

Breathing right will make your voice stronger, clearer

Inhale, exhale

BY JUDYLEE VIVIER

WE INHALE OUR FIRST BREATH the moment we are born and embrace life; we exhale our last breath in the moment of death. Breathing is the source of life in the body. Without oxygen we would die, so we rely on the involuntary respiratory system to feed oxygen into the body and remove the waste carbon dioxide. Our breath is also the foundation of the voice, the fuel that powers our sound, because our voice is made by outgoing breath.

When your drama teacher says to you, “I can’t hear you. Speak louder!” she is not asking

RICHARD FELDMAN



you to shout. What she is really asking you to do is breathe a little more deeply and allow that breath to support your voice, so that it can reach all the way to Aunt Mabel in the back of the theatre.

Take a moment to check how you are breathing right now. Don't change anything. I know it is always tempting to "correct" what you think you may not be doing well. Just notice how you are breathing. Is your breath shallow? Where do you feel the movement of your breath? Do you feel most of the movement in your chest? Or do you feel your belly expand as you breathe in and draw in as you breathe out?

Actors and singers are involved in the heightened action of performing for an audience. We call this a heightened activity because it is not real life, though it needs to appear as effortless as if it were real. Yet it is *also* larger than real life. It's always important for actors to create very clear actions so the audience will know what it is each character wants from the others. An important part of that is being clearly heard, often in a very large space. To accomplish that we use our breath to support the voice so that it fills the entire theatre. Good breathing is a conscious action, one that needs practice and preparation. The actor must breathe deeply with a release in the abdomen on the in-hale, a technique that teachers call being grounded or centered. With good breath support the voice will sound full and rich—not strident, strained, or pushed.

Breathing, not shouting

When the voice is not supported by good breathing, the tendency is to try to make it louder by shouting. For the actor, that's not an option. When an actor shouts, subtleties of expression and character are lost. It becomes very difficult for the audience to listen carefully to the story and become completely engaged. They stop hearing the story being told and start worrying about the shouting actor. Think about it. Have you ever experienced this situation? Has your concentration been disturbed by an actor straining and pushing his voice to be heard? Did you understand what he was saying? You might have heard his words, but did you really understand his meaning?

About this series

THIS IS THE SECOND of four articles on vocal training, a series assembled by Rena Cook, professor of voice at Oklahoma University, in which nationally prominent voice and speech coaches will introduce our readers to the fundamentals of their work. The series:

March—Alignment and the voice, by Antonio Ocampo-Guzman

This month—Breathing and the voice, by Judylee Vivier

May—Resonance, by Rena Cook

September—The articulate actor, by Dudley Knight

*With good breath support
the voice will sound full
and rich—not strident,
strained, or pushed.*

If the actor is free of tension—centered, breathing freely and deeply, able to support his voice—he will find himself calm, confident, able to concentrate, and connected to what he is saying. His voice will be more resonant and richer in tone, and it will flow more freely and easily. Most importantly, the audience will hear and understand.

When we think about breathing and the voice, we must remember that everything is connected. We're all aware that the systems of the body work together to make us function efficiently. When one system breaks down or malfunctions, it affects all the others. If the body is tense, the alignment, or the "building blocks" of the body, will not be in order. This means that some parts will start working harder or "tense up" in order to balance the body and keep it upright. This added tension restricts and puts stress on our ability to breathe freely, deeply, and in a centered, open way. There will not be enough fuel to support the voice to carry it across a distance. As a result, the voice will emerge breathy and weak, not expressive or energetic.

The breath is also connected to our feelings. When you are upset or angry or joyful, what happens to your breath? If you don't want to show what you are feeling in a specific situation, what do you do to suppress that emotion? Your breath responds to the way you feel; it changes as your emotions change. This reflex can lead to tension in the throat and a weak, thin sound if you are not skilled at deep central breathing.

Controlling the breath is essential to the working actor. If we are able to keep our bodies aligned and released from tensions, we will then be able to breathe more fully and easily; the feelings and thoughts we experience as the character will be more freely expressed and present in our bodies and our voices.

