

Ten Steps to Better Breathing for Singers

If there's a child near you, you have the perfect mentor for good posture and breathing. There's no better model. Notice the posture: head up; shoulders relaxed and level; an alignment of ears, shoulders, hips, knees and ankles; efficient breathing with a still chest, relaxed shoulders and easy movement in the abdomen. All perfectly natural. We adults, on the other hand, offer a less pretty picture of good posture and efficient breathing. We are victims of poor role models, laziness, weariness, and all-too-human vanities like tummy-awareness and sometimes overly tight clothing. As a result, our posture and breathing—and our singing and speaking—suffer. But it doesn't have to be that way! Loosen your waistband, relax, and take the following ten easy steps to correct breathing:

1. Start with good posture. Stand with your weight forward on your feet. To guarantee good posture, occasionally lift up on your toes, then back down. Keep your shoulders relaxed. Lift your hands straight up over your head. With your chin level (parallel to the floor, not tilted up or down), allow your head to balance naturally over your shoulders. Let your arms fall to your sides and imagine a **"posture string"** is lifting you up from the top, back of your head. The feeling should be one of **a long back of neck and short front of neck**. Your ears, shoulders, hips, knees, and ankles should be in perfect alignment. Practice in front of a mirror or video camera to be sure you are teaching the muscles to memorize the right position because **muscles have memory**. The balance, or lack of balance should be obvious.
2. Keeping your chest and ribs stable and still, gradually extend your arms out to your sides until they're parallel with the floor. You will be making a "T" with your body. Continue to feel aligned and balanced with the aid of the **"posture string."**
3. Now, clasp your hands behind your head. Without moving your chest and ribs, gently inhale. **Allow** (don't make) your lower abdomen to expand and drop away to receive the breath. You should also feel it in the sides and back, at waist level. Next, exhale in small breaths, keeping your chest and ribs comfortably still and expanded. Notice how naturally the waist and lower abdominal areas are the center of the work.
4. Now for the **crucial focus areas** that will stabilize your singing and let **you** be the manager of your breathing. **Keep the sides** (below ribs, at waist level) **in a constantly expanding state**. Not fixed or tight, or collapsed...always expanding outward. By first checking your posture with arms lifted up, then placing your fingers in your sides, you will feel the initial expansion when you inhale. Now, **keep that area expanding during the exhalation**. As you work to develop this **constantly expanding** status in the sides, you will begin to experience amazing freedom in the throat.
5. The other area that expands on the inhale, and continues to stay gently expanding on the exhale is **the back of the waist area**. All you have to do is yawn to feel how natural this is for good, full breathing. As you work both the sides and lower back, your singing will get more relaxed by the day. You will become as efficient as a toddler! And, though it

may take several weeks to own, it will serve you for the rest of your life.

6. Lie down on the floor, on your back. Get comfortable. Clasp your hands and let them rest on your abdomen around your belly. (Feel free to use a small pillow or book under your head.) To ease any tension in your back, bend your knees, keeping your feet flat on the floor. Now, fully relaxing, with a still chest, feel the activity in your abdomen as you inhale and exhale. The more you keep the sides and back expanding, the more the frontal, abdominal muscles will be able to do their work. By now you should be very aware of a healthy expansion of the abdominal area all the way from the sternum (the base of the breastbone) to the pelvic bone. You should also notice increasing activity in the sides and lower and middle back. This is something you are **allowing, not making**. It's natural.
7. Still on the floor on your back, continue to breathe, placing one hand on your abdomen and the other on your collarbone, at the top of the chest. Your abdomen should be moving up for the inhale; down for the exhale. The collarbone and ribs should remain quite still, but not rigid. Let this coordinated pattern become part of you while you continually strive for the expanding sides and back. With daily practice you will soon own this efficient breathing. It's how you were born to manage your breath.
8. Place your hands behind your head, keeping your elbows on the floor. Keeping your chest still, begin rhythmically taking in short breaths to the count of 1, 2, 3, 4 and blowing out short breaths to the count of 1, 2, 3, 4. Then expand that to 8 counts in and 8 counts out. Finally, when ready, advance to 16 in and out and even 32 counts in and out. But, don't sacrifice control for reaching numbers. **Only Proper Preparation Prevents Poor Performance and muscles have memory.**
9. Now take a seat on the front edge of a firm chair and lean forward, resting your elbows on your knees. Even though you're tilted forward from the waist, you should be able to draw a straight line through the ears, shoulders, and hips. Now, **inhale by sipping through an imaginary straw**, in one slow, noisy breath through your mouth. Allow your waist (front, sides, and back) to fully expand. Instead, you should feel your abdominal, back, and side muscles getting involved. **Exhale with a gentle hiss (sssss)**, letting those abdominal muscles do most of the work while keeping other areas still.
10. Still sitting, let your **"posture string"** lift you to a standing position with only a slight tilt forward. Practice staying aligned while moving back and forth between sitting and standing. Putting one foot slightly forward will make this easier, but you will be feeling your core muscles (abs/back) and quadriceps (legs) doing the work. As you alternate between these exercises your posture and breathing will continue to become more efficient for singing, speaking and . . . life. Remember: **Muscles have memory and practice makes permanent, no matter what you're practicing.**