

Understanding and Developing the Voice for Oral Presentation

We use our voices everyday to communicate ideas, emotions and needs. In a heightened performance environment — for example, actors onstage, or public speakers, or lawyers in the courtroom — it is vital to understand how to take proper care of the vocal instrument. In the case of lawyers, lengthy trials may require several days of oral argument. It's important to maintain vocal health and dexterity, as that will make the voice, as well as the message, more impactful.

Fundamentals of Vocal Production and Technique: Breathing, Phonation, Resonance and Articulation

- **Breathing:** Connection to the voice begins with deep, diaphragmatic breathing. The diaphragm is the dome-shaped muscle located just below the lungs, which flattens down into the abdominal cavity during the inhale. It then floats back upward toward the lungs, resuming that dome shape, during the exhale. With proper alignment of the body, the breastbone should be lifted, but still, during the inhale. The chest and shoulders should not move as the breath simply drops down into the lungs, pressing the diaphragm downward and expanding the lower belly.
- **Phonation** is a fancy word for the creation of vocal sound, or vocalization. It encompasses many techniques used by performers to create characters, or by public speakers to create impact, interest and influence. Phonation includes considerations such as pitch, pacing, tone, volume, emphasis and intonation. Skillful use of these vocal techniques can suggest a character's age, a dialect can suggest their origin, speech patterns can suggest specific personality traits. So, using vocalization in skillful ways allows the speaker to intentionally craft the way the listener will perceive their words or message. Healthy vocalization requires adequate warming up of the vocal folds to avoid damage to the voice.
- **Resonance** is the body's ability to turn itself into a natural loudspeaker. Resonance creates vibrations in the body. Lower pitches tend to vibrate in the chest (chest resonance), whereas higher pitches tend to vibrate in the head (head resonance).
- **Articulation** is the ability to make every word, sound and consonant clear. Good articulation makes for good diction, or pronunciation. Together, good resonance and articulation allow the voice to travel loud and clear to the back row, with or without a microphone.

Practice Makes Persuasive

If you wanted to become a world class basketball player, you'd know the importance of practice. You'd dribble for hours, throw thousands of free throws, 3-pointers, lay-ups, and run for miles to

build endurance. But you sure wouldn't do any of that without first at least stretching out and warming up your body, unless you wanted to be icing an injury later.

The same holds true for your voice. Gaining dexterity and skill vocally can considerably up your game as a public speaker. So exercising the voice is vital, as is warming it up properly before you do that.

Warm-Up Exercises

The body itself should be relaxed before working on breathing, vocal technique and, of course, performance.

- 1) **Semi-Supine Rest:** Lie on the floor with your knees bent and small pillow or book under your head, breathing deeply into your abdomen and allowing your spine to completely rest. This position is also useful while warming up the voice.
- 2) **Spinal Rolls:** Tuck your chin into your chest and roll down your spine, one vertebra at a time, with a relaxed head and neck. Lead with the top of your head, bending your knees if needed, and release your hips. Hang there for a bit, shaking out your torso, arms, head and neck. Then, slowly roll back up to standing, stacking one vertebra at a time until your head is aligned on your neck. Repeat this exercise to release any remaining tension.
- 3) **Neck Rolls:** Roll your neck gently in circles clockwise and counter-clockwise.
- 4) **Shoulder Rolls:** Roll your shoulders in gentle circles forward and backward.
- 5) **Massage the Jaw:** Release any tension in the jaw by massaging the muscles. Grasp the chin in both hands, take a deep breath and try to release the jaw on the exhale, while waggling your chin with your hands.
- 6) **Yawns:** Yawn to open your throat and lift your soft palate. Smiling while you yawn increases the stretch. Try also voicing the *ah* vowel on a yawn.

Breathing Exercises

After warming up the body, work on breathing technique before vocalizing. Stand with feet hip's width apart, spine straight but without tension, head upright in alignment with the spine. Imagine yourself like a marionette, with a string attached to the center of the top of your head gently lifting you up. Then try the following exercises designed to strengthen the muscles used to support the breath and voice.

