



*The expert at anything was once
a beginner.*

Hayes

Tips for Vocal Projection

For most people who are not trained speakers, singers or performers, projection is one of the hardest public speaking concepts to put into practice. It feels awkward, it feels like yelling (and it probably is), and it seems very complicated.

Here are some tips to make vocal projection easier to understand and easier to accomplish, so your audience will sit up and pay attention! (Check out the resources at the bottom of this post for more in-depth explanations of breathing and projection techniques.)

1. Relax

When we get nervous, all sorts of things happen to our bodies. Our breathing becomes shallow, our muscles become tense, especially in our upper body. The combination of shallow breathing and tight vocal cords makes for a weak and sometimes squeaky or quavery voice.

Before you speak, take a few moments for some relaxation exercises. Take some deep breaths. Warm up your neck and shoulders by doing some head and shoulder rolls. Clench your hands and feet and release -- do this a couple of times. Raise your arms over your head and take a big stretch. Open your mouth wide and warm up your face and jaw muscles. Bend at the waist and let your head and arms hang down to the floor. Warming up and stretching your upper body will release that tension that's tightening up your throat and keeping you from breathing fully.



*You can't build a reputation on
what you're GOING to do.*

Henry Ford

2. Open your mouth

Sometimes the only problem is that you just aren't opening your mouth enough. If you don't open your mouth, your voice is not going to go anywhere; on top of that, you are probably not enunciating, making your speech even harder to understand.

One trick to getting you to open your mouth wider and enunciate better is to practice vocal variety. My favorite method for this is to read children's books aloud (to yourself or to a child you may have on hand). You can't read a story to a 4-year-old without acting it out a little, and practicing this way will help you add some color and liveliness to your voice, which in turn will help your enunciation and projection.

3. Improve your posture

If you're not standing tall with your head up, you are strangling your voice. Your voice is made of air, and it needs a wide-open path from your lungs, past your vocal cords and out your mouth to be heard clearly.

Make sure your body and head are facing the audience, with your chest and shoulders open, not slouched or hunched. Hold your head high and, when reading from your notes, do not speak at the same time, but wait until you are looking up at your audience again. More on physical presence here.

When you're standing tall with good posture, you are also able to breathe more effectively, not only pulling in enough air, but expelling it better as well, which pushes your voice out into the world.



*Take the attitude of a student.
Never be too big to ask questions
and never know too much to learn
something new.*

Og Mandino

4. Focus your voice

Vocal projection is not so much about being louder as it is about placement. When you are not projecting your voice, it's because you are speaking to a space right in front of your face. Projection just means that, instead of focusing at a point right in front of you, you focus on a point farther away.

When you practice your presentation, practice speaking to various objects in the room. Start with something close, like a chair. Then, when you feel that the chair is hearing you, focus on something a little farther away, perhaps a plant. Talk to the plant (yes, I've had my clients talk to their plants); use the vocal variety mentioned above, breathe, and make sure your mouth is open so the air can flow. Does the plant hear you? Good. Now focus on something across the room, maybe a picture on the far wall. And so on.

If you feel your voice straining, **stop**. Don't force it. If you're not used to speaking and projecting your voice, start with humming. Here's a great exercise by Dr. Morton Cooper to help you focus your voice and find your natural pitch (note the part about the facial mask -- this is where you want your voice to be, bouncing off the cavities in your head and producing resonance).

Humming is also a great way to warm up your voice before you speak so you don't strain it.

These are a couple of easy ways to start getting more projection and clarity from your voice.



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