

# Vocal Technique for Singers: Breathing and Breath Control

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## Posture

The first step in developing vocal technique is to establish a good posture for singing. Your body is your instrument and poor alignment or unnecessary tension can effect how well you sing. Good posture enables good breathing. **Think of your body as the engine that drives your voice and your breath as the fuel that drives the engine.**

- Stand with your feet hip width apart. Your weight should be evenly distributed. A good exercise to ensure weight is evenly distributed is to transfer your weight from the right to left foot, forward and backwards and round in a circle, finally moving to a centered position. Your knees should be relaxed and your arms should rest by your side. Be wary of your chin and neck: singers often raise their chin as they believe they are *helping the sound come out* when really, this places unnecessary tension on the voice.

Once good posture is established we can learn how to breathe well during singing. Having control over your breathing will not only help to support your voice but will enable healthy singing to take place.

There are three key breathing skills singers need to learn:

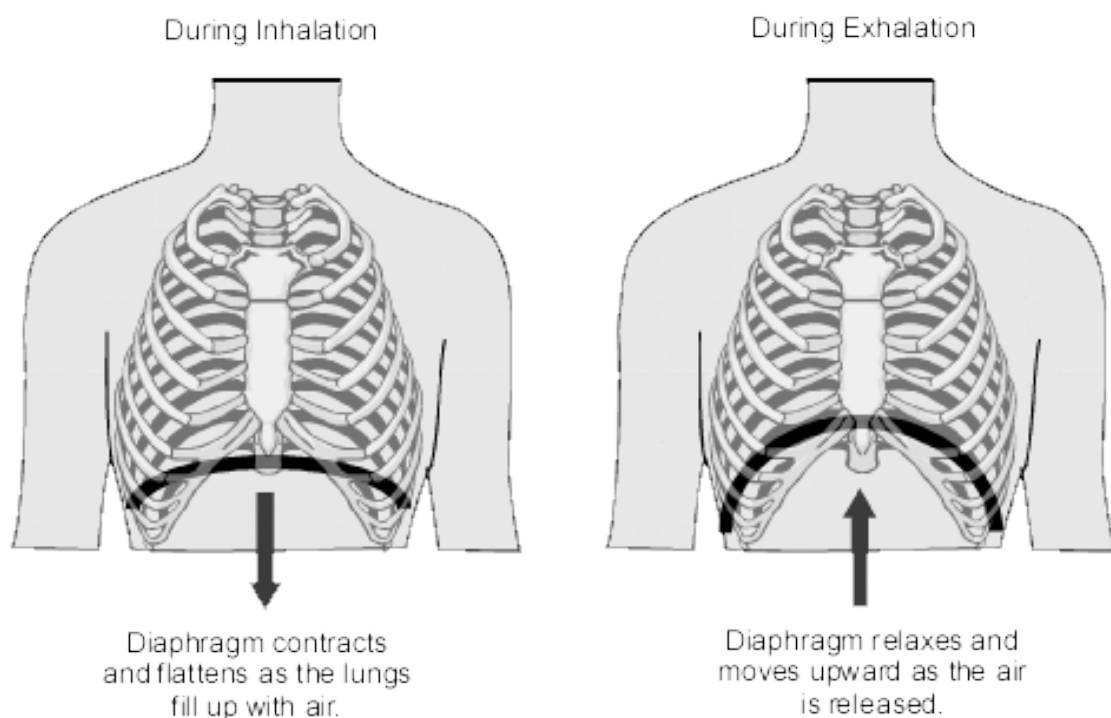
1. The ability to inhale large quantities of air
2. The ability to snatch a breath quickly
3. The ability to control the escape of breath

## Breathing well for singing

Most people find that when they breathe in their chest rises: this is after all what comes naturally. However, by improving your posture, practising breathing exercises and singing regularly you will start to learn a deeper way of breathing that utilises the stomach muscles and helps to control the diaphragm. Many singers are told to: ***“sing from the diaphragm!”*** But do you understand what this means? As a singing student I was frequently informed to “breathe from the diaphragm” but didn’t understand what this meant until my third year at music college and this is why: we don’t actually sing from the diaphragm. A combination of abdominal muscles, intercostal muscles (the muscles connecting the ribs) and the diaphragm constitute the breathing mechanism.

