

# The “wosbald” Approach to Proper Pipe Smoking

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## Packing the Pipe

I don't subscribe to all of the tedious packing techniques. I just fill the bowl firmly, until the leaf doesn't want to work its way into the bowl anymore.

I just put some leaf in the bowl and push down very lightly; just gently enough to settle it and make it homogenous. When you are near the top quarter of the bowl, top it off by pressing down around the edges. When the leaf doesn't work its way in any more, it's done. At this point, the center of the pack should be slightly domed and somewhat firm. The center should have a sort of drum-like tautness while it will seem a bit less tauter near the circumference. The reason that you don't put any significant pressure on the dead center of the load is because, even when the pipe is already properly packed, you can force the load to compress further by doing this. Then if one adds even more tobacco, the pipe will be overpacked.

This keep-it-simple approach has always worked well for me.

## Lighting the Pipe

A simple fact of pipe smoking is that all pipes are lit using the same basic technique. This holds true whether the leaf is dry or moist, whether it is flake or ribbon, dense or easy burning, or even whether one is using a narrow chamber versus a wide one. Although the reaction of the tobacco may change based upon these variables (and thus, the time it may take to accomplish the light may be affected thereby), the basic procedure remains the same.

Keep in mind that the primary ignition always occurs at the core, or center, of the load in the tobacco chamber. This is the area of the tobacco pack which is both the densest and the hottest. Therefore the ember begins here and subsequently spreads outward along the surface of the load. And unlike tubular forms of tobacco smoking, such as cigarettes and cigars, the circumference of the load (adjacent to the bowl walls) cannot be “rolled” around the load as would be done with a rolling paper. In addition, pipe tobacco is usually cut as relatively coarse, more irregular cuts in order to increase the slow smoldering properties of the leaf but which can also make the burn more irregular. Therefore the pipe smoker uses esoteric techniques such as “tamping” and “edging the circumference” of the pack in order to keep the ember tidy, contained, and uniform.

There is an old saying which says, “A pipe well lit, is a pipe well smoked”. This is very true. The lion's share of bitterness and bite arises from a struggle to light the pipe. Stomach irritation (the queasy, bloated sensation of swallowing too much air) also has its genesis in errors in the lighting procedure. Learning to light a pipe well will allow one to explore tobaccos of notoriously difficult burning properties as well as increasing the nuance and appreciation of more familiar ones.

The main goal of lighting is to achieve that which is called “catching the bloom”. This process involves slowly igniting the core of the load until a smoldering ember forms which is of sufficient mass that it can be caused, by regular and deep draws, to “bloom” into an ember which slowly spreads outwards towards the circumference of the pack. Using the minimum amount of flame necessary to accomplish this bloom is greatly beneficial. The goal is to carefully and methodically, yet quickly, establish a bloom which can then be carefully tended in order to remain smoldering for as long as possible.

In the generally accepted (though IMO improper) method of lighting, flame is applied while the smoker attempts to forcibly suck the flame deeply into the chamber and across the surface of the load. This is repeated until the bloom is eventually established. Though this method may be moderately successful when dealing with easy burning, finely cut tobaccos packed into a relatively narrow chamber, it is not ideal. Problems escalate as the tobacco becomes of a type which is less prone to burning, the cut is coarser, or the chamber diameter increases.

