

Let's get started!

Here are the first couple steps (your homework for the next week):

1. Do some self exploration to find what style is right for you.

This isn't going to happen overnight, but your first step would be simply to ask yourself, “what kind of music do I naturally like to sing?”. Take some time to think of some songs that you like to “sing along” with when listening. Perhaps there's a song that you sing regularly at karaoke? Maybe you play little guitar and you've sung a handful of songs at parties or campfires? Or maybe there was a song you sang for a random occasion and somebody may have commented on it, saying, “hey, you sounded pretty good”. Sing what feels good to you! This process may take years, or you may know from the beginning that you were meant to sing the blues.

2. Pick a few songs that you would like to focus on for the next little while.

Start making a list of songs that you either like, would like to sing, have sung, would like to sing again etc. You will notice that your choices may change over time as you start to hear songs on the radio, or remember some you used to sing, but that's why you've made a list of all the possible choices! Eventually, as you start to experiment with some, you will narrow it down to a couple songs you will be working on for a while. If you find that your choices fluctuate over time as you continue on with the rest of the exercises and strategies I lay out for you, you can just start at the beginning with each song and go through the steps. This exploration is going to help you land on what's right for you.

This is a REALLY important note. Pick songs that are in your range! I cannot stress this enough. Countless times I have dealt with a brand new singer who wanted to perform a Josh Groban song! First of all, Josh is a tenor, which is an incredibly awkward range for most amateur men, and doesn't translate well to women's voice unless you are a very high soprano or low alto. Changing the key is possible, but it's a little harder to find a backing track. That said, Youtube has a wealth of karaoke tracks, sometimes in different keys. If you play an instrument and can transpose keys, that also works well. You can then learn what keys “work for you”. Songs that express a vocal range over an octave (from middle C to higher C) are difficult for most new singers. Don't discourage yourself by setting the bar too high. Choose songs that you can sing comfortably after a short warm up and that don't cause you to “stretch” too much. Keep those other songs as goals to aspire toward.

3. Listen to some singers that you really like.

Try to figure out what it is exactly that you like about them. Some singers you will find don't improvise much on melodies, but they have such naturally beautiful voices that they are great singers anyways. Other singers like Ella Fitzgerald, Mariah Carey, Michael Buble and Christina Aguilera for example, go out of their way to improvise and show off their major player vocal skills. You may also hear a jazz singer whose bluesy nuances are enough to make your spine tingle. Listen to all of them, and even if just for a moment, try to sing like them. This will help you explore ways to make your voice sound slightly different – anything from a sultry “Look of Love” to the upbeat “I Will Survive”. Record Yourself singing to the songs with your voice at a slightly higher volume level than the voice of the prerecorded songs so that you can hear yourself. This may be a good indicator as to where your natural singing style lies.

Vocal Quality

Before we get into any practicing, this is an important note about vocal quality. If you are a musician, perhaps you are technically good, but lack the natural voice. On the other hand, perhaps you have a beautiful sounding voice, but don't have the technical knowhow. Maybe you have neither and are just trying to figure out if singing is your thing. Either way, the **SOUND QUALITY** of your voice is more important than technical ability if you want to sing solo. So “get out of your head” and really listen to and feel your voice when you sing.

A singer's sound quality is a combination of support, tone (the actual sound quality) and pitch (singing in tune). You can sing beautifully, but if you sing off-key everyone will cringe and run away. Also, if you sing in tune, but your voice sounds harsh, a similar reaction will occur. If you sing with no support, no one will hear you. It's about finding the balance between these aspects which is way more important than any technical skills.

With this in mind, practice and record yourself singing your warm-ups then use the recordings to listen to your vocal quality and increase your musical skills. If you don't listen and critique your own performance, you will never catch the slight changes in tone, tuning and technique that will always happen as you are dealing with something new. Once again, it is 100% possible to master the exercises while still not reaching your ideal sounding voice. Don't set yourself up for that trap.

A singer is much better off keeping a melody simple and comfortable than trying to add a bunch of technical fluff. If you really don't like the sound of your singing on recordings, there is a reason. A big part of it is self-criticism as well, so you be the judge on what you think actually sounds good and what sounds just bad. It works if you pretend it's someone else's voice so you can determine whether you would listen to them or not. Go easy on yourself at the beginning, and try to listen for the potential just like a teacher would.

To emphasize the difference in sound quality, pick a short melody from a familiar song and sing it on “la”. Now try to sing it as though the sound is coming from your nose. Then try to sing it simply through your mouth, then through your throat, then your chest and then your belly. Then finally, imagine your entire torso as a giant speaker that emanates the entire sound to the world. Did you notice a difference in your sound quality? If it helps, pretend you are an opera singer, singing out to the people at the back of the room. That usually helps open up the airways! Imagining your torso as a giant speaker or imagining yourself as an opera singer can work wonders for tricking your brain into knowing how to project your voice.