- 1) **Diaphragmatic Breathing:** Elevate the breastbone, shoulders back and relaxed. Place your hands on the lower abdomen and the small of your back to remind yourself where to send the breath. Allow the breath to drop in deeply, feeling the lower abdomen and ribs expand. Make sure the shoulders and chest do not move. Hold the breath for a count of five, then release the air through the mouth all at once. Repeat this exercise several times.

- 2) **DB with Sighing:** Take a breath as in exercise #1, then sigh out on open vowel sounds: *uh, ah, oh, oo, ee* (adding an 'h' leading into in can be helpful).
- 3) **DB with "sh":** Take in the breath as in exercise #1, but release the breath on a gentle *sh* sound without allowing your expanded abdomen to collapse. Repeat with other fricatives (unvoiced sounds) such as *sh,ss, th, ff*.
- 4) **DB with Buzz:** Follow exercise #2, but release the air on a lip buzz with puckered lips. Feel the vibrations of the buzzing sound as the air exits the body. Change the pitch with each repetition.

Vocal Exercises

The techniques below exercise different aspects of the voice. Remember to take in a deep breath before doing every exercise, and repeat each of them several times.

- 1) **Sliding Scales and Sirens:** *To help expand range and open the voice,*
 - a) Begin on a low pitch, and slide up the scale to a high pitch. Or imitate a siren sliding from low to high pitch.
 - b) Long *ee* and *oo* vowels work well with this exercise.
 - c) You can also slide through your range on a lip buzz.
- 2) **Humming:** *To explore chest and head resonance,*
 - a) Begin humming on a low pitch. Open up to an *ah* sound, then return to a hum.
 - b) Next, sustain a hum on a high pitch, open to an *ah*, then back to a hum.
 - c) Repeat at multiple different pitches.
- 3) **Tongue Calisthenics:** *To improve tongue strength and dexterity.*
 - a) Protrude the tongue for 30 seconds then release
 - b) With the mouth slightly open and jaw relaxed, repeatedly touch the tip of the tongue to the inside cheeks, the roof of the mouth, and the back of the lower front teeth
 - c) Draw circles with the tongue on the inside of each cheek, clockwise and counter-clockwise

Articulation Exercises:

Unvoiced:

Pa Ta Ka Pa Ta Ka Pa Ta Ka Pah
 Pa Ta Ka Pa Ta Ka Pa Ta Ka Paw
 Pa Ta Ka Pa Ta Ka Pa Ta Ka Poo
 Pa Ta Ka Pa Ta Ka Pa Ta Ka Pee
 Pa Ta Ka Pa Ta Ka Pa Ta Ka Pay

Voiced:

Ba Da Ga Ba Da Ga Ba Da Ga Bah
 Ba Da Ga Ba Da Ga Ba Da Ga Baw

Ba Da Ga Ba Da Ga Ba Da Ga Boo
Ba Da Ga Ba Da Ga Ba Da Ga Bee
Ba Da Ga Ba Da Ga Ba Da Ga Bay

Ba Ba Ba

BaBa BaBa BaBa

BaBaBa BaBaBa BaBaBa

Repeat, changing initial sound to D, F, G, H, K, L, M, N, P, R, S, T, V, W, Z

Tongue Twisters: *to improve articulation, try the following, increasing speed of delivery with each repetition.*

Unique New York

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.
If Peter picked a peck of pickled peppers,
how many peppers did Peter Piper pick?

She sells sea shells down by the sea shore.

Red leather, yellow leather

A big black bug bit a big black bear
and the big black bear bled blue black blood.

To sit in solemn silence in a dull dark dock,
in a pestilential prison with a life long lock,
awaiting the sensation of a short sharp knock
from a cheap and chippy chopper on a big black block.

She says she shall sew a sheet.

She stood on the balcony,
inexplicably mimicking him hiccuping
and amicably welcoming him home.

Lesser leather never weathered lesser wetter weather.

I have got a date.
I have got a date at a quarter to eight.
I'll see you at the gate, so don't be late.

What a to do to die today,
at a minute or two to two,
a thing distinctly hard to say,
but harder still to do.

For they'll beat a tattoo at two today,
a rat a tat at two.

And the dragon will come when he hears the drum
at a minute or two to two today,
at a minute to two today.

Amidst the mists and fiercest frosts,
With barest wrists and stoutest boasts,
He thrusts his fists against the post,
And still insists he sees the ghosts.