## Methodical Lighting Procedure

1. With the flame centered over the core of the pack, VERY GENTLY draw on the pipe a few times. These are short, gentle puffs. The flame will BARELY even be noticed to dip, and any dip it exhibits will be straight towards the core of the load.
2. Gently touch the center of the load with the tamper. Apply no pressure. Just flatten any tiny bit of ash or crispy leaf that may be there. Subsequent to the first couple of applications of flame, there will be very little ash or crispies.
3. Repeat step 1 and 2.
4. As this process is repeated, it will soon be evident that even the very gentle puffs applied to the pipe will cause the flame to begin a noticeable dip towards the core of the pack. This is an indication that an ember is beginning to form.
5. While repeating the above steps, it will be noted that there will be certain areas of the core which cause more “reaction” from the flame. The flame will tend to “want” to dip towards these spots. The flame will seem to “dance” over these areas as the smoker puffs, and there will be an increase in smoke volume as the tobacco lights in these areas.
6. Therefore, it is always advisable to find the spots where the flame “wishes” to go and allow it to gravitate there, rather than attempt to force the flame to areas on the surface which the smoker “believes” need to be lit.
7. The sound of air rushing through the chamber of the pipe is a definite indication that the force used when drawing down the flame is overly vigorous. This will excessively irritate the tongue as well as contribute to unpleasant bloating resulting from air in the stomach.
8. Repeat the above steps until an ember is formed which can be sustained by long, slow, deep draws. This is called “catching the bloom”. Once the bloom is caught, the smoker must attempt to nurture the ember as it expands, attempting to keep it alive by long, metered puffs and gentle taps with the tamper as the ember become less “tidy”.
9. If the ember does go out, gently tamp the surface and carefully repeat the above steps, allowing the flame to go whither it will. As the ember expands, each re-light becomes exponentially easier, so always go gently with the flame.
10. Eventually, the ember will have expanded to the point where it has “reached its limit”. The flame will not dip significantly anymore, and any smoke that is produced will be airy, harsh, and biting. At this point, carefully “edge” the crispy bits at the circumference of the chamber bending them SLIGHTLY towards the center of the load.
11. Commence with re-lighting, again allowing the flame to find its desired pathway.
12. At this point, the procedure of smoking a lit pipe (detailed in another section) should be followed.

It is very important to practice patience when lighting a pipe. Depending on the constituent tobaccos, the cut, and the chosen pipe’s chamber diameter, catching the bloom may proceed relatively quickly, or it may be a surprisingly prolonged affair. Regardless of the apparent lack of progress which may be experienced when attempting to catch the bloom, it is important to never attempt jump-starting the process through heavy handed application of the flame or forceful puffing. There is no doubt that, when dealing with dense, slow burning tobaccos in a very wide chamber, a 10-15 minute battle to catch the bloom can try one’s patience. However, it is critical to resist impatience and stay the course. Slow-burning tobaccos can be very surprising in that, although there may be many attempts to catch a bloom with seemingly no progress, the bloom will often suddenly catch on the very next attempt with little or no advance warning or indication.

Imbued with memories of grandpa’s mild and easy burning burley blends, Americans are historically conditioned to expect a pipe to bloom with one or two nonchalant passes of the flame. However, not succumbing to unrealistic self-expectation or the looming threat of perceived social awkwardness when lighting a pipe will bestow the pipe smoker with an easy burning, richly flavored experience.

## Smoking the Pipe

Truth be told is that pipes are the most scientifically "incorrect" way to smoke. When cigarette or cigar leaf is rolled, the circumferential compression helps keep the charred leaf forming the ember (or cherry) held together and homogenous. And that homogenous smoldering ember actually acts as a resistor for air which percolates through it. Air flowing through the ember evenly and at a measured rate keeps the smoke sweet and cool. But in pipes, the leaf is just stuffed in. The briar can't be rolled around the leaf. Therefore it is up to the smoker to keep the ember at the exact density which allows the air to penetrate easily and freely, yet slowly and evenly. This is what keeps that pipe in the "sweet spot" or "zone" which all smokers have experienced and which is the goal to maintain from the top to the bottom of the bowl. Yet even after smoldering in the sweet spot for awhile, the ember will naturally succumb to entropy (since there's no rolling or rolling paper to burn away) and the smoke stream will get airy and hot again. Scientifically speaking, the pipe the smoker is starting off at a disadvantage, and he must control the variables himself.

But keeping the smoke sweet from the beginning is the real key. Often one reads a review about a tobacco saying that "halfway down the bowl, the tobacco finally calmed down, but by then I couldn't taste it anyway." Incorrectly smoked VAs will either fry the tongue or else leave that bitter-sour aftertaste that lingers for hours on end. Carefully smoked, quality VAs (especially matured VAs) leave very little aftertaste.

Bite is caused by excess air flow that rushes around the ember unevenly and quickly (which is evidenced by a thin smoke stream, a sharp stinging sensation, and condensation in the airway.) Bitterness and acidity is caused when the tobacco and the ember get too hot. This is from puffing too fast. If the ember is set properly and the airflow is right, the smoker must let the pipe smoke itself by matching the suction of the draw to the speed at which the air wants to percolate through the tobacco. You just have to get the feel for it, but you are essentially just trying to tease smoke by drawing just until a gentle resistance is felt, then keeping the draw intensity at that level.

