

# Finding your voice

*and keeping it!*

A VOICE TRAINING MANUAL FOR CAVE GUIDES

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## Introduction

Have you ever suffered from laryngitis or had a husky voice? Have you ever had to raise your voice to be heard by a large group of visitors? Have you ever had visitors complain that they couldn't hear what the guide was saying?

If you've been a cave guide or managed cave guides, you have probably experienced these problems. Guiding is an integral part of cave presentation and management. But how much attention do we give to the health issues associated with continual use of the voice? How much do we consider voice quality in relation to the visitor's experience, as well as delivery of the guide's message?

## Why do we need voice training?

'Words carry approximately 7 per cent of the message, while the voice carries 38 per cent', voice coach Lorraine Merritt quotes in her book, *Talking the Talk*. If we think guide health and effective visitor interpretation are important, then we need to ensure that cave guides are equipped with good voice skills so that we can get our message across to visitors.

Voice work is an established and integral part of the theatre and performing world, where practises such as voice warm-ups, relaxation, posture, breathing exercises and facial exercises are as much a part of performing as learning a script and being on stage. A cave guide who uses their voice for work every day without being taught how to use it is like a ballet dancer going onto the stage without first warming up: their performance will suffer and their audience will leave feeling unsatisfied.

Voice skills are not only essential for good health and good presentations—they're also fun and easy to learn. This manual, written by an experienced voice coach, is designed to help you to better understand this powerful and important instrument—your own voice—and use it for the maximum effect and minimum damage. You can do the exercises at home alone, in the car, or with friends. Just relax and enjoy yourself ... the benefits will speak for themselves.

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## Exercise 1: Breathing awareness

The beginning of voice is breath. Without good breath control, guides restrict themselves to sentences that are always the same length. This makes for a monotonous presentation. If you have good control of your breathing, you can add more variety to the tone of your voice and the length of your sentences. Your presentation will improve and your audience will stay interested for longer.

Any tension held in your body will, however subtly, affect the quality of your voice. The best breath is from a relaxed body, so all your voice work must begin with a conscious relaxation of your body in order to allow your breath to flow freely.

When a baby or young child releases their voice it is a free (and often extraordinarily powerful) sound. Attitudes, self-consciousness and acquired habits have not yet begun to restrict the mechanisms of young children's voices. Such voices arise on breath from the deep centre of the body, the solar plexus/lower stomach region, and have a greater power than a voice 'held' by habits acquired in later years. So often in later life the taking of a deep breath involves the raising of our chest and shoulders rather than a filling and releasing of breath centred in our solar plexus. To break these habits and retrain and empower our voice, we must begin with relaxation exercises.

## *Floor work*

Lie on the floor, face up. Hold your arms slightly away from your body and keep your hands palm up. Make sure your spine and body are straight. Allow your feet to gently fall aside; don't hold them upright. Your head should rest comfortably facing up, not tilted back, or to one side, or with your chin tucked in.

Beginning at your toes and feet, allow your mind to wander up through your body, just checking for any feelings of tension. It is useful to consciously create a tension here and there and then release it to feel the difference. For example, you might tense a calf muscle and then let it go. Or imagine you are going to raise one leg, feel the muscles that will lift it begin to tense, and then release them again.

Play with these tensions and releases for a while and settle into the feeling of gentle relaxation. As you do this, be conscious that you let your breath in and out slowly, as you 'explore' your body. Allow your breath to rise and fall from your stomach/abdomen, not your chest. You might place a hand on your stomach and feel the gentle lift of your diaphragm. Do not force your breath. Allow it to rise and fall and then follow its rhythms, rather than dictate them.

When you feel relaxed and comfortable, let your mind follow your breathing pattern. Breathe in through your nose and out through slightly parted lips. Be aware of the passage of air through your nose and lips. Be aware of the 'warming' of your breath.

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Silently count the in-breath. There will be approximately four to six counts in, and then a very brief rest before the out-breath. Now silently count the out-breath. Notice any difference in the time taken to fill your lungs with air and empty them out. Let the breath fully out and, if necessary, give it a gentle 'push' to completely empty your lungs.

Initially you may find that you need to take a big, deep breath from time to time, rather than a gentle rising and falling. Allow this to happen, and then return to the gentle rising and falling. When the pattern of rising and falling is established, imagine that the breath is entering your body through your upturned palms and the soles of your feet, and is warming and further relaxing your entire body.

When you feel ready, allow a 'sigh' on the out-breath. Do not vocalise the sigh. Just allow it, and be aware of your throat area and of the air passing over your vocal cords. Now hum the out-breath, just a gentle hum that gives your lips a slight tingle. Continue to breathe in and gently hum out, but do not vocalise.