When we inhale, the diaphragm descends into the stomach area, pushing down and moving everything out of the way. The intercostal muscles of the rib cage expand sideways resulting in an expansion around the stomach, sides and back. When we exhale our diaphragm relaxes upwards towards its original position as our lungs empty of air. This is where the abdominal muscles kick in: they are responsible for the exhalation of breath. **The diaphragm merely controls the speed we exhale our breath.**

To focus on the diaphragm as the sole mechanism for breathing is quite beneficial as the diaphragm is intricately linked with a myriad of abdominal muscles that contribute to the task. The diaphragm is also one of the largest muscles in the human body and its rise and fall—an accordion-like inhalation and exhalation pattern—provides strong visual imagery.



Let's now look at some exercises to develop each of these three key breathing skills.

**Please note: If at any point you feel light-headed take a break and come back later. These exercises need only be performed for a few minutes at a time.**

1. Start by performing these exercises lying down.
2. Progress to sitting upright and eventually standing.
3. For an additional challenge perform these exercises while walking.

As you inhale keep the upper body as relaxed as possible: there should be no lifting of the shoulders, clenching of the hands or jaw, or a noisy gasp of breath. Your sternum/breastbone should be strong and erect with no sagging and focus should be placed on drawing the breath low into the body. **Your stomach must never be sucked in during singing!**

## 1. The ability to inhale large quantities of air

The ability to inhale large quantities of air allows long phrases to be sung in a controlled and relaxed manner. We tap into this ability by breathing deeply, allowing the lungs to fully inflate as the diaphragm lowers into our stomach area.

- Lie on the floor or on your bed. Breathe in and out through the mouth and focus on how your body feels. Does your stomach rise and fall? E.g. are you breathing deeply?
- Inhale through the mouth or nose for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 8 seconds, exhale in a slow and controlled manner, hold your exhaled breath for 8 seconds. Please note, when you 'hold' your breath there should be no tension – the throat should be relaxed as though in a surprised position. It is difficult to avoid panicking when 'holding' the breath but can also feel liberating when you master the art of neither breathing in or out, and doing so without tension.
- Experiment and invent your own breathing exercises to develop deep breathing.

## 2. The ability to snatch a breath quickly

The ability to snatch a breath quickly is effective when there is little time to breathe between quick sentences/phrases in a song.

- Practice panting. As you do so you will feel your stomach move out and in quickly. This is because your diaphragm is moving up and down and pushing your stomach contents aside in the process. See if you can do this silently. Focus on the exhalation and see how easily air pulls back in the lungs. You will be surprised at how much air you can take in by simply relaxing and not *trying* to breathe in. The lungs are a vacuum and are never empty of air.
  - Practice gasping in shock – this opens the throat and allows large quantities of air to enter the lungs quickly. Now practice doing this silently.
  - Think of your lungs as filling up in quarters. On the count of 1 breathe in 1/4 full, on the count of two breathe in 1/2 full, on the count of three breathe in 3/4 full and on the count of four breathe in the final quarter. Repeat as you exhale, again in four stages.
  - Sing: 1, 121, 12321, 1234321, 123454321, 12345654321, 1234567654321, 123456787654321 and silently snatch a breath at each comma.
  - Experiment and invent your own snatch breath exercises.

## 3. The ability to control the escape of breath

The ability to control the escape of breath allows long phrases to be sung in a controlled and relaxed manner. On exhalation the diaphragm moves back to its relaxed 'home' position under lungs. As the diaphragm controls how quickly we exhale our goal is to learn how to control and slow the process of exhalation. If exhalation occurs too quickly it can create tension when

there is not enough breath to make a solid and consistent sound. This is where many vocal technique problems occur and these problems are often referred to as a *lack of support*.

Your stomach should remain in the *full feeling* position you experience immediately after breathing in. You should try to maintain this position for as long as possible when you are singing. Try to hold that feeling of fullness as you exhale. Essentially, make the diaphragm's job of getting *home* as difficult as possible so its return is slow and controlled.

- Hold a lit candle in front of your face. Take a deep breath into your lower stomach. As you exhale blow gently on the flame so it flickers but is not blown out. Keep your stomach in the *full-feeling* position throughout. Continue until your breath has fully escaped and try to stay relaxed throughout.
- Breathe in and exhale very slowly to a 'hiss'. The hiss should be relaxed and consistent. Time your exhalation and see how long you can exhale for.
- Breathe in and exhale on an 'ah' sound. Time yourself and see how long you can exhale for. If you would like an additional challenge increase your loudness as you sing, while maintaining the feeling of fullness. Try reversing the loudness: start loud and finish quiet.
- Experiment and invent your own breath control exercises.

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