As I mentioned a moment ago, our whole body is involved in and affected by breathing because everything is connected. The four specific parts of the body that work together to support deep central breathing are:

- The lungs.
- The muscles between the ribs that allow the rib cage to expand and contract so that the lungs can inflate and deflate.
- The diaphragm, a big dome-shaped sheet of muscle at the base of the rib cage, which contracts to allow breath to enter the lungs.



JESUS OUESO

- The abdominal muscles.

Have you ever watched a baby crying or a puppy barking? Consider how they use their entire little bodies to perform these vocal tasks. They are free from tension and responsive to the intake of breath that fuels that cry or bark produced on the outgoing breath. So it is very important that the muscles between the ribs, the diaphragm, and the muscles in the belly or lower abdomen are flexible, released, and able to expand and contract fully, instead of being squeezed tightly. If they are held tight, they cannot release and contract fully and that limits the amount of breath we can take in.

Freeing the body of tension

Here are several simple stretches you can do to free the body of tension:

1. Stretch over to the right side, left arm over your head to stretch the muscles between the ribs, the intercostals. Then stretch the left side. Feel the breath in the lower ribs.
2. Stretch the chest by clasping the hands behind the back. Then bring your arms around to the front and give yourself a gentle hug, rounding your back and stretching between the shoulder blades. When you feel your back muscles loosen, focus breathing into that part of your body. Rolling forward and hanging over the legs can deepen this stretch. Make sure the feet are connected to the floor and that you have awareness of your feet on the floor. Squat down with your feet flat on the floor, open your knees wide, and imagine breathing into your tailbone. Release the back of your neck.

3. Fold forward into the prayer position, or child's pose, with your forehead on the floor. (Or place your hands under your forehead for more comfort.) Make sure the back of the neck is released. Feel the breath in your back ribs, the side ribs, and in the belly. Allow the belly to hang loosely onto your thighs.

4. Roll onto your back and bring the knees loosely up to the chest. Make sure the knees are wide apart. Focus on the breath in the belly and in the back. Notice and observe the moment when the in breath becomes the out breath. Try not to make anything happen. Just watch. Also notice that between exhalation and inhalation there is a brief pause. Allow that pause, that moment, to happen. This will calm the breath and allow the cycle of the in breath and the out breath to slow down. Very gently allow a gentle vibrated sound, "huh-huh," to be made as you breathe out. Make sure the "huh-huh" is voiced and not breathy, and make sure you release the in breath on this vibrated, unstructured sound. Try it a few times without any effort. See if you can find a spot on the ceiling that you gently direct this sound toward. Now, can you "push" this sound out toward the ceiling?

5. Drop your knees over to the left and keep your arms stretched out in a "T" on the floor. Feel the twist and stretch in your rib cage. Roll over onto the left side in fetal position and feel the breath in the back, around the tailbone. Stay here for a few seconds.

6. Roll onto your back again. Stretch your arms up over your head and legs downward, stretching out the abdominal muscles. Keep breathing. Keep the neck and





6



7a



7b



8

shoulders released. Release the breath on a vibrated sigh, a voiced but not breathy “aaaagghhhh.”

7. Roll onto your belly and gently push up, careful to exhale as you ease and release the back of your neck, shoulders, and belly and curl into prayer position again. Breathe for a few more seconds and notice if you can feel the breath throughout the body.

8. Tuck your toes under and come into a squat. Keep breathing as you gently unfold and roll up one vertebra at a time through the spine, floating the top of the head up toward the ceiling.

Exercising to increase your breathing capacity

There is often confusion between breath support and breath manipulation. Sometimes in trying to breathe correctly, we create tension by pushing, punching, or forcing the abdominal muscles out.