Now allow the hum to open into an 'aaah' sound. Begin with a gentle 'mmmm' and open your lips to allow the 'aaah' to follow. Be aware of the breath passing over your vocal cords, which will begin to vibrate and create the sound. As you continue, allow your mind to 'feel' the whole body/breath connection: your relaxed body, the rising and falling of your breath, its passage through your body and out into the air.

Gradually begin to play with the sound. Shape your lips in various ways; flatten, round and stretch your tongue and hear the different sounds that issue forth. Try 'chewing' the sound. Continue playing, but do not vocalise beyond the sounds that arise naturally from the initial 'mmmmmaaaaaah' and its

variations as you experiment with mouth and lip shapes.

This is the beginning of the centred, relaxed breath and voice. Play with and enjoy the feelings and awareness of the mechanisms of your voice. Then, when you're comfortable with the process, begin to make your in-and out-breaths of the same duration, i.e. four counts in and four out, or six or eight—whatever you are comfortable with. Play with the control of your breath. Do not create any tension in your body, just begin to 'manage' the flowing in and out of your breath. Gradually increase the count in and out while playing with sounds. Occasionally return to silent, conscious awareness of your breath.

### *Standing work*

When you're ready, roll to one side, get into the foetal position, then onto your knees and slowly stand up, being aware of gentle breaths all the while. Feel your muscles working but when standing upright, allow the same feeling of relaxation that you had when lying down.

You will feel the sensation of gravity pulling you back down. Allow your body to sag a little, then stand straight again but without tension. Let your head loll forward, then straighten it. Roll it around and feel your neck muscles working in a relaxed way. Roll your shoulders a little and gently shake your arms. Allow your body to take on a 'rag doll' feeling and then return to a supported upright position. Feel the pull of gravity, but remain comfortably upright. Allow your knees to bend a little, then lock

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them, then try a position halfway between the locked knees and the slightly bent ones. Now bend your knees again, only slightly, and allow your shoulders to sag and your head to loll again. Gently shake your body and wobble your knees. Return to upright. Be aware of your breath gently flowing in and out from your solar plexus; the rising and falling of your diaphragm.

Now stand with your feet apart, about the width of your shoulders. Keep your feet parallel, not pointing inward or outward. Bend your knees and also keep them parallel over your feet—no knocked knees. Feel a ‘string line’ passing up through your body, from the centre of your crotch up through your head and into the air. Your body is centred along this line, straight and relaxed. This is the centred position from which free breath and voice will flow. Play with all of this for a while, tensing and relaxing as you did on the floor. Always return to the centred position and allow your breath to flow freely all the while.

Now play with the same sighs and ‘mmmmm’ and ‘aaah’ sounds as you did on the floor, warming the breath and gradually and gently vocalising. Play with your lips and tongue and listen to the different sounds that arise. The more flexible your tongue, lips and jaw, the better the articulation and clarity of your voice.

## Exercise 2: Articulation

If your voice is to be used professionally for long periods on a daily basis, you need to combine your daily breathing exercises with exercises that help you practice your articulation. Articulation is the adjustment and movement of your ‘speech organs’ to create clear pronunciation and sound. Improving your articulation will help visitors to better understand what you are saying.

Vocal articulation is muscular. Your face muscles—your tongue, lips, cheeks and even the muscles around your eyes—all need to be exercised. Pull faces while cleaning your teeth; wildly exaggerated lip and mouth movements. Open your eyes wide as if you can hardly believe what you are seeing. Contort your face in the shower, feeling every muscle, fold, tic, twitch and grimace with which you express your emotions. Massage your face with your fingers and pull clown faces. (Speaking from experience, it’s not a good idea to do this on public transport—or when you’re meeting your tour party!)

The following formal articulation exercises will also help you develop an awareness of the muscles you use to shape your lips and tongue. Make a habit of doing these exercises every day.

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First, stand in the relaxed centred position. Look into a mirror if possible, and repeat these sounds:

**AH    A (EH)    EE    A (EH)**

**AH    OR    OO    OR**

Exaggerate the shapes needed to produce the vowel sounds.

After a while, add consonants to the vowel sounds. Repeat:

**ARMST AIMST EEMST AIMST**

**ARMST ORMST OOMST ORMST**

Again, concentrate on the sounds and the shapes you make with your facial muscles to produce them.

