Great Voices Capture the Imagination.

The most compelling public speakers, the best actors, the greatest “pitch” masters, all have one thing in common: great use of the voice.

Voices vary infinitely, and the one nature gave you is the one you have to work with. You may not be blessed with the great “pipes” of a Richard Burton or a Lauren Bacall, but no matter; you can use the voice you have to great effect. In talking, as in most everything else, there are certain techniques for getting the most out of your natural ability.

Vocalization is a physical, even athletic activity, and like any sport, it can take many hours of practice and years of experience to master. Just as you can't learn to sing by reading music, you can't develop your vocal style and power by simply reading about vocal techniques.

If your goal is to change your voice, I recommend combining this guide with a vocal warm-up and workout regimen. I offer a short series of vocal warm-up and workout exercises; follow along with the Change Your Voice, Change Your Life video series on my You Tube channel at youtube.com/butterfieldpofp.

Activating Your Voice

Just as we often speak of the quality of a voice as its “color” or “character,” we employ even more elaborate metaphorical language to describe voices. How would you describe your best friend’s voice, or your spouse’s, or your own? Is it bright or breathy, silky or smoky, smooth or raw, resonant or reedy, bell-like or booming? The fundamental distinction is weak or strong. Strong is better; no matter what the inherent character of your voice, you always bring out its best qualities, and sound more confident and more persuasive, by using it vigorously. In the theater, this is called projection.
Mindful Breathing

Projection is more than just a matter of how loud you are. A good actor or speaker can actually lower his or her voice (or at least seem to) and be heard in the farthest row of the balcony. Projection is a matter of supporting your voice with your breath. It comes from your diaphragm, the musculature that operates your lungs. That’s why it’s important to be aware of your breathing when you’re speaking in public. Being mindful of your breathing will help you take deep, full breaths, which will in turn keep you from hurrying your speech and running out of breath. Before long, you’ll get in the habit of supporting your voice with good breathing, and it will become natural to you.

Projection is also a matter of where your voice comes from inside your head, throat, and chest. In general, the further “back” a voice comes from, the more it fills the oral cavity and throat, the more strongly it will project.

One of the first tips budding actors and performers learn: Always talk to the last row of the audience. Making a conscious effort to do so will automatically improve your projection.

Bring Focus to Your Sound Through Articulation.

Americans are notoriously lazy speakers. This is not just a matter of how idiomatic and slangy our modern American version of English has become. Much of the crispness of traditional English pronunciation has gone by the wayside in our everyday communications. (Of course, if you learn a foreign language from a textbook or a bunch of audio tapes, then visit the country where it’s spoken, you’ll probably think the native speakers are a tribe of mushmouths, too.)

You can’t deliver an effective presentation — people will simply stop paying attention to you — if you can’t be understood. Pronouncing words clearly, known as articulation or diction, is essential to your power of persuasion. The kind of lazy talking we can get away with in our personal and everyday communications — the consonants soft and blurry, the vowels clipped or jumped over — can quickly undermine your effectiveness as a public speaker. Especially if you tend to talk fast, or if you find that people often ask you to repeat yourself, consider your diction at risk.

Good diction depends on the full, supple use of the whole speaking apparatus: lips, teeth, tongue, and jaw. Improving your articulation requires repetition of the practice exercises. You can also make a start on improving your diction by being mindful of how fast you’re talking, slowing down if necessary, and taking care to “finish off” each of the sounds that make up every word — especially the words at the beginning and end of each sentence.
Volume, Pitch, Pace, Cadence: Music of Speech

The human voice really is like a musical instrument or even a complete ensemble. It can run nimbly through an enormous range of notes ... blare like a trumpet and purr like a cello ... march briskly through a string of syllables or caress a lonely word ... pound out a dirge and boogie like a ragtime tune ... bring us to our feet like an anthem or put us to sleep like a lullaby. And our language gives us an infinite range of music to play.

With the mastery they have of their vocal instruments, great actors let us hear all that music, especially when they're performing the works of Shakespeare and other masters of poetic, theatrical language. But the same tricks and techniques great actors use are available to all of us; in fact, we use them every day.

Volume

It's the favorite vocal tool for many if not most speakers. After all, raising the voice or “punching up” a word or phrase with a burst of greater volume is the most natural way of getting attention or emphasizing a point.

Unfortunately, many American speakers seem to regard louder as their only vocal technique. The other end of volume control – lowering your voice, speaking softly or even in a whisper – is an enormously effective way to draw an audience toward you. The next time you're listening to a practiced public speaker, watch your fellow audience members when the speaker lowers the volume. You'll see people literally leaning forward in their seats, and you'll probably also notice them becoming quieter as well.

Pitch Variation

A term borrowed directly from music, describes a vocal dimension that we learn to use before we learn to make sentences. A toddler may not know all the words he needs or how to string them together into a request, but by raising the pitch of his voice at the end of the sound he makes, he lets us know that he's asking a question (or, more likely, asking for something he wants).

Inflection

A change in pitch applied to a single word. Inflections are very effective vocal techniques for adding meaning or force to particular words.

A downward inflection – a word that starts at one pitch and then goes down – has power and authority and also implies finality.
An upward inflection – a word that starts at one pitch and then goes up at the end – can not only ask a question, like the toddler; it can also create a sense of drama, tension, and anticipation.

A series of upward inflections, the “stairway to heaven,” works great when you’re listing things.

A circumflexed word is one that is pitched first up, then down, or down-up, or even up-down-up. Words that have special contextual meaning or are being used to paint a picture are often circumflexed.

