

# Perception exercise 3

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## **Constriction and retraction**

### **Step 1. Constriction levels**

The false vocal folds constrict when we strain or grunt. Let's experience this by putting too much tension on our bodies like so. Tighten your abdomen as hard as you can (as when lifting something weighty) and notice the effect on your throat. You should be able to feel tension spreading and your throat getting tight. Keep this in mind and assess an effort number.

Try tensing again, but this time with less pressure (a smaller effort number). Again, you should note that there's something wrong and uncomfortable, but not as extreme as before. Now, this may resemble a tight throat as when singing ineffectively. Depending on your psychological distress, the intensity of your vocal task and your technique, you will constrict more or less and squeeze your vocal folds to a certain degree.

The sensation may be that something inside your throat is pushing down and in while the air is forcefully pushed up from your abdomen, trying to break apart that ceiling. This should be avoided at all costs for it causes hoarseness, nodules and other vocal issues that put your singing career at risk.

### **Observation!**

Don't overdo this step. Its purpose is to make you aware that there are different gradients of constrictions and that you should recognise and avoid all of them when singing. Discomfort in your throat when using your voice is a warning sign that your technique needs improvement.

### **Step 2. Retraction of the false vocal folds**

Breathe through your nose while keeping your ears covered. Listen carefully and observe the inhaling and exhaling sounds that occur. Try and imagine the path made by the air when it rushes in your lungs and gets expelled afterwards. Now, breathe the same way again, but this time without making any noise. Notice what changes.

For starters, it is not as easy, in the sense that you had to focus and put a little work into making it happen. Secondly, did you feel a new sense of space in your throat and something moving out of the way? This is the feeling of retraction. The false vocal folds

don't interfere by closing up the airway, and when sound is employed, the vocal folds can function optimally (if the retraction state is maintained).

### **Observation!**

It is essential to understand that retracted it is not the same with relaxed or loose. It is more challenging to remain retracted, and many times, it doesn't come naturally to people. Retracting the false vocal folds should be practised to build muscle memory and being able to recognise the presence/absence of this action in your singing.

### **Step 3. Retracting some more, an alternative to step 2**

Another tool you may use when working on retraction is to think about implementing a silent laugh or a silent cry throat posture. Think about something that makes you smile inside. Allow the sensation to expand down your throat, noticing the space you can create. You should aim in keeping that throat open and avoid squeezing your vocal folds (when producing sound).

The final action is to add sound to this sensation. Let the silent cry develop into a laugh on different words like "ha-ha", "ho-ho" etc. Focus on keeping an adequate body posture and on what we previously discussed. If your throat starts feeling displeasing or itchy when you add sound, it means that you constricted. Repeat the previous steps and allow yourself time to grasp this sensation and proper muscle coordination.

### **Final thoughts**

Do you need to use retraction all the time? Yes, in most singing situations you do because it allows your vocal folds to move freely during vibration. So, if you endeavour a tense throat when singing, start by checking if you have retracted your false vocal folds before looking at some other technical issue.

Remember to address the psychological factors, especially when you are anxious and struggle with stage fright. Our bodies are actually trying to shield us when employing these protective mechanisms. This way, it tells us that something isn't functioning optimal and that you need to stray away from this dangerous path. Also, constriction happens more frequently when the vocal demands are greater (singing high and powerful, for instance).

The lack of proper technique determines singers to push their voices and squeeze the vocal folds to force out the notes. They need to adjust their singing approach and fight that natural urge to strain for more difficult singing tasks because it is not sustainable. The solution? The amount of effort concentrated in that squeezing and pushing needs to go somewhere else; physical actions like supporting and controlling the airflow, resonance strategies like placement, twang or other vital aspects that are missing from your technique.