

# Tips for Teachers: Speaking Through A Mask



*Sarah Whitten*  
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## The Mask and Your Voice

**Problem: Wearing a mask makes you feel like you can't breathe.**

Masks can add up to 3 layers that filter the air as it comes in to you. It does 'slow down' the air, but it doesn't mean you can't adequately breathe. Many of us have a habit we don't know we have: we over breathe. Over breathing means we take in more air, more frequently than we need. Wearing a mask can reveal this habit when we have the feeling that we can't breathe easily with our mask on. Over breathing is also heightened when we experience elevated stress levels.

**Solution:** Practice relaxed breathing, where you slow down your breath and reduce the amount of air you take in. There are ALL kinds of benefits to relaxed breathing beyond feeling better able to breathe in a mask, the most primary of which is lowering your stress level. See attached description to practice. Make sure to practice OUTSIDE of school time, when you are in a low stress environment. It will make it easier to transfer the skill to in school, masked use.

**Problem: You feel like you get a mouthful of mask when you breathe in to speak.**

Many masks sit close to the face to create a proper seal around the edges. To speak we tend to inhale through our mouths and then speak. That breath in through the mouth can bring the mask even closer to our mouth.

**Solution:** Breathe through your nose exclusively when you are talking. This takes practice - start with reading something like a simple children's picture book while breathing through your nose between phrases. This also helps you stay in a place of relaxed breathing.

**Second solution:** Wear a mask that sits away from the face like [this mask from TMF](#) which is also rated highly at containing aerosols and allows for jaw movement while speaking (or singing) or add a [silicone insert](#).

**Problem: Students have a hard time hearing you through your mask.**

Fabric dampens sound. This is great if you need to sound proof your basement to rehearse with your rock band so you won't wake your neighbors. This is less good if you are trying to speak through a mask. Our default is to speak louder, but that leads to excess vocal effort which can lead to vocal fatigue, hoarseness and loss of voice.

**Optimal Solution:** [Personal amplification device](#). They can be purchased for as little as \$35.

**Second solution:** Practice speaking using a resonant voice - see attached handout for exercises - so your voice is easily produced with greater ease (also good to practice in non-mask wearing times when you are teaching).

**Problem: Students have a hard time understanding you through the mask.**

There are two things at play here:

1. Masks dampen higher frequency sounds. Vowels have lower frequencies. Consonants have higher frequencies and sound waves that dissipate more quickly. However, consonant sounds are what makes us intelligible.
2. The mask hides your mouth. We don't just use our ears to understand speech we also use our eyes. When we can't see the mouth our brains have to work harder to figure out what is being said. This means we process things more slowly.

**Solution:** Put a little more energy into your consonant sounds - imagine you are speaking in a Shakespearean play! You might feel like you are over enunciating, but you will be better understood by your students.

**Solution:** Slow down your speech a bit to give the listeners brains a chance to process what you are saying. This is helped by breathing through your nose where you will automatically pause a bit longer between phrases to get a breath.

**General Vocal Hygiene Tips**

- Don't smoke any substance.
- Cultivate regular stress management practices like movement, meditation and breath work.
- Hydrate! The top layer of your vocal cords protects against the friction generated by voice use. It is water based (it's mucous, but it's a good kind of mucous!). You need to be hydrated to have this layer in place and for it to regenerate. Hydration is also systemic. This means your voice is impacted by the water you consumed in the days prior to use. Which is why you need adequate water to pee pale, every day.
- Make sleep a priority. Our voice like the rest of our body recovers and regenerates when we sleep. That mucous layer is replaced in part when we sleep.
- Eat a healthy diet. We tell our students that and we need to practice it too!
- If you've got acid reflux manage it - that acid can hugely impact your voice.
- Build in down time for your voice where you aren't using it.
- If you find yourself in vocal trouble - either a sudden loss of voice, or a problem that persists for more than 14 days, get your voice looked at by a Laryngologist. This is an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) doctor who has a subspecialty in the voice. We have three of the top voice care centers in the country in Boston - Mass General, Mass Eye and Ear and Brigham and Women's.



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## Relaxed Breathing

This is a practice that can take 5-10 minutes depending on the state of your body and breath.

**\*\*Nota Bene:** There is not one optimal way to breathe!!! For example, you need to breathe differently when you speak or exercise to accommodate the demands of the activity. **This is a practice** to help you get out of the habit of over breathing.

### **Posture:**

Sit cross legged on the floor making sure your hips are higher than your knees, or at the front of a chair with feet flat on the ground.

