

# Finding Your Teaching Voice

By Peggy Brown

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**Y**our voice is a very special part of who you are as an individual and as a teacher. Your voice and your words are one of the most important ways of teaching and communicating with your students. What kind of voice do you have? Is it loud or soft, high pitched or low pitched, fast or slow, quiet or bossy, grating or clear?

Your voice indicates three things about you as an individual and as a teacher: your personality, your passion, and the strength of what I will call your vocal physique.

Your personality often comes through in your voice as you share yourself and your own unique gifts with your audience; it reveals much about who you are as an individual and cannot be hidden or masked. It can be strengthened or improved, but will always be uniquely you; so embrace who you are and what you have to teach!

Your passion is the content and the intent of the information you would like to share with others. I believe that we all are passionate about our love of horses and passionate about what we teach. When you are passionate about what you teach you will communicate to your audience that you are sincere and genuine, and that you are authentic and the real deal. If your voice lacks passion your power will diminish and your intention will become less effective and less clear - people won't really believe you.

Your vocal physique indicates the strength of your voice and your ability to project and resonate your words. Unfortunately, if people complain that they have trouble hearing you, speaking louder will not necessarily give you a more powerful voice. Often, in trying to speak louder, teachers raise the pitch of their voice and shriek or screech rather than speak. You must learn to moderate your breathing, your resonance and mindfully project your sound in order to have a clear voice and a pitch pleasing to both humans and horses.

Centered Riding instructors can experience much through the teaching of F.M. Alexander who stood in front of a mirror and discovered how posture and correct breathing affected the tone and projection of his voice. The Alexander "Whispered Ahhh" exercise is a good one to experiment with. Balance your head, free your neck and whisper "ahhhhhhh...", listen to and also feel the sound as you make it. Now whisper "ahhhhhhh..." and slowly look up and down with your head and notice how the sound changes and how it feels to make that sound. Push your head too far forward or pull it backwards stiffly or tilt it off to the side and see what happens to the sound? Can you find a balance of the head, neck and body that allows you to make the most clear and effortless "ahhhhhhh....."? This balance will be the spot from which you can project your voice clearly and also with the least effort.

Resonance is almost a vibration or buzzing feeling of the voice. High sounds often come from the head and throat, while deep sounds come from the chest area. Human sound can also resonate in the face or what might be called the mask. This mask area can create clear sound, no matter how loud or soft. Try this experiment. Say Mmmmmm... and feel the vibration, the buzz in your face. Now say Mmmmmm... one, Mmmmmm... two, Mmmmmm... three and so on. Notice if the words one, two and three sound different after the Mmmmmm... sound. Try the Mmmmmm... sound before other words and notice how the words both sound and feel.

Resonators might be thought of as the “speakers in your head”. As the sound comes from your vocal cords it resonates through the head and the throat, as well as the chest. Here’s another exercise to try: hold your nose and say “Many mighty men making much money in the moonshine” with as much force as you can muster. Now let go of your nose and immediately say the phrase again. What do you notice?

To have force and projection in your voice you will need good deep diaphragmatic breathing. Take deep breaths down into your belly using your diaphragm to breathe and then use that air and your diaphragm for projection and resonance. Shallow chest breaths will require you to breathe faster, will raise the pitch of the voice and may make you speak in tones that are breathless and hard to hear. Breathe deeply and speak or sing deliberately.

We each have an optimum pitch. To find yours take a deep breath with your diaphragm and then say “Ohhhhhhhhh...” starting with a high pitch and moving to a low pitch. Can you find a pitch that is good for you? Notice a vibration in your chest as you do this exercise. When you find the greatest or perhaps clearest vibration this will help you find the best pitch for you. You won’t always stay exactly in this pitch because if you did you would speak in a monotone and your audience would soon lose their attention, but this spot is a good balanced, home position for your voice to find.

Your words are so important when you teach; however remember that you should also consider your enunciation and speed as you say these words. You may want to ask a friend or student to help evaluate your speech or, as much as you may hate it, record your voice and then listen to what you say, how you sound, and how you speak. Make sure your words are clear and pronounced correctly, if in doubt look up the pronunciation in the dictionary. Make sure you have space between each word so that they don’t run together in a garble of sound.

**Speak so that people sit up and want to listen to you.** Your words are important but how you say those words can mean so much to how your students hear and understand you. Happy teaching!