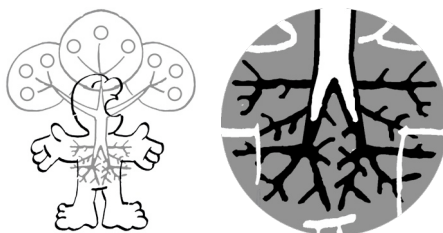


# GROW YOUR VOICE TO SPEAK WITH CONFIDENCE

**Petro Janse van Vuuren**





Week 1

## Root: Posture and breathing

*At one level you're condemned to the voice you have. But within those confines, you have a certain amount of freedom to range among your possible voices.*

David Guterson

### Rooting your voice in your diaphragm

The Russian actor and director Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938) who is considered the father of modern theatre and acting said: "The language of the body is the key that can unlock the soul."

Tension of any kind – either from inside because of fear, or from outside because of noise,

traffic and conflict – causes physical reactions in your body and therefore in your voice. This interferes directly with your body's and your voice's ability to unlock the message and intention of your soul. However, if you purposefully relax your body and get into a neutral position, it neutralises the fear and the tension. It puts you in an alert and relaxed state, which allows you to communicate your message confidently and clearly.

Tension also interferes directly with your breathing, which has an immediate impact on your speaking – you run out of breath, your voice sounds weak and rushed. If you can control your breath you can also help your body to relax and increase its capacity for longer sentences so you don't breathe in the wrong places. I taught a group of local rappers this principle using the exercises below. It revolutionised their performance. They said they had always wanted to know the secret of *lang longe* (long lungs). For them, this skill is crucial, since the art of rapping, especially, requires that you do not break the word flow in non-aesthetic places.

Breath is the root system of your voice. It grounds the voice and stabilises it. The stronger the roots, the better you can withstand the winds of

tension. Your posture is the soil into which the roots grow. It contains and holds your voice tree firmly.

## **Objectives**

- to understand the importance of posture for relaxing and communicating your attitude
- to learn how to breathe for control and enhanced capacity

## **Questions to stir your thinking**

- What happens to your body, your breath and your voice when you are nervous/indifferent/under pressure/enthusiastic/eager to communicate?
- How do you want to sound to others when speaking?
- How do you want them to respond?
- What is the role of breathing?
- How can better breathing potentially better your speech?

## Exercises

### Posture

*Exercise 1: Establishing perfect posture – the most neutral position for your body so that you appear alert, calm and confident.*

Stand with your feet directly under your hips, and your hips directly under your shoulders.

1. Plant your feet firmly on the ground, distributing your weight evenly over the heel, ball, and toes of each foot. Relax your knees.
2. Tilt your pelvic girdle slightly forward (most of us tend to have it tilted backward). Imagine that you are scooping up your insides and cradling them safely in your pelvis.
3. Straighten your back, imagining that you are being pulled by an invisible chord from the top of your head.
4. Unwind your shoulders. Have your thumbs pointing forward, rather than inward to your thighs.
5. Balance your head comfortably on your neck, not sticking your jaw out, or pulling it in.
6. Stretch upward as far as you can. Link your

thumbs to help you.

7. Now pull yourself, as if with your arms, onto tip toes. Stretch.

8. Come down from the tip of your toes, keeping your arms stretched. Do not collapse your ribcage.

9. Bring your arms down sideways allowing your shoulder blades to slide down your back. Breathe easily.

*Exercise 2: Sideways stretch to open up your ribcage for breathing and resonance.*

1. Stand with your feet parallel and your weight distributed evenly over the heel, ball and toes of each foot.

2. Swing your arms upward until they are beside your ears.

3. With hands above the head bend to the right, breathe into the stretch and breath out as you straighten.

4. Repeat to the left.

5. Bring your arms down, without collapsing your ribcage.

6. Breathe easily and freely.

*Exercise 3: Neck and shoulders – a little extra attention to this part greatly increases your chances of communicating confidently.*

1. Roll your shoulders first to the back five times, then to the front five times.
2. Pull them up to your ears, squeeze and relax, then relax some more.
3. Place your arms at your sides, thumbs pointing forward and breathe easily and freely.
4. Drop your head onto your chest and pull up slowly. Feel the tension release as your head finds its balancing point.
5. Repeat to the right and to the left.

