

Using Your Voice

From BBC Bitesize

You need to consider the vocal elements at your disposal. Think about your character's accent and register, and the type of performance required. You can practice your articulation and breathing.

The importance of your voice

The voice tells us so much about a person. Where they come from, their personality and how they're feeling.

An actor's voice needs versatility as it must be able to communicate a range of emotions. It must have clarity so that every word can be heard and enough strength and resonance to fill a theatre auditorium.

An actor also needs excellent breath control so that they won't run out of steam and power midway through a sentence. They must ensure the sound they make is well supported by steady air, so they're able to deliver their lines in a way which is sustained and controlled.

Vocal elements to consider

There are a number of different vocal elements you should consider:

- **Pitch** – speaking in a high, low or natural voice.
- **Pace** – the speed with which you speak, eg the speed of response in an argument.
- **Pause** – a dramatic pause at a crucial moment is very effective in performance.
- **Tone** – your tone suggests your mood and your intention towards the listener, eg happy, sad.
- **Volume** – you must be audible to the audience but not shout at them!
- **Accent** – you need to consider the accent that will work for your character.
- **Emphasis** – this is the pressure on individual words that makes them stand out. There's a natural stress on syllables as we speak, such as the first syllable in 'cabbage'. But emphasis or stress for a particular effect is significant and can change the meaning of a sentence as well as the feeling behind it.
- **Intonation** – the rise and fall of the voice. There's a clear movement up when we ask questions for example. Intonation also helps us to say what we mean.

Warming up

Before you begin work it's important to warm up your voice so you don't strain your vocal cords.

Understanding volume

This is how loud or quiet your voice is. Varying volume is important to communicate a range of emotions and situations. Anger or excitement might be communicated with a loud volume while fear could be shown by using a quiet voice.

Volume is important in a large theatre auditorium. An actor needs to be able to project their voice but still keep connected to the emotional truth of the character. This depends upon good breathing, so breathing exercises to ensure the voice is supported will help. If you simply shout without producing the voice properly, the sound will catch in your throat and you will experience vocal problems, such as loss of voice or a sore throat.

Remember you don't need to 'shout' to be heard but the audience needs to hear you. This clip from the BBC's production, *When Romeo Met Juliet*, shows actor Adrian Lester explaining the importance of projecting your voice in the theatre.

Tone

Tone of voice is its 'color' or emotional quality. A mother may speak to an upset young child in a soothing tone of voice, but if the child is misbehaving, the mother might use a stern tone of voice to ensure she's obeyed. The child recognizes what is communicated through the tone of voice as much as the words themselves.

When performing a scene you must identify the emotion of your character at each given moment. You must make sure that your tone of voice matches the character's mood and what you need to communicate about their feelings. Although we each have a distinctive way of speaking we vary vocal tone considerably to make ourselves understood.

Vocal tone exercises

Practice speaking the line below using the suggested vocal tones and note the difference in intonation and emotion.

"Why did you come here?"

- A bitter tone of voice
- An accusatory tone of voice
- A frightened tone of voice
- An angry tone of voice
- A curious tone of voice
- A surprised tone of voice

Pitch

Pitch describes the degree of highness or lowness of a vocal tone. For example, when a person is excited or nervous their pitch may become higher. If a person is trying to control emotion or expressing something serious or confidential they might use a low pitched voice.

Practice using a range of notes in your voice so that your voice is flexible and expressive. A voice that is all on one note is in monotone and unless this is a character decision, it can be very boring to listen to.

Vocal range exercises

There are several exercises you can do to extend your vocal range:

Sliding scale

Start on a low note and slide your voice up the musical scale as far as it will go. Then try it the other way round. Practicing this technique regularly will help extend your voice at either end.

Hustler technique

This is a singing exercise that stretches and then relaxes the vocal cords, which leads to a wider range of pitch. You shouldn't attempt this exercise unless you are supervised by an expert as it could strain your vocal cords if attempted incorrectly.