Feel your sitz bones - the bottom of your pelvis - in contact with the ground or chair. Allow your body to rise up out of the pelvis with ease. If your low back bothers you, elevate your hips a bit higher or place a pillow between you and the back of your chair.

Say the word Boston and leave your tongue tip where it touches on the roof of your mouth for the /n/ sound. Close your lips - your teeth will be slightly apart and the bulk of your tongue will rest up against your hard palate. This may feel uncomfortable at first if you are used to resting your tongue between your lower teeth - the placement of the tongue on the hard palate is more optimal for your body and it facilitates breathing through the nose.

### **Scan:**

Start at the crown of your head and slowly scan down your body all the way to your toes. If you encounter a place that is tense or held, allow the tension to melt away (softening your breath will help soften your body and mind). If listening to calming music or the sound of ocean waves helps relax your body feel free to listen while you do this.

### **Breathe:**

Place one hand on your chest, around the heart center and one hand at your solar plexus, or on the low belly. Notice if either (or both) hand is moving as you breathe in and out through the nose.

In relaxed breathing the only part of the breathing mechanism that needs to move is the diaphragm. Many of us have the habit of using what are called secondary muscles of inhalation and the muscles of our belly when we are breathing at rest - this is one part subconscious habit, one part stress response.

Stay with the practice long enough to feel the muscles of the upper chest and belly quiet. Your breath is light like butterfly wings and the only motion in the body is that of the diaphragm and you see/feel it in a small amount of movement in the lower ribcage.

### **TIP**

If your nose feels blocked or stuffy, try pinching it closed and nodding your head up and down 5-10 times (don't do this if you have vestibular issues aggravated by head motion or history of TBI that is aggravated by head motion). This will often open up the nasal passages making it easier to breathe through the nose.



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## Resonant Voice Work

based on the work of Kittie Verdolini Abbott

### **Prepare:**

Breathe. Spend 5-10 minutes doing relaxed breathing.

Stretch: Keep the breath easy and move gently to awaken the thoracic area – this can include things like shoulder rolls, neck rolls, exaggerated chewing, side bends and gentle twists.

### **Practice:**

1. With your teeth apart and lips barely touching hum 3 pitches – middle c, b below and b-flat below. Go for NO control and very little effort. Identify the pitch where you feel buzz/tickle sense on the lips. Repeat several times to confirm which pitch buzzes the most. This is your optimal pitch (OP) You can download an app to your phone that has simple piano keyboard on it.

2. Begin humming on your OP. Identify where you feel vibrations. Cut your effort level in half, then half again, in half again. Take the pitch a half step and then a whole step higher and ask, “What happens to my vibrations?”

3. Voiced exercises. Use your OP for these and then try other pitches:

/mi-mi-mi-mi-mi/(me). /me-me-me-me-me/(may) /ma-ma-ma-ma-ma/  
/mo-mo-mo-mo-mo/ /mu-mu-mu-mu-mu/

- Try them slow/soft to louder/faster to slow/soft again
- Then repeat moving through all sounds /mi-me-ma-mo-mu/

4. Produce voiced sentences, chanting on your OP, using as little effort as possible:

Mary made me mad.

No one knew nanny.

Mother made marmalade.

Nanny knew nothing.

My merry mom made marmalade.

Now Nan knew Nelly.

My merry mom may marry Mary.

Nine knew nothing.

Melvin made mother merry.

Name nine new names now.

5. Repeat the above sentences in your speaking voice – be sure you are using your new-found resonance.

6. Try speaking regular sentences using your resonant voice.



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## About

Voice and movement expert, Sarah Whitten focuses on whole body wellness and function for voice professionals. Her work is built on the concept of Vocal Interdependence, recognizing that the voice is influenced by every other system of the body, and acknowledging that vocal technique alone cannot solve every issue. Using principles of biomechanics, research-backed movement and pain

science, as well as a hefty dose of intuition, she works with bodies to resolve pain and physical dysfunction and trains voice teachers to better understand the singing body. She holds an MA in Vocal Pedagogy, and MM in Vocal Performance both from The Ohio State University.

Additionally she has studied Trauma and Breathing, is a 500hour Certified Yoga Instructor, Level 1 Movement for Trauma Certified, Restorative Exercise (TM) trained, and Module 1 and 2 Yoga Therapy trained. She taught in the Holden Choral Program at Harvard for 13 year and has presented and worked with singers and voice teachers at National and Regional NATS conferences, New England Conservatory, Boston Conservatory, Walnut Hill School, and numerous other schools and colleges in addition to public workshops and courses both in person and online.