## Breathing

First, locate your breathing muscles. Some of them are between your ribs and are called intercostals. You can feel them work when you put your hand on your ribcage and breathe in. Do you feel the extension? The most important muscle for voice work is your diaphragm. Your diaphragm lies between your belly button and the place where the ribs part. Try laughing or coughing to feel it contract. Keep one hand on your ribs and the other on your diaphragm for all your breathing exercises.

*Exercise 4: Intercostal-diaphragmatic breathing for control, more capacity and a rich sound.*

1. Breathe out all the air in your lungs.
2. Tighten your diaphragm so that it does not move
3. Breathe into your chest by expanding your intercostal muscles (the ones between your ribs).
4. Keep your chest extended and breathe into your lower lungs by extending your diaphragm.
5. Still keeping your chest extended, squeeze the air out of your lower lungs with your diaphragm
6. Finally, exhale the air that is in your chest, without collapsing your shoulders.
7. Repeat, but this time, take three breaths in and out with your diaphragm without releasing the air in your chest.
8. After the third breath, let the chest air float out.



*Exercise 5: 4 x 4 – to take control of your breath and your nerves.*

1. Lying on the floor or standing in perfect posture, place one hand on your lower ribs and the other on your diaphragm.
2. Breathe normally, becoming aware of the rhythmic swing of your breath – in and out. Concentrate on feeling the extension of your ribs and the movement of your diaphragm with your hands.
3. Breathe in for four counts, hold for four, breath out for four and hold for four again.
4. Do this a number of times, returning to normal breathing in between if you get out of breath.
5. Try it using intercostal-diaphragmatic breathing.
6. When you are ready, extend the counts to 6, 8, 10 and 12.

***Note:** When you do this exercise, there is no wrong or right count on which to fill the lower lungs or upper lungs. Simply let the diaphragmatic breathing flow the way it wants to. Experiment with different counts, if you like.*

## **Why is posture and breathing important?**

### **Posture**

#### **Eliminating tension**

Because speaking is a muscular process your state of relaxation or tension influences it greatly. Your state of relaxation or tension is most prominent in your posture and is reflected in your breathing and, ultimately, in your voice.

Nervousness shows up in unconscious swaying from side to side, shifting your weight from one leg to the other and in walking about unintentionally. Additionally, you may pull up your shoulders, clench your hands in front of or behind you or crane your neck forward in anticipation. All these things can be eliminated with good posture.

*At times of great stress it is especially necessary to achieve a complete freeing of the muscles.*

Konstantin Stanislavski

#### **Communicating your attitude**

Before you speak, posture reflects your attitude: Do you want to communicate? Are you nervous or do you look confident and competent? The latter

comes from your body being alert and calm. Such a physical state is exercised, energetic, focused and relaxed.

### **Providing a neutral starting point**

‘Perfect posture’ is a neutral state from which you can meet your audience and move them to where you want them to be. If your posture is tense or over eager, or the opposite, laid back, you will have difficulty meeting the audience where they are and taking them where you want them to go.

### **Essential preparation**

Good posture ensures that the soil is prepared for controlled breathing and, ultimately, for a powerful and controlled voice. When you control your voice, you can control your message and how it is received.

## **Breathing**

### **Essential support**

Breath is essential for supporting the voice – the voice’s root, because it both creates and then sustains sound. You cannot make a single sound without breath moving through your vocal cords. Well-controlled and purposeful breathing ensures well-controlled and purposeful speech.

## **Relieving tension**

Breathing before your show or presentation helps to calm your nerves and get you ready for your performance. During the performance itself it continues to relieve tension, which is the enemy of a confident and inviting delivery. It especially relaxes your neck, jaw and face where the tension can really hamper your speech.

Tension also interferes with your ability to focus on what you want to say and with how you relate to the audience. If you stay alert, calm and relaxed, you can stay focused on what you want to say as well as on who you are talking to.

*The mind is a wonderful thing. It starts working the minute you're born and never stops working until you get up to speak in public.*

Unknown

## **Allowing for intercostal diaphragmatic breathing**

This is the most effective way to breathe when you speak – for four good reasons:

1. It ensures maximum control so that you can purposefully pause, stop or flow where your message wants to go.

2. It helps to increase capacity so that the meaning of your words are never interrupted by the need to take a breath.
3. It provides a little reserve breath for emergencies that you sometimes need for that last word or two.
4. It makes room for resonance because of the large open chest where the sound can be amplified into a rich, full note.

**Good posture ensures that the  
soil is prepared for controlled  
breathing.**

**Breath control is essential for  
communicating confidently.**

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