Now, prefix more consonant sounds to produce:

**PAH    PAY    PEE    PAY**

**PAH    PAW    POO    PAW**

**BAH    BAY    BEE    BAY**

**BAH    BOR    BOO    BOR**

**TAH    TAY    TEE    TAY**

**TAH    TOR    TOO    TOR**

**SAR    SAY    SEE    SAY**

**SAR    SAW    SOO    SAW**

Work through the alphabet, paying attention to any combinations of sounds you find more difficult to produce. Occasionally return to massaging your facial muscles and pulling

a range of exaggerated faces as you work the muscles. Also do 'horse blows': relax your lips and blow through them so that they vibrate together and make a slapping sound, like a horse.

The following exercise is great for taking your lips and tongue to the 'gym'. Repeat:

**SHE STOOD ON HIS BALCONY  
INEXPLICABLY MIMICKING HIM HICCUPING  
AND AMICABLY WELCOMING HIM IN**

Be very conscious of your lips and tongue, and exaggerate their shapes and movement. For example, be careful to make sure 'balcony' does not become 'belcony'. It is often these flat vowels that confuse overseas visitors listening to a guided tour.

There is no need to lose your own individual voice and sound. You're not trying to achieve a 'BBC voice', but seeking to give your voice greater clarity.

Now repeat rapidly:

**AN ENEMY  
ANEMONE** (the flower)

**UNIQUE NEW YORK  
UNIQUE NEW YORK**

You may have your own favourite exercises. Mix and match.



Go look at your mouth in a mirror. As well as your teeth and tongue, you will see the bony roof at the front of your mouth, called the hard palate, and the fleshy area at the back of the roof of your mouth, called the soft palate. You will also see your uvula, the dangling tissue at the back of your mouth that closes your nasal passage when you swallow.



Looking in the mirror, make a hard 'g' sound (as in 'guard') way back in your throat:

Flatten your tongue as you make this sound,  
and practice raising and dropping your uvulva.

**K-K-K-K-K-K-K-K-K-KAAAAAH**

Now repeat the following noting the occasional use of your soft palate, especially on the words ‘(RHE)**TORICAL**’, ‘**GLAD**(STONIAN)’ and ‘**COM**(PLETLY)’.

It's a mouthful, and you may feel a need to breathe after 'parliamentarians'. So use this exercise to practice your breath control as well as your articulation: try to complete the whole sentence on one breath.

Keep practicing these exercises every day. There are also valuable exercises to help you learn to project your voice and use various resonators within your head and chest; skills that are useful in different locations and circumstances. We will learn more about these now.



### Exercise 3: Projection

How many times have you had to address a large group of visitors? How often do you feel like you are almost shouting to be heard? When we speak at volume we are less able to vary the nuances in our voice, which tends to make our delivery very monotonous. The acoustics of the cave environment can make things even more difficult. Male voices may start to bellow; women's voices can become thin, even reedy—and neither is conducive to a positive visitor experience. By the end of the day our voice can be strained, hoarse, or non-existent. One solution to this problem is voice projection.

Projection is not loudness. Unlike shouting, which is just releasing the sound without direction, projection is channelling or redirecting the sound, allowing it to travel outward. The well-projected voice begins with breath seated in the centre. Remember the 'string line' you imagined running through your body during your breathing exercises? Your breath must come from this centred position.

Here's an exercise that will help you project your voice:

Imagine a feather suspended about 30 cm in front of your face. Blow softly through your lips as if to set the feather in gentle motion. Feel the air coming from your mouth. Sense where it comes from.

Now imagine a ping pong ball caught behind your teeth and lips. Imagine expelling the ball from your mouth. It cannot be blown out as you blew the feather. Locate your breath in your solar plexus and expel the imaginary ball with a deep-seated 'HUH' sound. This is your projection centre. Get used to sensing it. Feel the difference between the soft blow for the feather and the deep 'HUH' breath.

Now stand comfortably in the centred position and select three or four objects at varying distances from you. Make sure the first object is close up and the others stretch into the distance; say, 1 metre away, then 4 metres, 8 metres and 10 metres away. Take a breath, release it with a gentle 'mmmmm' sound opening up to an 'aaahhhh', and imagine the sound hitting the selected object. Make sure your breath is coming from your projection centre, deep in your solar plexus, as you first hit the closest object, then the next and so on. Concentrate on the sound travelling over the distance. You will raise your voice a little as you work harder to push the breath from your lungs but think volume—a bigger sound—not loudness. Let your breath and solar plexus do most of the work, not your throat.

Now cup your hands in front of your mouth and again, using your breath and 'mmmmmmaaahhhh' sounds, imagine forcing your hands apart with the sound. As the sound increases, move your hands away and allow the sound to travel out into the open distance.

If you can access open country, try these exercises and allow your projected voice to travel into the hills and valleys. Send your voice to the top of a mountain! But do not shout. Your voice must come from your centred position, not your head or throat.

