

Vocal Technique

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The intent is NOT to “control” your voice, nor to “project” your voice...

Remember: the intent is to release your natural voice.

This is important – how you think about your voice will affect how you use it.

Anatomy lesson: Get familiar with the location of your diaphragm, abdominal muscles, vocal chords, lungs, stomach, bladder, intestines, spine, ribs & sternum, sinus cavities. Where are they in relation to each other? How do they all connect?

Grounding the Feet: Reduces shifting, and gives a sense of balance/stability.

Stand with your feet a shoulder-width apart (not too wide). Close your eyes. Breathe comfortably. Picture the bottom of your right foot as it rests against the ground. Picture a brightly-coloured dot at the back of your right heel. Mentally draw a coloured line around the outside of your foot, ending at the base of your baby toe. Think about your dot again. Now draw a coloured line around the inside of your foot, ending at the base of your big toe. Think about your dot again. Draw a coloured line around the outside of your foot again, this time bringing the line all the way around the tips of the toes to end at the base of your big toe. How aware are you of your right foot versus your left now? Repeat with your left foot.

Panic Points: Identifies your individual points of nervous tension.

Once the feet are grounded, rock your body gently forward and backward. As you reach the outer limit of your comfortable balance, where in your body do you feel a sense of panic? What parts of your body feel shocked, tense? They can be anywhere, from the roots of your teeth to your baby toes.

(Psst.... Who's not breathing?? We train ourselves to hold our breath when we concentrate, when we listen, when we absorb information. Be aware of this! Keep breathing when you listen... bring the information inside on a good breath of air!!)

Shoulder Blades: Learn to let your shoulder blades fall naturally.

Stand comfortably, with feet slightly apart. Imagine a warm energy gathering in your shoulder blades. After a moment, let that energy flow down your arms, stopping at your elbows – this energy will lift your upper arms gently out in front of you. Now let the flow continue to your wrists, which will lift your forearms. Then let the energy flow past your wrists and out the tips of your fingers, raising the hands and spreading the fingers wide. Don't let your shoulders ride up! Now withdraw the energy to your wrists again, letting the hands drop... then the elbows, then back to the shoulder blades. Lightly shake out your arms as they hang.

Rolling the Spine: Deepens breathing, and loosens tension all down the spine.

Stand comfortably, with feet slightly apart. Let your head roll *slowly* straight forward, so that it hangs without tension. Breathe for a moment – let the cool air drop in, turn warm inside, then release back up warm. Where does it turn warm inside you? Point to this spot. As you keep breathing, slowly lower your hand until it is across your lower belly (below the navel). Let the breath drop this far before it releases up warm. Don't force your inhalation or exhalation, just let your body breathe naturally. Your abdominal muscles should not be tense. Now roll your head slowly downward, feeling each of your vertebrae join in the curve. Bend your knees and legs slightly as you roll. Let your head, arms and body hang for a moment once you've reached the bottom of your spine. Where is your breathing? Place a hand on your belly again. Also feel the deep breaths expand the lower ribs in your back – there is a lot of breathing room there! Slowly roll back up, one vertebrae at a time, leaving the head and arms hanging loosely. Keep breathing! Roll the head up at the very end.

Head Rolls: Safely stretches the neck, without twisting the vocal chords.

Standing comfortably, let your right ear slowly fall toward your right shoulder. Don't push or strain. Imagine there is a tall “V” in the air a few feet ahead of you, with the point on the ground. Let your eyes travel down this “V”, and let your head slowly roll along with this motion. Let your eyes travel back up the other side of the “V”, following with your head until your

left ear is pointing down toward your left shoulder. You should feel a light stretch in the sides and back of your neck, but very little movement of the voice box. Don't EVER roll your head backwards past your shoulders – this can be harmful.

(Hey, who's holding their breath? Gotcha.)

Rib Massage and Stretch: Loosens tension around ribcage.

