

Simple Practices for Impactful Stage Presence
Dr. Shannon Holmes, Associate Professor
Theatre, University of Regina

Your voice shapes how you are heard and how you are perceived. It's not a personality trait.

The state of your nervous system shows up in your voice. Calm, grounded bodies create clearer, more trustworthy sound.

Our goal is not to erase “nerves” but to teach our bodies and nervous systems that we are not under threat and learn to work with the “charge” that comes from being in front of an audience.

Tension patterns (physical or mental) affect your voice and your ability to speak with impact. You can't address any vocal issues without working with the body.

The breath is the fuel source for the voice—anything that inhibits the breath (such as physical tension) will impact vocal expression.

An easy way to remember this is “Vocal Math”: If the body isn't free, the breath can't be free, and if the breath isn't free, the voice can't be free.

Tone, pace, and rhythm matter. Variety in your vocal expression helps listeners stay connected.

Know what you want to say — don't just recite it. Let the ideas live in your body before they become sound.

You are not talking at people — you are connecting with them.

Real change comes from embodied practice, not just tips. Practice is how your system learns.

Exercises:

- Start where you are! And how do you know where you are? Check in with yourself. This can be as involved as a dedicated mediation session or as simple as sitting in car in silence and taking three breaths as you “check in” with yourself- assessing what you might need for a warm up that day. This may include acknowledging any specific tensions you may be holding (physically and/or mentally) and/or assessing your energetic state.
- Start with your body (remember the “vocal math equation”!). You will want to stretch/attend to any specific places that may feel particularly tight. Stretching out our intercostals (rib cage), neck, and jaw tend to be good places to start as they tend to be places that, if tight can interfere with a free vocal expression.
- Go to the breath Try a Giggle/Sob exercise to feel the connection to the transverse muscle. Do an extended exhale on a voiced breath (ss, ff, vv or sh) moving the breath in a steady manner.
- Yawn and sigh! This may be both the easiest and the most impactful exercise you do. Not only does yawning stretch some key muscles used in vocal production but the sighing allows you to do some easy vocalization AND it calm your nervous system.
- Begin some gentle “phonation” (sound produced by the vocal folds). This can include humming, lip trills, and “fluffy sounds”.
- Extend these sounds to include your range. Swoop from your lowest comfortable pitch to your highest in a playful way.
- Play with resonance. Bring the sound into your chest and feel the vibration there. Now move it into your “mask.” Imagine the sound coming out of your “third eye”— forward-placed sound projects better. By focusing the sound there, you will avoid trying to push from your throat.
- Wake up your articulation. Any tongue twisters work great, or even phrases you use in class can be used. Over-articulate the consonants.