
How to look after your voice

a guide for teachers by Phyllida Furse, Voice Coach



Education staff often forget that one of their most important tools is their voice. This is an introduction to strategies that can save, protect and develop your voice as well as boost your vocal capability.

Your voice

Your voice is produced when your brain is stimulated. The cry at birth uses your voice for the first time. You listen to your parent's voices as you grow up. You copy and repeat what you hear gradually learning words and developing your way of speaking with the rhythms, intonation and pronunciation that you hear.

Just as a trumpet needs the power of the breath to create vibrations and the shape of the instrument to resonate the sounds, breath is the power for voice, the support and flow of breath from your lungs causes the vocal folds in your larynx (or voice box) to create vibrations. The vibrations, or sound waves, resonate in the space of throat, mouth, nose (and to some extent your chest) and become your voice.

Your voice has a unique sound and people who hear it can recognise you. You form the vowel sounds by shaping your mouth with tongue and lips.

Vowel sounds help your voices to carry – as in 'Hi! You!'

You make the consonants by constricting or shaping/holding the sound with your tongue, teeth and lips, as in the sounds 'z' 'b' 'l' 'm'.

The muscular energy of consonants gives clarity to words and to their meaning.

Voice at work

If you have to speak at work for long periods, in large spaces and to big groups the effort may put pressure on your voice and cause strain. If the strain is too great voice problems may develop and make the voice less effective, which will have less impact on the listeners. If the speaker is aware of this they can feel less in control and less confident.

Voice training is an opportunity to check the efficiency and the ease of the natural process. Understanding how your voice works and how to take care of it helps to gain control.

For a healthy voice

- Stretch, hum and hiss before work.
- Stretch up and wave the arms from side to side to raise the ribs and open the chest.

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- Exhale then breathe in deeply on the recoil.
- Exhale slowly to 'ssss' then 'shhh' then 'zhhh'. Imagine your lungs filling from lower down like balloons. Feel the rib cage expand further with each new intake of breath.
- Hum gently to 'mm', feel the vibration in the upper chest, throat, nose and chest. Start off very quietly, gradually increasing volume. Let the hum fill your mouth like a drink. This will warm the muscles powering the vocal folds safely, and help increase resonance. Best place for this is in the shower, or as you drive to work.
- Practise vocal slides up and down on 'ng' to eliminate pitch breaks.
- Energise the articulators with a few tongue twisters. Repeat rapidly, about six times each: Mixed biscuits, Rubber baby buggy bumpers and Peggy Babcock.

At work

- Stand tall – shoulder blades sloping down the back, head comfortably balanced at the top of the spine to increase breath support and give both you and the class the reassuring feeling that you are in control.
- You will not feel or convey confidence by standing in a 'sag' position. Claim your territory in the classroom and walk forward, leading with your legs, not your chin.
- Remember to breathe (sometimes we forget) – allow yourself to breathe deeply and easily before you have something important to say. Big breaths generate volume, enabling you to power the voice from lower down, keeping tension away from the throat. Think of speaking from the belly rather than your neck. Be focused on where you are sending the sound.

To prevent problems, avoid:

- smoking, or cut down if you can
- excessive consumption of alcohol, caffeinated tea, coffee, fizzy drinks (they dry you out)
- medicated lozenges that kill pain – (pain is telling you to stop talking); suck non-medicated pastilles instead
- heavy/spicy meals last thing at night (can cause indigestion and acid reflux, which inflames the vocal folds)
- dairy products which can cause over-production of mucous around vocal folds
- talking above background noise or yelling in excitement (causes strain)
- talking in a whisper when your voice starts to go (folds are held in tension and the problem is made worse)
- clearing your throat unnecessarily or as a mannerism (smacks the folds together, increasing mucous production, which makes you clear your throat again).

Early warnings

These may include breaks in the voice (sudden stoppages), unexpected changes of pitch (voice all over the place), changes in vocal quality (hoarseness), changes in



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the body (sore throat), increased effort to talk (voice tires easily), regular loss of voice, and a sensation of lump in the throat (usually emotional tension).

What can you do?

- Voice rest – stop talking when you get home
- Body rest – relax - take steamy baths
- Steam inhalations to moisten the back of the throat, and ease pain
- Gargle with boiled, cooled salty water to reduce pain and fight infection
- Hydrate by drinking lots of water (1.5 litres/day)
- Early nights
- Take time off to allow inflammation or swelling of the vocal folds to subside.

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Early warning signs may include breaks in the voice, hoarseness, a sore throat, a regular loss of voice and an increased effort to talk