

The Voices Workshop

If you can make your read alouds vivid, if you can teach your students to imagine characters speaking in their own voices, reading and storytelling become an extra special adventure. Your voice is a remarkable tool and one that can be developed as any muscle might be developed. A beautiful voice is a treasure. Not only will your reading and teaching grow richer, every aspect of your efforts to communicate will be enhanced. In the coming pages, I am going to offer a very simple series of exercises that will first help you to develop a flexible, pleasant speaking voice. In the second phase of this workshop I am going to help you realize the potential of your voice. By the time we are through, you will be able to create characters with your voice. Here is a motivation for you. Watch any of the old Warner Brothers cartoons. Did you know that nearly all of the voices and certainly all of the famous ones were created by one man: Mel Blanc. Listen to the Harry Potter audio tapes. Jim Dale not only does the narration, he performs all of the voices. He's contracted to do all seven novels. Amazing!

Mastering your voice will take time. After all, except for walking, speaking is the first thing we learned to do. The patterns are ingrained. Some effort will be required to break old habits. Is it worth it? A beautiful speaking voice is a source of pride. Good luck.

Basics

First, hum. I know it sounds strange but humming is the simplest way to prepare your voice. This is especially true if you tend to experience sore throats, hoarseness and laryngitis. Hum. Hum softly. Actually, I have found humming a good way to get myself focused on the tale I am about to tell, an excellent way to block out distractions.

Second, remember water and rest. Drink water when you are performing and get lots of rest at those times when you are scheduled to perform. Water and sleep are the two best restoratives.

A Note for Those Who Are Prone To Vocal Trouble:

If you have trouble with your voice and/or lose your voice often, there are remedies. Call your local college or university and ask to be connected to the theatre department. Start with the secretary and explain your problem and that you are a professional working with children. Ask the secretary to suggest a speech teacher who would be willing to meet with you. Make an appointment. If they don't have a speech teacher, ask for the closest school that has a speech program. You do not want a singing teacher. You want a speech teacher.

When you go in for the interview, he or she will have you speak and will listen. If it is a simple problem, the teacher will suggest exercises. If the problem is extreme they may suggest you see a physician or try out the Alexander Method. The Alexander Method is actually a lot of fun. Don't be intimidated. This note is only for those who are very interested in the voice or for those of you who are prone to losing your voice.

General Vocal Warm Ups:

Speak these sounds clearly. You may want to stand and try these. Say...

Mah Nah Lah Thah Vah Zah
May Nay Lay Thay Vay Zay
Mee Nee Lee Thee Vee Zee
May Nay Lay Thay Vay Zay
Mah Nah Lah Thah Vah Zah
Maw Naw Law Thaw Vaw Zaw
Moo New Loo Thoo Voo Zoo
Maw Naw Law Thaw Vaw Zaw
Mah Nah Lah Thah Vah Zah

Do this three times. As you do it a third time, reach up and check to see how far apart your teeth are. If you are like most folks, your teeth will be quite close together. As a way to measure, try fitting one finger between your teeth and say the sounds again.

Here is the first lesson: if you wish to be heard, you have to open your mouth. It makes sense. You can't hear someone who is speaking behind a closed door. So this is your first task. Place a finger between your teeth and repeat the sounds again three times.

You will find that this forces your tongue to do a lot more work. It will sound awkward in the beginning but remember, in the end, you will not be speaking with your fingers in your mouth. After you can easily do the sounds with the spacing of one finger, try two, maybe even three. It can be done. Relax and let your jaw fall a little. Take the fingers away and speak the sounds.

The key with each of these exercises is to stop occasionally and speak normally. Try to feel your voice. Feel where all of the "equipment" in there is placed and what your tongue and lips are doing. Change will happen over time. Once you can feel what's going on in there, you can control and shape your words making all sorts of lovely sounds and voices. Practice. At minimum, do this exercise each time before you read or tell your tales. Over time, it will prove helpful. You have just completed the first step to building your voice.

The above exercise worked the vowels. Now, we will work on the consonants. Go back and forth between each pair of consonants, sounding them out loud several times. You will quickly notice that each pair is the same sound. The left side of each pair includes the voice while the right side is just air. Do not "say" the letter; make the sound of the letter. So T is not pronounced "Tah" not "Tee."