Picturing your vocal cords

Try and picture your vocal cords at the back of your throat. You should be able to feel them tighten as you speak. On a steady breath, breathe out across the vocal cords with a very low and sustained breath so that they vibrate. You'll make a sound like a death rattle. Practise controlling the speed and frequency of the vibrations so that the rattle 'clicks' at varying speeds. This is a good technique for loosening your vocal cords and can heal a tired voice.

Now try doing the opposite so that you pull the air inwards and over your vocal folds. You should make a noise somewhat like a dinosaur! Pull the air back over your vocal cords as tightly as you can so that the sound goes higher. This tightens your vocal cords and can help extend the range of your voice at the upper end. Always be careful not to strain your voice and to finish with the first exercise to relax your cords again.

Diction and articulation

Diction means clarity of speech. An actor with good diction speaks in a way where all their words are well pronounced. In order to have good diction you must have good articulation. This is the ability to make every sound and consonant clear, so that individual letters are not lost within words and they are sounded correctly. Think of the actors you admire who have excellent vocal skills; what makes their performance so memorable? Actors Alan Rickman and Joanna Lumley are well known for their vocal skills. Not only do they have a rich and pleasant tone to their voices, they also have excellent diction and articulation.

The sound an actor makes in a theatre auditorium needs to carry well. Consonants such as the letters 't' and 'd' are easily lost at the end or in the middle of words. This can affect clarity.

Plosives

The tongue is a muscle. Like any other muscle in the body it can be trained to become stronger and to move around the formation of sounds accurately and quickly. A lazy tongue means that your speech will sound lazy. The audience may struggle to understand what you are saying, especially if you're speaking quickly. It's not just the tongue that is important in effective articulation; your lips also have a large part to play in sounding letters.

Plosives are sounds like 'buh' and 'puh' (B and P). They're called this because they make an explosive sound when forced from the lips. It's important that your lips are strong for your plosives to be clear. If they're weak, your words won't fly out into the auditorium with sufficient force or energy to make an impact.

The Joshua Steele rhythm exercise

This is an excellent exercise for improving articulation and can be used for plosives and other consonants to stop them becoming weak or 'splashy'. Sound out a consonant in accordance with the rhythm below. /// indicates a silent beat or rest.

t///	t///	t///	t///
tt//	tt//	tt//	t///
ttt/	ttt/	ttt/	t///
tttt	tttt	tttt	t///

Try this with other consonants, such as d, s, g and v. You can do this with any letter. Focus on keeping the sound clear, crisp and precise. When you've mastered it, try to speed up and maintain good articulation. When you use the exercise with plosive sounds, try it voiced and unvoiced. 'Voiced' means that you push breath over the sound as if you were speaking it. 'Unvoiced' means that you don't use any breath but let the mechanics of the mouth movements you make create the sound.

Tongue twisters

Tongue twisters are excellent for improving articulation.

Try these:

- The Leith Police dismisseth us.
- A tutor who tooted the lute, tried to teach two young tooters to toot. Said the two to the tutor 'Is it easier to toot or to tutor two tutors to toot?'
- Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.
- Unique New York.
- Red lorry, yellow lorry.
- Betty Botter bought some butter, but it made her batter bitter. So she bought some better butter and it made her batter better.
- 'Are you copper bottoming 'em my man?' 'No, I'm aluminiuming 'em ma'am'.

Try repeating each one until your lips and tongue feel tired. Speed up and slow down as necessary.

Articulation exercises

Try saying nursery rhymes or reading passages of text where you consciously over pronounce every sound. This will make you very aware of letters that perhaps, ordinarily you don't articulate. Try these to begin with:

Humpty Dumpty

by Unknown

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.*

Lepanto

by GK Chesterton

*Dim drums throbbing, in the hills half heard,
Where only on a nameless throne a crownless prince has stirred,
Where, risen from a doubtful seat and half attained stall,
The last knight of Europe takes weapons from the wall,
The last and lingering troubadour to whom the bird has sung,
That once went singing southward when all the world was young.*

Controlling your breathing

Breathing is very important for an actor. Running out of breath will mean that words tail off and lose their impact. It is important for volume too. The breath you take supports the sound and makes it strong. Without sufficient breath the voice won't carry.