Standing comfortably, bring your right arm up over your head. Let your arm relax so that your hand rests lightly on the top of your head. With your left hand, dig two fingers into your right armpit and find the rib bones (yes, this will hurt – but it has to be done, sorry!). Massage between these bones. Ouch – keep going! Run your fingers down past the next rib bone, and massage this gap. Continue down until you run out of ribs. Repeat on left side. Do a “Rolling the Spine”, and see how your ribs feel less restrictive when you breathe deeply. Then stand comfortably, and do a “Shoulder Blades”. Once you have let the energy flow to your elbows, and your upper arms have risen, gently bring your arms together in a loose hug. Feel the ribs of your upper and lower back expand with your breathing. Let the hug relax, and draw your arms backward with your shoulder blades – feel the stretch in your front ribs and sternum. Bring your arms back to their neutral position, then let them drop to your sides.

Jaw Massage: Loosens tension in jaw and tongue.

Let your jaw hang loosely. With the heels of each hand, massage your temples in a circular motion. Slowly move your fingers lower, massaging above and below your cheekbones, then the hinge of your jaw, then forward along the line of your jaw to your chin. Where's your tongue? Let it relax and settle into your jaw – the tip should sit touching the back of your lower teeth. Place your hand under your chin and use it to close your mouth, while still trying to keep your jaw relaxed. Remove your hand – if truly relaxed, the jaw will drop. Repeat massage until this occurs. Roll your head forward... where's your tongue now? What's it doing? Work at relaxing both your tongue and your jaw at the same time.

Finding Your Inner Swamp!: Make pure, uninhibited sound.

Do a “Rolling the Spine”, and remain hanging at the lowest part of your curve. Place your hand on your lower belly, feeling the deep breathing in your belly and back. Imagine that in your belly there is a vast swamp, lake or ocean... and this swamp or ocean is filled with millions of thoughts, ideas and concepts. All are unique. Still continuing with your relaxed breathing, let one of these thoughts escape up from your belly in the form of a “HUH” sound. There is no right or wrong sound – don't try to shape it, just let it emerge. Let the thought bubble up from your swamp.... don't speak from your throat or upper chest. Let different sounds emerge; maybe multiple “HUH”s, perhaps long or short, but always a separate thought bubbling up from your swamp. Try this while slowly rolling up and down the spine, then when doing a slightly faster “Rolling the Spine”, then when standing. Shake or jump it out! Explore the sounds you can make when you aren't trying to control your voice or your breath.

A Note About Your Abs: Support your voice with abdominal muscles and belly.

When singing, or speaking loudly, the tendency is to tighten the throat to gain control over the sound you are producing. Singers tend to do this more when trying to sing higher notes, and heralds/public speakers tend to do this more when they feel that their audience isn't listening. **Tightening your throat will only work up to a certain limit, and will eventually tire and hurt your vocal chords.**

It is **far better to support your voice with a lot of air** (coming from deep breathing in your belly) and to channel that column of air with your middle and lower abdominal muscles. When singing or speaking, poke yourself just under your sternum and keep poking down in a line over your belly. The abs should be firm when singing/speaking (exhaling), but softer when breathing in. Practice this by lying on your back, and placing a 2 - 5 lb. bag of sugar on your abs. Breathe into your belly, which will raise the bag slightly, then SLOWLY lower the bag as you sing a note or speak a sentence. The slower the better, and don't clench with your throat. Like any muscle, your abs will take a while to show improvement, but exercising them will make them stronger.

One last note:

While shifting to using proper vocal technique, you may sound awful for a while!

It happened to me, it will happen to you – guaranteed. You're training new muscles to support your sound, while training old muscles to stop clenching and controlling. Don't get discouraged; keep working at it, and one morning you'll be amazed at the new voice you're able to release. It will be stronger, more reliable, and more expressive. It will get less tired, and won't hurt you. Your new breathing will help you relax (both on and off-stage) and lessen your performance jitters. Isn't it worth the work?

This is just an introduction, and I don't claim to be an expert. This is all based on a professional course I took at the Equity Showcase Theatre in Toronto; it was an excellent course taught by David Smukler.