



## *Voice - Putting the Orchestra to Work*

A stunning voice is not necessary to make a stellar performance. Whatever your natural voice, you can learn to use it to your advantage. But you must learn to use it effectively. Each of us can learn techniques – breath, projection, enunciation and vocal variety – that can turn any voice, even one perceived as weak or ineffective, into a valuable tool. Some points to keep in mind:

**Breath:** Our breathing habits affect our sound enormously. And many of us have never learned to breathe correctly. As children, most of us were taught to take a deep breath by expanding our chest. Wrong, wrong, wrong. We breathe using our diaphragm. And where is the diaphragm located? Below the chest, right above the area we usually think of as our belly.

Let's have a little biology lesson. The diaphragm is a large muscle attached to the lower ribs, actually separating the chest from the abdomen. When you take a deep breath, the diaphragm is designed to move downward, as well as to move the muscles attached to the ribs. Both these actions create more room in our lungs, thus enabling us to breathe more deeply.

Try it yourself. Let that diaphragm expand downward, into the tummy area, to make plenty of room in your lungs. Then watch your tummy flatten again (flat is a relative term for most of us) as you empty the lungs and release the breath.

Many of our students have learned that yoga classes are an excellent place for learning the art of effective breathing. Proper use of breath will help you relax. It will also assist you in improving the next voice tool.

**Projection:** When you're breathing deeply, your projection automatically improves. In other words, your voice carries better when it comes from deep in your chest rather than from the back of your throat.

Don't mistake projection for loudness, either. You've heard the phrase "stage whisper?" Even the softest voice can carry to the back of the auditorium when it isn't coming from shallow breathing. And a soft soprano can carry as effectively as a baritone if the breath is right.

Ask the help of a friend or co-worker in learning to project your voice different distances and in rooms with different acoustics. Once you've become aware of what your voice can do, you'll be able to make adjustments in any situation. Effective projection will enable you to adjust your volume, which will not only keep you from sounding monotonous to the audience, but will keep your voice fresher, less prone to hoarseness.

**Diction:** Do you have an accent? Do you tend to speak too fast or too slowly? Are your words crisp and clear, or a little soft around the edges? Are you confident of your pronunciation, your grammar, and your articulation? Do you stammer or stumble around a lot of “uhs” and “ahs” when you speak? I stack all these under the umbrella of diction. All make important contributions to your effectiveness; none are fatal, all can be cured.

Let’s look at accents. Very few of us can boast perfect diction, the kind of accent-free voice Walter Cronkite, Diane Sawyer or Mike Wallace are blessed with. Besides, a touch of accent or dialect can add color or individuality to our presentations – think of Henry Kissinger or Dr. Ruth and their memorable accents. But if your regional or ethnic accent is so pronounced that it can hamper communication, acknowledge the limitation and seek help. Try listening to speakers without an accent and learn from them. Consistent practice using tongue twisters also improves articulation.

Another limiting habit is the use of non-words: “Ah” and “uh” and “kind of,” “like,” “you know,” “okay,” “well.” We use them to fill the silence, to give ourselves time to think, because we’re nervous.

Toastmasters, a wonderful organization devoted to developing confident presenters, asks someone at each meeting to be the “ah-counter.” That person literally makes note of the non-words in a talk. Become your own “ah-counter.” Learn that a pause, a few moments of silence to collect your thoughts, are not only okay, they sometimes pack quite a punch. If you can eliminate non-words, you will be eliminating the “garbage sounds” that diminish your effectiveness as a communicator.

Which brings us to our final, and most powerful vocal tool—vocal variety.

**Vocal variety:** Vocal variety is the antithesis of monotony. It is expressiveness versus flatness. It is resisting the urge to do the safe thing, the consistent thing, over and over. Remember, even the most pleasing part of your presentation taken to excess becomes monotonous.

Vocal variety is using different instruments in your orchestra. Learn the power of a lilting note, a whisper, a pause or a shout. Don’t limit yourself to using only the notes, only the instruments you’re familiar and comfortable with. Use new notes as well. Use the full orchestra, fiddle to flute.

What we are describing is the ultimate storyteller’s skill. Have you ever sat in at the public library when the children’s story hour was going on? Listen to the storyteller. She isn’t reading the story all in one tone, all at one speed. She’s lowering her voice to a whisper, urging the children to lean in and listen more intently. She’s bursting forth with sound, shaking them up, surprising them, and exciting them. She’s slowing down and speeding up. She’s changing her voice to fit the story. She is painting a picture by pulling out certain words, expanding key syllables of the word to make the children take note.

You can do this, too, as you plan and practice your presentation. Begin by writing out your presentation. That gives you the opportunity to focus on how you deliver the words you’ve scripted. What parts of the presentation warrant intent listening? When do you want to surprise them, to jolt them out of their seats? Do you want their hearts racing at one point, or to envelope them in an aura of calm at another time? Diagnose a sentence and see what words you can highlight, elongate, and emphasize with your voice.

You will probably not want to use a written script when you make your presentation. (I generally recommend using bullet points instead.) But this exercise will help you expand your vocal variety.

A final word about monotony. Certainly, it is a lack of vocal color. But we can also become monotonous in our gestures, our energy, in every part of our presentation. We must work to keep the audience a little off balance. Surprise your audience, speak conversationally and colorfully, and you will make the audience your friends.

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