Breath is supported by a large muscle under the ribcage called the diaphragm. The way you hold your body will affect your breathing and the way your voice sounds.

When you breathe in, the diaphragm contracts, pulling downwards to increase the volume of the chest and air is sucked into the lungs. The diaphragm relaxes when you release air and sound, so that the muscle is helping you control the output of air.

Breathing exercises

Place your hand on your diaphragm, just below your ribs. Take a deep breath in through your nose, making sure that you do not tighten or raise your shoulders. You should feel your diaphragm contract.

Stand with your feet about hip width apart and your bottom tucked under you. With your hand on your diaphragm, breathe in through your nose for five seconds. Hold your breath for 10 seconds and then breathe out through your mouth steadily for five seconds. Practice pushing out the breath for longer and then with a voiced vowel sound, such as 'ahh', 'oo' or 'ee'.

You can do as above while counting out loudly, with a clear and supported voice, for as long as you can. When you've run out of breath, you should feel a new breath naturally 'drop in'.

Lie on your back and focus entirely on your breathing. As the breath is released, hum a continuous note without forcing it. Repeat this and see if you can do it for longer each time.

Place your hand on your diaphragm and pant like a dog. As you do this for some time you will find that the muscle begins to ache. This is an excellent exercise for making your diaphragm much stronger.

Resonance

Your body is, in effect, a large loudspeaker. Produced correctly and without tension, the sound you make will vibrate in your body so that it's rich, full-bodied and carries well. There are two main areas of resonance in the body.

Chest resonance

This is when the sound vibrates in your chest. Lower pitched notes tend to resonate here. Hum out and then open the hum into a vowel sound. Play with the sound, bringing it back to a hum often. Keep your hand on your chest as you do so. You should feel the sound vibrate. Experiment with a range of notes and sounds until you can feel this happening.

Head resonance

This is where higher notes resonate. Make a sustained high-pitched humming sound and place a hand on your forehead, just above your nose. Try and imagine the sound filling that area and that you are pushing the sound forwards. Feel around your face, neck and the top of your head to see where the sound is vibrating. Practice both these exercises for a voice that is strong, rounded in tone and pleasant to the ear.

Using your voice to build a character

When choosing a voice for a role, you need to study the script and the playwright's description of the character. There are several things to consider.

Age

- Is the character young, old or middle-aged?
- Would their voice be deep and mature or young and light?

Personality

- What kind of person is the character, are they shy and quiet or loud and domineering?

Accent

- Is the character from a specific place? Wherever they're from, you'll need to master the correct accent.
- You can also use Received Pronunciation (RP), which is the standard 'neutral' English accent, if the character's accent isn't specified.

Mannerisms

- Should the character have specific vocal mannerisms, eg a nervous cough or giggle, a booming laugh or a squeaky tone?

Register

- Does the character speak with a low or high register? Usually, low registers are used to show softness and kindness and are used by mature characters.

Type of performance

- Is the play a comedy or a tragedy? Your vocal choices must blend in with the overall feel of the play.
- Is your performance a vocal one only? Remember, if the audience can't see you, you can't rely on facial expressions or body movement to enhance the dialogue.
- Are you providing a voice-over or narration? If so, you'll need to 'overdo' your vocal work slightly, making sure that it conveys as much as possible to the listener.

Think about a character of your choice from the world of theatre or film. How did the actor make the role their own? Think about how Michael Gambon's vocal performance as Dumbledore in the Harry Potter films differs from that of Richard Harris, his predecessor in the role. Your voice is unique so the voice you give your character should be unique too.