Rate and Cadence

Whatever kind of music you like, part of what pleases you about it is the range of tempos and rhythms you hear, whether you’re listening to a symphony, a suite, or a single song. Spoken language offers the same pleasures and the same opportunities to use pace, the speed of your talking, and cadence, the rhythmic flow of your words, to add to the interest, the meaning, and the force of what you say.

Consider, for example, a good storyteller or even just someone who tells a joke well. A good deal of his mastery lies in the way he controls and varies pace and cadence to match the various moments and movements of the story, from exposition to dramatic conflict, climax, and resolution.

In everyday life, how fast someone talks gives us a plethora of signals about what he or she is saying – its meaning, its urgency or importance, how the speaker feels about it, and more. Likewise, the cadence of speech can captivate us or bore us. Much English poetry, including the plays of Shakespeare, follows the cadence of iambic pentameter: a line of five iambs, each one made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). For example:

When I do count the clock that tells the time …

(the opening line of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 12)

Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?

(the famous line about Helen of Troy in Marlowe’s play, “Dr. Faustus”)

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

(the last two lines of Tennyson’s poem, “Ulysses”)

The modern American playwright David Mamet has observed that iambic pentameter is actually the natural cadence of spoken English, including the highly idiomatic and often profane dialogue he writes for his own plays. In any case, it is the skillful variation in cadence that distinguishes the art of Shakespeare and
other great poets and playwrights. Listening to an endless march of pure iambic pentameter, or any other regularly cadenced language, would put us to sleep if it didn’t drive us crazy first.

The Pause

In speech, like in music, the strategic absence of words has special meaning, too. In my experience, the pause is the most overlooked and neglected oratorical tool among all but the most expert business and professional presenters. Silence is enormously powerful. It can bring the wandering attention of an audience back to you. It can underline the last thing you said, or build anticipation for the next thing you say. It can even get a laugh.

“Variety is the Spice of the Spoken Word.”

It’s a lesson every speaker must learn – and it applies to all the dimensions of vocalization. In volume, pitch, pace, and cadence, variety is your greatest ally. Keep in mind how we describe a speaker who has bored us. We say that “she droned” – meaning that her voice seemed never to vary in volume or pitch. Or, saying that “he went on and on” or spoke in a singsong way, we mimic (and ridicule) the unvaried cadence that made it seem like the speaker had no feeling for what he or she was saying – and would never finish.

Mastering the music of speech is a matter of long practice. As with real music, it takes a well-trained ear in addition to a well-tuned instrument. But, just as with real music, you don’t have to play everything from memory. In the theater, actors commonly mark up their scripts with various performance notes while they’re rehearsing and memorizing their lines. They might underline certain words they want to emphasize or treat in some other special way … make a note about their intentions with a certain line … and use notations for passages where they want to pause, accelerate, or slow down, turn up the volume or lower it. Especially when you’re going to be presenting from a verbatim script (on paper or a teleprompter), you can “score” your script in the same way.

Taking Care of Your Voice

When practicing your vocal technique, rehearsing a presentation, or just in the everyday use of your voice, it’s important to take care of it. Talking is hard work, and voices get tired just like any other muscle that’s used so much. When you feel your voice getting raw or raspy, when your jaws start to ache or your lungs start to feel tired, stop and be quiet, and give your vocal instrument a rest.

Actors are notorious for the variety of their voice remedies. They range from the simple, mild tea and a bit of honey and lemon, to the extreme, bags full of lozenges and supplements. If and when you’re having trouble with your voice, I suggest the following steps:
Make sure you’re supporting your voice with your lungs.

Think of your voice box as the light bulb and your diaphragm as the power plant.

Get some vocal rest.

Silence is a great healer. But don’t think you’re sparing your voice by whispering! Whispering is actually very hard on the vocal chords.

When you’re losing your voice...

...take a long hot shower or place a towel over your head and breathe from a bowl of steaming hot water. Or simply breathe the steam from a cup of tea, preferably Throat Coat. Among lozenges, I’ve found those containing zinc are most effective.

Chill out and warm up.

The day before a big presentation, see if you can take more “quiet time” than usual to give your voice some rest; in any case, don’t go to a concert or sporting event and scream your lungs out. And before going on in front of your audience, always give your voice a chance to warm up, either with a set of vocal exercises or by rehearsing a portion of your speech.

Speaking Into the Microphone

Most of us have had the excruciating experience of watching and listening as a speaker fought with a microphone and lost. The tall one who hunched over and twisted his head unnaturally in an effort to make contact with the audience, because the mike was too low and he didn’t take the time, or know how, to raise it. The one who manhandled the mike or chewed on it, making explosive sounds that jarred both the audience and himself. The one who stood back, intimidated by the device yet trusting it to carry her message, when all the while the mike, let alone the audience, had no chance of picking up her too-soft voice.

In short, a microphone can present you with a classic victor-versus-victim choice. Will you use it to your advantage or be defeated by it?

Microphones come in many varieties – on a stand, attached to a lectern (usually by a flexible neck), hand-held, hung around your neck or clipped to your lapel – and if public speaking is part of your professional life, you’ll probably have to deal with each kind someday.

Six inches is the rule.

When using a mike on a stand or lectern, adjust it so that it’s about six to ten inches from your face and below your chin. A lavaliere or clip-on mike should be placed about six inches below your chin and at or close to the center at your sternum (if
it’s pinned aside on one lapel, every time you turn your head the other way your voice will fade out).

**Speak to the audience. Not the microphone.**

In any case, remember that a microphone is designed to pick up your voice as it travels toward the audience. Speak to them, not to the mike. Talk just as you would if you didn't have a microphone, and let the technician monitoring the sound system adjust the volume to you. Just avoid hitting your consonants too hard, especially those popping p’s.

When you combine awareness of the quality and control of your voice with active practice, you will not only change your voice – you will change your power to persuade.