**Basic Voice Improvement Techniques**

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Your voice includes several characteristics, including: tone, volume, pitch, cadence, speed, voice inflection (word emphasis), emotion, and enunciation.

Many of these characteristics can be learned and controlled with practice.

This article has some simple techniques that I teach my students in an Introduction to Public Speaking class at Wilberforce University in the USA.

Many of these methods could be helpful for anyone who needs to warm up their voice.

**Tone –** Most of us need to work on our tone from time to time. Some people are not aware of the tone of voice they use when speaking. They talk loudly with a tone of irritation, regardless of who they are talking with.

**Volume –** This is an especially important variation to practice and can quickly influence how you are perceived by the interviewer. Try to work up and down the alphabet raising and lowering your voice. Be aware of how others react to you when you are having a casual conversation. Often their non-verbal signals will let you know that you are talking too soft or loud.

**Voice inflection –** Here is a simple exercise you can try. Take a sentence and emphasise different parts: WHY are you late for the appointment? Why ARE you late for the appointment? Why are YOU late for the appointment? Why are you LATE for the appointment? Why are you late for the APPOINTMENT?

**Enunciate distinctly –** Make sure to pronounce the final syllable in every word. Emphasize key concepts with your voice: punch out the important ideas that you want the audience to remember.

**Mannerisms –** This might include such things as repeating the same phrase over and over again, laughing at your own jokes, using filler words (uhmmm, er), etc. Ask friends if they notice any annoying vocal mannerisms and try to eliminate them.

**Speed –** Ask friends for feedback about whether you are speaking at an average speaking rate (around 120 words per minute). Be aware of when you speed up or slow down during a normal conversation. This is not necessarily bad as long as you have some control over it.

**Contrast –** Use your voice to create contrast: high and low, loud and soft, excited and reserved. Be in charge of the emotion that you are projecting.

**Emotion –** This includes whether you have the ability to communicate how you feel and express the appropriate emotions. As mentioned earlier, some untrained speakers maintain a similar tone that conveys only one emotion (such as irritation). This will tend to give your audience a bad impression.

**Digitally record your voice, and listen objectively –** Experiment with different tone, pitch, emphasis, speed, volume and pronunciation. Also listen for common vocal problems such as nasal tone, unnaturally high or low pitch, mumbling, breathlessness. To help overcome these problems, buy a tape of a well-known actor reading selections from literary works.

Next, record yourself reading those same selections and compare your vocal quality. Also listen for sincerity, intensity, volume, inflection, pronunciation, drama. Continually practise your control over what you are projecting. Many people hear their own voice on a recorder and can’t believe that it is them. With enough practice, you get comfortable with the sound of your own voice, even when it does sound slightly different when recorded.

Being able to relax your voice is essential for good speaking. You cannot produce a fine, resonant, pleasing tone when your throat muscles are pinched, tense, or strained. By doing some of these vocal workouts before your talk, you will have more confidence. Combine this with an awareness of your throat muscles and make a genuine effort to relax them.  
Also, be sure to take care of your voice, rest it when possible.

According to “Your Speaking Voice,” a Toastmasters publication, when you speak, your voice reflects your psychological and emotional state of mind.

You cannot hope to persuade or influence others – or even get them to listen in a positive way – if your tones are harsh and unfriendly. Such a voice can repel even when the speaker wishes to attract. The quality of friendliness is a requirement for a good speaking voice. It is largely a matter of habit, as is the unfriendly tone.

Practise tongue twisters until you master them. Below is a vocal warm-up exercise that we do in the Introduction to Public Speaking class. These are a variety of unintentional and intentional tongue-twisters from actors’ exercises, corporate media ads, and elsewhere.

* She sells sea shells by the seashore, and the shells she sells are sea shells.
* A twenty-two point two cubic foot frost-free refrigerator-freezer.
* A central ice crystal’s six similar sides determine a snowflake’s six-way similarity.
* Withdraw five millilitres from the top of the pallet-poor plasma.
* A lower-cost alternative to traditional plans.
* Double Bubble gum for that just-brushed freshness.
* High roller, low roller, lower roller.
* I need a box of biscuits, a box of mixed biscuits, and a biscuit mixer.
* He thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts.
* The jolly collie swallowed a lollipop.
* Friday’s five fresh fish specials.
* Imagine an imaginary menagerie manager imagining managing an imaginary menagerie.
* The least of the police dismisseth us.
* Red leather, yellow leather.
* The sixth Sikh Sheik’s sixth sheep’s sick.
* Three free thugs set three thugs free.
* Charles deftly switched straight flange strips.
* Gwen glowered and grimaced at Glen’s gleaming greens.
* Fancy that fascinating character Harry McCann married Anne Hammond.
* Lot lost his hot chocolate at the loft.
* Snoring Norris was marring the aria.
* Eleven benevolent elephants.
* Girl gargoyle, guy gargoyle.
* Rubber baby buggy bumpers.
* She stood on the balcony inexplicably mimicking him hiccupping and amicably welcoming him in.
* Six sick slick slim sycamore saplings.
* Unique New York.
* Toy boat (repeat three times)
* Lemon liniment.
* Three free throws.
* Blue black bug’s blood.
* Red lorry, yellow lorry.
* Giggle gaggle gurgle.

Have fun with these ideas, but stay determined to improve your vocal technique, including: tone, quality, volume, pitch, cadence, speed, voice inflection, emotion, sincerity and enunciation of your voice for your next job interview.

**My Bio:**

Dr. Rick Sheridan is an assistant professor of communications at Wilberforce University in Ohio, and has also lectured at Stanford, California State University and at the Chautauqua Institute. Rick also works as a journalist.

His news and feature articles have been published by the Chicago Sun-Times, St. Petersburg Times, New Orleans Times-Picayune, UPI, Training Magazine.

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