

Reader's Theater Exercise II

Breathing Correctly to Improve Vocal Volume

1. Have your students exhale all the air from their lungs. Encourage them to continue to push it out even when it might feel like it's totally expelled. When no more air can be forced out, they will automatically inhale. Instruct them to inhale deeply. Encourage them to observe how the air rushes in. Only a deep, full inhalation will satisfy their hunger for air. Repeat this process three or four times. This exercise teaches the students what a real breath feels like.
2. Instruct your students to exhale comfortably. Then, take a moderately filling breath. Hold it for 15 seconds, then exhale quietly. Repeat this process three or four times. Each day increase the holding time until the students can hold their breath for a full minute. This exercise helps the students develop breath control by strengthening the diaphragm muscles.
3. Have the students stand erect and inhale with five quick, short gasps through an open mouth. Your students will notice that they can't gasp like this without using their diaphragm. After inhaling five gasps, tell them to exhale in five quick gasps or puffs. Now have the students practice gasping and puffing through the nose with the mouth closed.
4. Instruct the students to laugh heartily with a big HA, HA, HA. Now have them do this until they have exhaled all the air from their lungs. Then quickly inhale deeply and quickly.
5. Have your students close their lips and laugh soundlessly through their nose. Laughing silently through the nose promotes better breath control.
6. This exercise can be demonstrated in the classroom and given as a homework assignment. Have one of your students volunteer to lie on their back. Place a book on their diaphragm. Encourage them to relax each part of their body and concentrate on the diaphragm. As she or he inhales, the books will rise. When he or she exhales, instruct them to flatten their abdomen as much as possible. At home the students should practice this exercise until it becomes automatic.
7. Have your students stand and bend over as if to touch their toes, but just hang limply. Remain in this position for a full minute and then straighten up. Repeat the exercise. Encourage the students to pay attention to when they exhale their breath. It should naturally expel when they bend at the waist.
8. While the students are standing, instruct them to place their hands on their hips, tilt their head back so they're looking at the ceiling, and yawn. Advise the students to pay attention to how their waist expands as the diaphragm flattens and draws in air. Next, instruct the students to exhale and produce the "AH" sound and hold it as long as possible without discomfort.
9. Next while the students are standing, encourage your students to speak in "sync" with their breath. Try a counting exercise where they take a breath at each comma: 1, 12, 123, continuing until the count of 10. Encourage the students to let their breath flow easily. This helps students learn breath management.
10. When your students read aloud a character part in a Playbooks® Reader's Theater story, have them pick a section that has a mixture of long and short sentences. Read each sentence on a single breath, if possible, inhaling before the sentence, then controlling when to exhale while reading.

TIPS:

1. If students feel their abdominal muscles contract or throat tightening, they need to practice using shorter breath spans. Encourage them to release their abdominal muscles at the end of exhaling their breath and a new breath will easily drop in.
2. Proper posture and alignment is crucial to students maximizing their breathing. Let your students imagine two strings are holding them up like a marionette, one attached to the head and one attached to the sternum. The strings need to remain taut throughout the breathing cycle.
3. Students can periodically monitor their breathing by placing one hand above their navel and the other hand below the navel. The belly will move out as they inhale and float in as they exhale. The breath and not the hand should be moving the body.

As the students practice these exercises, they will learn better breath control, improve their vocal volume, and vary its rate to reflect their intentions and emotions.

Sources: "Breathe & Speak with Ease Professionally Speaking Tips" by Lucille Schutmaat-Rubin, Ph.D. Voice & Speech Coach, NYC, "Your Speaking Voice" Toastmasters International