T ----- D
F ----- V

P ----- B
K ----- G
M ----- N

Go back and forth between these sounds. Be as precise as you can. Try to feel what is going on in your mouth. Do each of these sounds several times.
Now, go back to the first exercise and repeat the vowel sounds. Then, switch to the consonants. I am sure it will feel that they are working against each other. Your goal is to keep your jaw open and relaxed while your lips and tongue do most of the work.

Here is a little speech that will help you bring it all together. Relax your jaw and yet be precise.

Lips and Teeth and Tip of the Tongue
And
Tip of the Tongue and Teeth and Lips

Do this several times. Ready? Here is a true test. From Gilbert and Sullivan:

I am the very model of a modern major general
I've information vegetable, animal and mineral
I know the Kings of England
And I quote the fights historical
From Marathon to Waterloo
In order, categorical

Do this over and over again. It is a wonderful exercise for combining vowel sounds and consonants. Again, your goal here is to feel what is going on inside your face as you are making sounds and speaking.

Now, go back to the above speech and let's play with the voice just a little. Here the only change will be emphasis. Say, you are reading Milne aloud and you want a voice for Eeyore. Do the speech but exaggerate the vowel sounds. Slow the pace and stretch the vowels. Remember, there are vowels in every word. Try it. Stretch the vowels.

I am the very model of a modern major general
I've information vegetable, animal and mineral
I know the Kings of England
And I quote the fights historical
From Marathon to Waterloo
In order categorical

Sound a little like Eeyore? Now, in contrast, if you need a voice for rabbit or any other up tight type character, emphasize the consonants. Keep the vowel sounds as you would normally speak them and precisely tap on every consonant. Have fun. Exaggerate. Hit every t and every d. don't just hit the consonants at the beginning and ending of words, emphasize the middle ones as well.

Sound a bit like Rabbit? It is at this point in a lesson that I feel like Henry Higgins. "The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain."

So, simply playing with vowels and consonants gives use character numerous options. You might try to isolate a particular sound for each character. Snakes works well with the letter "S." Trolls and Giants fancy the "GR" combination. Furthermore, vowels and consonants are the key to mastering regional dialects which we call accents.

Now let's explore with other variables.

Pitch:

Start with your normal pitch and as you read through the letters of the alphabet, I want you to go up in pitch. Don't strain. When you reach your highest comfortable pitch, start back down past your normal pitch, down to your lowest comfortable pitch and the slowly return to your usual pitch. Try this a few times and let your voice stretch a little.

A---B---C---D---E---F---G---H---I---J---K---L---M---N---O---P---Q---R---S---T---U---V---W---X---Y---Z

Do this back and forth and find your comfortable highs and your lows.

A Rule of thumb when using your voice:

The more extreme the voice is, the more sparing you want to be with it. If you want to use your highest voice, then you want to use it just for an accent. Why? First, because the voice will be difficult to sustain. Second, because a truly extreme voice can grow annoying. Maybe, the character with the high voice ever only says one word. For example the character might only say, "Yippee!" Now, you can use that response several times in a story, not strain your voice and not drive your listeners wild.

Now pick your high comfortable pitch and do the alphabet

A---B---C---D---E---F---G---H---I---J---K---L---M---N---O---P---Q---R---S---T---U---V---W---X---Y---Z

Now find a comfortable low voice and do the letters again.

Now back to Gilbert and Sullivan. This will feel silly so do it alone. Try a high voice.

I am the very model of a modern major general
I've information vegetable, animal and mineral
I know the Kings of England
And I quote the fights historical
From Marathon to Waterloo
In order categorical

Now try the same speech with your low voice.

Now let's combine what we have learned.

- Give me the same speech in a high voice but now stretch out all of the vowels. Don't strain.
- Now do the same voice but be precise with your consonants,
- Now do the low voice with stretched vowels.
- Now try the low voice with precise consonants.

Now, counting your regular voice, we have nine distinct voices.

- Three in a high pitch (stretched vowels, normal, and precise)
- Regular pitch (stretched vowels, normal, and precise)
- Low pitch (stretched vowels, normal, and precise)

Nine voices! Yet, consider, these are only the extremes. Pitch can be far more subtle. We have more to go. By the end of these exercises you will be able to generate countless character voices.

Let's play with nasality. That is... the volume of air going through your nose. First get as nasal as you can, really push it, and do the letters of the alphabet pushing as much air through your nose as you can.

