

# WHY SHOULD A PUBLIC SPEAKER DO VOCAL EXERCISES?

Jessica Cooper, M.M. Voice Performance and Opera; Lecturer of Music, University of MA, Boston

Why should a public speaker do vocal exercises? Aren't they busy enough? Phrasing, tone quality and resonance matter in public speaking. Would you rather listen to James Earl Jones speak or Fran Drescher from "The Nanny?"

**1. Your tone quality will impact your message.**

**2. Find balance with a projected yet warm vocal tone.**

**3. Your voice is worth the hard work, and brings measurable results!**

The three most common issues speakers face are vocal resonance issues, not using their OPR (optimal pitch range) and bad breathing. There are a multitude of other challenges that we won't address here, but it is important to remember that the voice is a physical/muscular mechanism that is also impacted by our thoughts and feelings. Studies show that the human voice is the most subtle indicator of feeling- even more so than facial expression or hand gestures. How many of you can tell instantly when a close friend or loved one is feeling down- just by the tone of their voice? The influences on the voice are numerous and complex!

Let's tackle the three most common problems here, starting with resonance. An example of imbalanced resonance is a voice that utilizes too much nasality without enough mouth resonance, sounding "shrill," or "annoying." There is a flip side to that - one might use too much mouth resonance resulting in a swallowed sound that is too far back in the throat creating a sound that is "boring," "stiff," or even worse- barely audible. Your tone quality will impact the message you are trying to get across, and with the right balance and resonance - your voice will be a better indication of your sparkling personality!

In the singing world, we co-opt the art term “chiaroscuro” to define a balanced sound. In visual art, chiaroscuro is the contrast of light and dark in a composition. In voice terms, this means a sufficient use of nasal (bright/light) AND mouth resonance (warm/ dark), creating a projected but warm tone. Vocal exercises can help speakers learn how to distribute air more evenly between the nasal and mouth cavities as they speak, producing a balanced tonality in the voice.

OPR, or Optimal Pitch Range, is where your voice rests comfortably in the range. Sometimes you can find it by saying “Mm Hm” 2 or 3 times - as you would when giving a non-verbal “yes” to friends or family. The OPR sits in the lower middle of a person’s range. Finding your OPR will tie directly into your work of understanding how to balance nasality and mouth resonance.

Let’s tie this all into breath. Breathing is natural – yes – but there is an effective or ineffective way to breathe. Over the course of our lives, we develop bad breathing habits – most often taking “high” chest breaths, allowing parts of the upper torso (shoulders, clavicles, even neck) to get involved in the intake of air. Speakers must be willing to unlearn the habit of shallow breathing in order to deliver their messages in an effective way. There is no way to have a balanced, resonant sound in our OPR if breathing is unconsciously tense and high. The best way to remember how to breathe is to think of sleeping babies - do their shoulders get involved in a breath? No- their tummies gently move up and down, as the diaphragm does its designated job of bringing air into the lungs.

Bringing all of these elements of good vocalizing is not as easy as it might seem. We have to practice good vocal techniques in order to “embody” the voice in a way that is both conscious, and natural. It means taking on a vocal practice to undo old habits, and establish healthier ones. In any case – uncovering your “true” voice is worth the hard work, and brings measurable results!