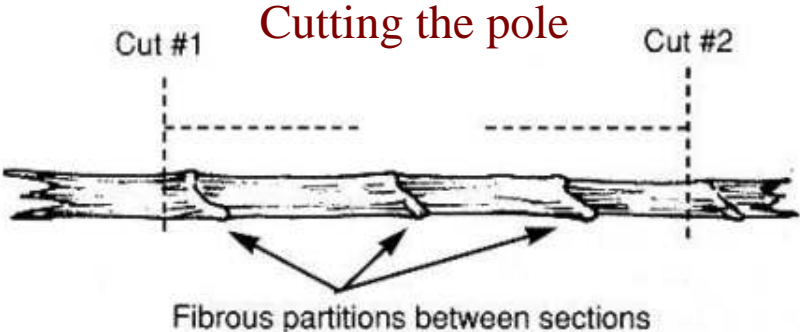
hemp twine

beeswax

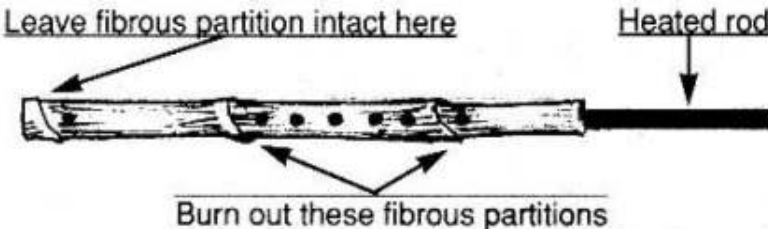
natural furniture polish or oil (olive, walnut, orange)

# Sample Images Of Making A Bamboo Flute

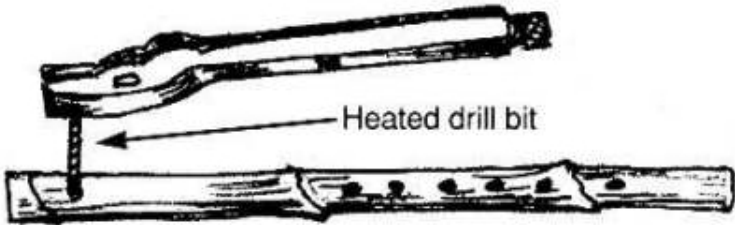
IMPORTANT NOTE - Safety should always come first. If you do not understand the techniques fully, or are not comfortable using the techniques described, get help from someone to create a flute. Don't in any way endanger yourself or act without care and thought while creating a flute using the techniques described herein. Always take great care while using any type of method to heat the tools!



### Clearing the fibrous portions in the pole



### Burning the holes



### Sandpaper the holes