A---B---C---D---E---F---G---H---I---J---K---L---M---N---O---P---Q---R---S---T---U---V---W---X---Y---Z

Try this a couple of times. Now I want you to try de-nasality. This is what we sound like when we have a cold. It is a tough voice to find but there is an easy test: hold your nose. Try to speak normally, do the letters of the alphabet and hold your nose. The minute you pinch your nose the sound changes. Try it doing a nasal voice and again the sound changes. If you are doing a perfect de-nasal voice and you pinch your nose nothing happens because there is no air coming through your nose. This is the sound we make when we have a cold. Remember that if you ever have to call in sick – Just kidding. Do the alphabet again.

Now try letters of the alphabet going back and forth from your normal voice to nasal back to normal and then to denasal.

I am getting tired of Gilbert and Sullivan. So, let's switch to Nursery Rhymes. When you are comfortable, in your natural voice read...

This little piggy went to market;
This little piggy stayed home;
This little piggy had roast beef;
This little piggy had none;
And this little piggy cried, "We! Wee! Wee!"
All the way home.

Now in your best nasal try it again.

Now try it in denasal again. Is it beginning to feel comfortable? Let's play a little. The key to each voice is feeling it in your face. I know that sounds strange but it can be done. The reason you want to feel it is so that you can know what the sound is going to be before it comes out of your mouth and you hear it. This allows you while reading or telling to switch from one voice to another and back. Soooooo, try this. We're going to switch back and forth.

NASAL:	This little piggy went to market;
DENASAL:	This little piggy stayed home;
NORMAL:	This little piggy had roast beef;
NASAL:	This little piggy had none;
DENASAL:	And this little piggy cried, "We! Wee! Wee!"
NORMAL:	All the way home.

Do it again. Is it feeling comfortable? Now, I am not great at math but you have just increased the number of voices to 27. I promise this will be the last time I will do the math.

precise)	Three in a high pitch (stretched vowels, normal, and
NASAL +	Regular pitch (stretched vowels, normal, and precise)
	Low pitch (stretched vowels, normal, and precise

precise)	Three in a high pitch (stretched vowels, normal, and
NORMAL +	Regular pitch (stretched vowels, normal, and precise)
	Low pitch (stretched vowels, normal, and precise

precise)	Three in a high pitch (stretched vowels, normal, and
DENASAL +	Regular pitch (stretched vowels, normal, and precise)
	Low pitch (stretched vowels, normal, and precise

I will stop doing the math because with the next additions we will just to more then 100.

Yes, I know this is difficult but the pay off is huge. Children love character voices. From now on, listen to the people in your life and in the media. Try to determine where they are placing their voices. A balding man once told me that once a man is going bald, he will forever look at other men's hair lines. The same is true of working with your voice. Once you have become aware of your voice, you will never stop listening to the voices of others and placing them.

Now, let's play with the shape of your resonating cavity. Sound exotic? Actually, we are just going to play around with the size and shape of your mouth as you speak. Before we try a voice, just open your mouth as wide as it will go and try the letters of the alphabet. Do the "Wide Mouthed Frog."

Now, make your mouth as small as you can. I call this "mushy faced" because you are mushing your face right up. Do the letters of the alphabet again. Now, let's try a nursery Rhyme.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the King's Horses and all the King's men
Can't put Humpty Dumpty together again.

- Try this with a nice wide mouth.
- Now, try it with a mushy face mouth.
- Now, work back and forth.

Wide:	Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Mushy:	Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
Wide:	All the King's Horses and all the King's men
Mushy:	Can't put Humpty Dumpty together again.

I won't go into the math but these two aspects of the voice can be combined with all that we have learned. We'll get to mixing later on in the lesson.

Let's add air to the voice. How much breath do you usually use when speaking? Be careful with this voice as you can sometimes give yourself a headache. Try letters of the alphabet adding as much air to your voice as possible. Start with your normal voice and keeping adding air, now back to your normal voice and try to work towards using as little air as possible and back to the normal voice again. Do the alphabet.

Notice something in the quality of the voice? If you've ever fancied being Marilyn Monroe, a possible starting place is adding breath to your voice. "Breathiness" is also the perfect way to whisper in a story without putting any strain on your voice. Try it.