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## Exercise 4: Resonators

Another way to make our guiding presentations more interesting and memorable is to work on the character of our delivery. We can do this by developing the quality of our voice, using our resonators.

Think of the hollow spaces that create resonance in a musical instrument, such as a guitar. The shape and size of the resonating cavity determine the quality of the sound produced by the instrument. We humans also have resonators. These are those hollow spaces, predominantly in our head and throat, which give a resonant pitch to our voice. Resonators amplify and sustain the tone of our voice and the tone is, in a broad sense, the character of our voice or our individual sound.

The shape and size of some of our resonating cavities are set by nature and genetics—our nasal and sinus cavities, for example, cannot be altered at will. Our mouth, however, can be changed in shape and size, and can be used consciously to shape sound. We can likewise manipulate the shape of our throat.

Once the breath has passed over the vocal cords into the larynx, the resonators come into play. By becoming more conscious of your own resonating spaces you can gradually begin to play with your vocal quality. The following exercise will raise your awareness of these spaces.

Close your mouth with your teeth and lips held together and gently hum. Now, keeping your lips together, slowly separate your teeth so that your mouth is opening behind your lips. Listen to the changes in sound as you play with the shape of your mouth.

Now with your mouth relaxed and lips together, hum a middle note from your range. Now soar up several notes and feel the

sensation of sound filling your head cavities, such as your sinuses. Imagine your cheekbones vibrating. Repeat, and this time open your mouth as you soar up and feel the sound up high in your nose, flowing into your sinus cavities. Be aware of the shape of your throat and mouth as you change notes.

Take that middle note again, then drop to a lower tone and feel the sensation of your chest resonator. Hold your hands lightly against your chest and imagine them vibrating to the sensation. Repeat and open your mouth as you drop down the scale. Feel your chest resonators respond and again, concentrate on the shape of your mouth and throat.

Play up and down the scale like this, really feeling those hollow spaces and their capacity.

Now take any word and play with it. Say it in a high and low pitch and listen to how it might change in subtle meanings, depending on the pitch and tone that your different resonators produce.

Pick a sentence and do the same thing. Choose words in the sentence and use a different pitch and tone on them, again listening to subtle changes of inference.

Now that you are aware of the effect of resonators on your vocal delivery, listen to a voice that you admire and concentrate on its sound. What resonators are predominant? Try to imitate that voice, exploring the shapes and resonators you need to use in order to reproduce it.

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Also appreciate the individual qualities of your own voice and use your resonators to explore changes to those qualities. Use this knowledge to expand your vocal repertoire and bring life to your guiding presentations.

## Conclusion

A professional dancer must, daily, do some form of a body workout; a concert pianist must exercise their hands over chords. You couldn't possibly sing on a stage or act in a play without warming up your voice first. The same goes for you as a cave presenter. Your voice is an instrument, and like all instruments it is the better for regular tuning. Exercising and developing your voice will not only help you avoid problems such as laryngitis and huskiness, it will enhance the richness and quality of your presentations.

A greater awareness of your voice and body/breath relationship also has a resonance in the development of understanding your own emotional responses. It can lead to greater insights into your thought patterns and how you use language to express yourself. These insights can help you to communicate the true meaning of your words, enriching your personal and professional life.

So get into the habit of taking your voice to the 'gym'. It's a good idea to set some time aside for a regular workout, but moments can be found during daily living. Diaphragm/breathing awareness and muscle relaxation/

tension exercises can all be practiced shortly after waking and while you're leisurely getting out of bed and dressing. You can help your voice in other ways: hum to warm up as you go about your work, or before a tour; drink plenty of water while you're working; avoid cigarettes and whatever you do, don't shout!

If you can, attend a voice class occasionally to work through the full range of body relaxation and awareness exercises. Singing or drama classes can also help. But while a professional voice coach would be great to have, not everyone has access to one, or can afford classes. The exercises in this kit have been devised so you can practice the skills on your own. We hope that you will use and enjoy this resource. Don't put it off; get started today.

Good luck! And have great **FUN** with your voice!



## Further reading

To learn more about vocal exercises, and other tips for dynamic and effective spoken presentations, you might like to read the following:

Brochu, Lisa and Merriman, Tim. *Personal Interpretation: Connecting Your Audience to Heritage Resources*. Chapter 7. Fort Collins, Colorado: InterpPress, 2002.

Merritt, Lorraine M. *Talking the Talk: Communicate with Persuasion, Panache and Passion*. Marrickville, NSW: Choice Books, 2003.

Pastorelli, John. *Enriching the Experience: An Interpretive Approach to Tour Guiding*. Chapter 5. Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Education, 2003.