As you practice the exercises below, think of dropping the breath into the body, not “sucking” it in or “blowing” it out. Allow the voice to move up and out of the body at the moment when the in breath becomes the out breath. For vocal performance, it is necessary for actors to develop muscle strength and coordination. This will increase the amount of breath taken in and the capacity of the lungs. To flex these muscles and increase capacity we can practice some tried and true exercises. You can do these with a partner, to help develop awareness and observation skills.

1. Release a “fffffffffffffffffffffffffff” sound on one breath for as long as you can without squeezing or pushing. As soon as you feel the temptation to squeeze you are no longer “supporting” the breath. Take in a quick recovery breath—think of dropping it into your belly rather than the chest and repeat the exercise five times. Then rest. The muscles between the ribs might feel as if they are “working.” That is all right. Keep checking in with your body to make sure the shoulders, the back of the neck, the jaw, the buttocks, the legs, and the feet are not tightening.

2. Repeat the same exercise using different sounds—a “vvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvv,” or “ssssssssssssssss,” or “zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz,” or “hummmmmm.”

3. Here’s a fun exercise that will challenge your breath capacity. On page 56 is the Mother Goose rhyme “The House that Jack Built.” What’s interesting about this simple nursery rhyme is that it keeps accumulating characters and situations. Try reading it this way: when you need to take a breath, make sure you take it at the start of each new thought to support the new idea rather than breaking up a thought to take a breath. Do you see how the intention differs?

You may notice that you take in a different depth of breath for thoughts that differ slightly in length. As the thoughts get longer, try to avoid speaking faster. Also, don’t forget to describe what is happening—tell the story by using the juicy sounds that make up the descriptive and evocative words the poet has given you.

During your reading, try to fill the space outside of the body with vocal power. Be aware of space in the rib cage, in the abdominal area, in the shoulders, and at the back of the neck. Release tight muscles, and feel bigger and looser. This internal space, filled with breath, will help you communicate the idea of the poem and the energy of the language. It will also enable you to reach to the back row of any auditorium.

As a final exercise, see if you can apply these thoughts about breathing to a monologue. Breathe deeply into your

center and allow the breath and language to fill the space in a way you may never have experienced before. In any performance, consider that breathing may be the single most important thing you do. So prepare yourself as best you can: breathe deeply and with awareness while you are in the wings waiting to go on stage. Breathe as you are listening to other characters. Breathe at each thought change and you will notice a new voice that carries confidence, authority, clarity, and intention. And yes, you will reach Aunt Mabel in the back of the house. ▼

The House that Jack Built

This is the house that Jack built. / *(breathe)*

This is the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built. / *(breathe)*

This is the rat
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built. / *(breathe)*

This is the cat
That killed the rat
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built. / *(breathe)*

This is the dog
That worried the cat
That killed the rat
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built. / *(breathe)*

This is the cow with the crumpled horn
That tossed the dog
That worried the cat / *(breathe)*
That killed the rat
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built. / *breathe)*

This is the maiden all forlorn
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn
That tossed the dog
That worried the cat / *(breathe)*
That killed the rat
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built. / *(breathe)*

This is the man all tattered and torn
That kissed the maiden all forlorn
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn

That tossed the dog / *(breathe—a nice low dropped in breath, not a short gasp of breath into the chest)*

That worried the cat
That killed the rat
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built. / *(breathe)*

This is the priest all shaven and shorn
That married the man all tattered and torn
That kissed the maiden all forlorn / *(breathe)*
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn
That tossed the dog
That worried the cat / *(breathe)*
That killed the rat
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built. / *(breathe)*

This is the cock that crowed in the morn
That waked the priest all shaven and shorn
That married the man all tattered and torn / *(breathe)*
That kissed the maiden all forlorn
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn
That tossed the dog
That worried the cat / *(breathe)*
That killed the rat
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built. / *(breathe)*

This is the farmer sowing his corn
That kept the cock that crowed in the morn
That waked the priest all shaven and shorn / *(breathe)*
That married the man all tattered and torn
That kissed the maiden all forlorn,
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn / *(breathe)*
That tossed the dog
That worried the cat
That killed the rat / *(breathe)*
That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built. / *(breathe)*

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