Whisper the letters of the alphabet. Now whisper loudly. Notice the strain. Now, instead of whispering, add breath to the voice. See what I mean?

Time for the Test:

First read this through in your natural voice a couple of times.

One, two, buckle my shoe
Three, four, shut the door
Five, six, pick up sticks
Seven, eight, lay them straight
Nine, ten, a good fat hen
Eleven, twelve, who will delve?
Thirteen, fourteen, maids a courting,
Fifteen, sixteen, maids a kissing,
Seventeen, eighteen, maids a-waiting
Nineteen, twenty, my stomach's empty.

Now let's mix up the voices.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| • Emphasize the Vowels: | One, two, buckle my shoe |
| • Emphasize the Consonants: | Three, four, shut the door |
| • High Pitch: | Five, six, pick up sticks |
| • Low Pitch: | Seven, eight, lay them straight |
| • Nasal: | Nine, ten, a good fat hen |
| • Denasal: | Eleven, twelve, who will delve? |
| • Wide Mouthed: | Thirteen, fourteen, maids a courting, |
| • Mushy Faced: | Fifteen, sixteen, maids a kissing, |
| • Breathy: | Seventeen, eighteen, maids a-waiting |
| • Stingy Breath: | Nineteen, twenty, my stomach's
empty. |

Wild, isn't it? Now, don't strain your voice. You are now doing things with it that may have never been done before. Do the switches two or three times. You might need to pause in between to adjust your face a little.

Let's add an extra challenge:

In between each of the sounds we are going to return to our natural voice. So, Follow the same pattern but when you say a number, use your normal voice. To help out, I will underline what should be said in a natural voice.

- Emphasize the Vowels: One, two, buckle my shoe
- Emphasize the Consonants: Three, four, shut the door
- High Pitch: Five, six, pick up sticks
- Low Pitch: Seven, eight, lay them straight
- Nasal: Nine, ten, a good fat hen
- Denasal: Eleven, twelve, who will delve?
- Wide Mouthed: Thirteen, fourteen, maids a courting,
- Mushy Faced: Fifteen, sixteen, maids a kissing,
- Breathy: Seventeen, eighteen, maids a-waiting
- Stingy Breath: Nineteen, twenty, my stomach's empty.

We are almost done. We are working with ten voices here. Actually these are ten extremes. Let's see if we can combine them.

If you want to become a giant... Begin with your deep voice. Try it.

"Fee Fie Foe Fum
I smell the blood of an Englishman
Be he alive or be he dead
I'll grind his bones to make my bread."

Now to the deep voice add a nice round mouth. Try it again.

Not done yet. Now add denasal. So, you are doing Wide Mouth, low tone and denasal. Try it.

Had enough? One more? Stretch the vowels as well. So, now we are doing... Wide Mouth, low tone and denasal and stretched vowels. And again.

Bravo!

Now, for contrast. Let's try a witch. Read through the following riddle a few times.

Old Mother Twitchet had but one eye,
And a long tail which she let fly;

And every time she went through a gap
She left a bit of her tail in a trap.

ANON.

(The answer: A Needle and Thread)

Now let's play.

- Try Nasal.
- Now try Nasal with a high pitch.
- Now try nasal, a high pitch, and mushy faced.
- Now try nasal, high pitched, mushy faced while emphasizing the consonants.

Pretty cool I think. Did you notice that every time you played with an aspect of your voice the character changed? If you are looking to strengthen your mastery of voices, go back to the counting poem again and again.

Some Notes about Playing with Your Voice:

As you try on new voices, your playful streak will emerge. You'll find yourself prone to exaggerate your voice; you assume a different posture or cast your arms about sawing the air with new and strange gestures. This is your imagination at play. Have fun.

New postures, stances and gestures will also help you remember the voice. If you have a hard time remembering voices, pick a posture for each character and when you get to the character, take a second to assume the posture and as you are doing that be looking for the voice. Remember, as you play with your voice, you give yourself permission to have fun. Yes, you will feel silly but silliness is a balm for both the heart and the soul.

Once you have a voice, try pulling it back about 20 percent. This will make sure that you do not strain your voice. However, if your throat feels scratchy or you become hoarse, drop the voice.

A general note about practicing... if you are working on a voice, do a voice, walk away from it, then come back and see if you can "find it" again.

As a general rule, use no more than three voices per story. Any more and you are liable to become quite tongue tied.

