

Speakers Who Sing, by Joan Melton, PhD, ADVS, author of *Singing in Musical Theatre: The Training of Singers and Actors*, and with Kenneth Tom, of *ONE VOICE: Integrating Singing Technique and Theatre Voice Training*
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Speakers who sing often have distinctive qualities that enhance their stage presence and ability to communicate. They move with confidence and ease, their voices have a certain “ring,” and their speech is clear and interesting. Since we speak and sing with the same voice, singing can clearly influence the way we speak. For example, two physical actions basic to singing technique make an immediate difference in a speaker’s available pitch range and resonance (or richness of sound). Here are two exercises that will help you to use these natural physical actions:

1. Relax the abdominal muscles and allow the lower ribs (mid-back) to widen gently on inhalation.

Exercise: While sitting, standing or moving about, keep the top of the sternum (breast bone) lifted and the back of the neck long as you blow breath out in little spurts. Notice the inward (or in and up) action of the abs as you exhale, and the immediate release of the abs as the breath drops in. Next, either count, or speak bits of a poem or song using the same abdominal action and release. It’s the release that’s key!

NOTE: Although gym classes often encourage “tight abs,” continuous contraction of the abdominal muscles makes for shallow breathing which often translates into shallow sound and a feeling of “not enough breath.” We speak on exhalation, or on outgoing breath. The major muscles that manage breath movement are the abs, and in order to function efficiently, they need a balance of engagement and *release*. Additionally, the diaphragm, our major muscle of *inhalation*—which works without our direct attention—must contract downward toward the abs in order to make room in the chest cavity for the breath we need. So if the abs are tight, the diaphragm can’t do its job.

2. Relax the jaw and make space in the throat, especially as you ascend in pitch.

Exercise: While sitting or standing, with the top of the sternum high and the back of the neck long, find the beginning of a yawn in the back of the throat, but keep your lips touching as you hum (sliding, as in a glissando or siren) up and down. Think of widening the back of the throat gently when you go higher in pitch. Then do the same thing on an “oo” with the lips puckered. This exercise is wonderful for blending the entire range of the voice. Repeat with one hand on the lower abs and note the connection between Exercise Number 1 above and Exercise Number 2.

NOTE: When we get excited or animated, our voices tend to ascend in pitch—which is fine. However, in order to use the upper part of our vocal range and maintain a pleasant sound, we need space in the throat, or a reasonably wide pharynx and lifted soft palate. Singing training is invaluable for opening that space and encouraging the habit of widening, instead of squeezing as you raise the pitch.

These simple and natural actions contribute to a feeling of calmness because they allow the body to breathe easily and release unproductive muscular tension.