When the leaf overheats chemicals are altered. Once pleasant chemicals morph into bitter, acrid ones. And once these chemicals contact the mouth, they are persistent. The rest of the bowl, even if smoked "correctly" will be colored by the lingering bitterness. VA is particularly high in chemicals which, initially tasty, have the potential to turn bitter. Turkish tobaccos, even when correctly smoked, have a certain acidity and bitterness which are of a pleasing quality and which don't linger interminably.

Keeping the flame in the bowl too long when relighting will also overheat the tobacco. When relighting, use draws that are rapid and short and gentle enough to just make the flame "dance" down into the chamber. As soon as a little resistance is felt and a little bit of smoke is produced, remove the flame and use measured long draws as the ember flares up. Then resume slow, shorter draws after it is fully lit. If the ember doesn't ignite, just try again. It's better to try again rather than overheat the ember.

If the ember doesn't take to flame after a reasonable number of puffs with a lighter, then take the flat end of a regular pipe nail and very gently touch the tobacco surface along the entirety of the circumference of the chamber. (This is called "edge tamping" and accomplishes the same thing as using one of those fancy, \$100 tilted tampers.) Then try to relight again. When all this has been tried and the ember still won't light with a reasonable number of puffs, you're probably at the end of the bowl. You may also notice that the draw becomes occluded slightly at this time as well. But never try to burn every last shred of tobacco. I don't know who came up with that one. Burning your pipe and your mouth is a lose-lose proposition.

## Chamber Gauge

One of the more overlooked aspects of pipe smoking is the effect of chamber diameter on both the flavor as well as the burning qualities experienced during the smoke. Similar to the manner in which the flavor of a particular cigar blend will be perceived differently depending on the ring gauge selected, the choice of chamber gauge allows the smoker to tailor the smoking experience to his specific needs. Though there are no absolute and unbreakable rules which determine which blends should, or should not, be used in particular chamber sizes, the objective variables effected by chamber gauge should be taken into account by the savvy smoker.

Chamber gauges can be broadly defined as:

- Narrow: 17-19 mm (11/16"-12/16")
- Medium: 20-22 mm (13/16"-14/16")
- Wide: 23-25 mm (15/16"-16/16")

One of the most commonly found of chamber gauges is the 3/4" (19 mm). Indeed, it is one of the most popular sizes, primarily due to its practicality. Almost any tobacco blend and cut can find comfortable matches with this gauge. In addition, since extremely wide chambers can take a significant amount of technical expertise to master, this gauge is an ideal starting point for the neophyte smoker.

In general, narrower chambers favor tobaccos which are:

- quick burning
- finer, narrow cut
- bright, pointed, nuanced, and subtle in flavor
- have uneven packing characteristics (like broken flakes or krumble kakes)

Wider chambers tend to favor tobaccos which are:

- slow burning
- broad cut
- mellow, smooth, generous and expansive in flavor
- homogenous packing characteristics (like ribbon cut mixtures)

As the chamber becomes progressively narrower, the top ember becomes progressively denser and thus, more resistant to rapid air flow. It smolders relatively slowly and at relatively cool temperatures. Carefully smoked, narrow chambered pipes present and delineate the various constituent tobaccos in a mixture, preserve the subtlety of delicate and nuanced tobaccos, and deliver low smoke volume.

Progressively wider chambers reduce the density of the ember, thus maximizing its exposure to air. With the resulting increase of airflow, the ember increases both its smoldering rate as well as its ambient temperature. Treated properly, wide gauge bowls tend to homogenize and unify the constituent tobaccos of complex mixtures, amplify the robust flavor of assertive tobaccos, and deliver generous gouts of smoke. It should be mentioned that some chambers are radically tapered from rim to heel, allowing a variable smoking experience.

As to which chamber the smoker should select for particular blends is largely a matter of preference. Though the smoker will likely find that certain blends which perform admirably in narrow chambers will fail to deliver their optimum characteristics in wider ones, the converse is not necessarily true. Many smooth, heavy blends can be wonderfully appreciated in narrower bowls, allowing the smoker to analyze and deconstruct the flavor constituents. Yet the smoker can "open up" the flavor of these same blends by increasing the bowl gauge.

Though there may be a bit of trial and error as the smoker explores his chosen blends in a variety of chamber gauges, the attentive and experienced smoker will soon have little trouble selecting the ideal pipe befitting tobacco as well as circumstance.