You hear many singers talk about “head voice vs chest voice”. There is also a method called SLS singing that tries to minimize the difference between the two but that is not taught here. Start singing an exercise in a comfortable range while slowly working your way up through the warmup. There will be a point where your voice “breaks” and you may naturally move into your head voice, or your voice may cut out altogether. The head voice sounds different and possibly softer in volume. For men it is called a “falsetto”. Transitioning between these two voices quickly can be tricky at first, but once again it comes with practice. Just be aware for now that these two entities exist and as you practice, you will start to find ways to make them sound more similar to each other and transition easier between the two.

Most importantly, open your mouth! I have had students who sing with their mouths practically closed and I have no idea how they do it. Normally I find that it is because they are not comfortable expressing themselves quite yet, but with time, everyone can figure it out.

The key of a song is quite important, so pay attention to your preferred keys when you have the chance. I'm most comfortable singing in the keys of Ab through Eb, with an occasional stretch in either direction. I can sing soprano notes, but prefer alto keys, which would be similar to bass. Soprano and tenor are more likely to sing in keys E through A.

Posture and Warming Up

This is a point that I cannot emphasize enough: in every moment that you are singing, be mindful of your body. As you work through these exercises, you'll notice that as you reach the extremes of your vocal range, you may start to compensate for it with your body and face. For example, you might be tightening your neck muscles or changing your stance, even "lifting" your body. These are all ways to compensate for what you're singing and will develop bad habits that can cause you physical harm. If you need to force it, you're either doing it wrong or you're not quite ready to sing it. Below are a few ways to help correct bad habits.

1. Check out your posture in the mirror. In fact, I recommend you do most of your singing in front of the mirror at the beginning. If you watch yourself while singing, you can catch some of these mistakes and perhaps become more comfortable with yourself along the way. You can also watch your face and learn to avoid the scrunchy "concentration face".

2. Imagine your entire torso from the bottom of your hips to your collarbone as a huge amplifier that sends your sound out into world, instead of trying to sing from your throat or chest. Keep your face, mouth, neck, chest and shoulders relaxed while keeping your abdominal muscles lightly engaged. You should be able to lightly punch yourself in the stomach while singing and not have it stop your voice. Just don't hurt yourself!

3. Many people nowadays don't breathe deeply enough. It seems we spend most of our time stressed-out, in a hurry and forget how to stop and breathe. Use the following exercises before every practice, or as a stand-alone practice to help you breathe deeper. Sit or stand and do these for as long as you want.

Lastly, always make sure your jaw is relaxed!

1. Placing your breath

Put your hands around your waist with your thumb around back in the soft spot between your bottom rib and hip bone. Breathe deeply and notice how your breath feels. Now try breathing into the area where your thumb is sitting. The goal is to feel the movement of your breath all the way down to your hips! Do you feel any movement in your thumb? Take a couple more breaths and imagine the breath going all the way down the bottom of your torso. Still don't feel any movement? Don't worry this can take quite some time, but feeling the breath all the way down to your lower back is the goal. So practice deep breathing!

2. Breathing deeper

There are a couple breathing techniques that I use to help students breathe deeper. One is the Darth Vader breath. Basically, try to make the sound of Darth Vader's breath through his mask just by lowering the tone of your own breath while you breathe in. Essentially you are trying to hit the lowest note possible while breathing in, but without singing. In contrast, imagine you are going to say "Hi" and try breathing in again. You should notice a big difference in the tone of your breath. We are always aiming for the lower sounding breath.

Another option is to purse your lips and pretend you are sipping through a straw that goes straight down to your bellybutton, then draw in a nice deep breath all the way down to your hips. Start with trying to fill the bottom of your lungs first and then the top. The ideal breath while singing will be a combination between the two; a deep, focused and quick breath in between phrases to maximize the amount of air needed to support your vocals.

2. Hum-mm-aahh

This is a great exercise for those who are completely new to singing or have never worked on tuning before. It helps to fine tune your ear and vocal cords to certain pitches. Start by humming a note, then open your mouth while keeping your tongue raised toward the soft palate, as though saying an “ng” sound, then open your palette to sing a full “aahh”. I usually hold the humms for 2 seconds each, and the full “aahh” for 4 seconds, catch my breath, then continue up to the next note.

3. Mi,meh,ma,moh,moo

This exercise may seem tedious, but it's also the most critical in developing your vocal tone, ear and vibrato. As you are singing the sustained vowels, pay attention to how each one sounds. Are there some vowels that sound “nicer” than others? Does your voice sound good? Are you trying vibrato? Are you having trouble sustaining your breath? Ultimately your goal is to have nice sounding, sustained vowels.

Do this exercise two different ways. One where you hold the vowel (aah or maah) for the entire note, two where you cycle through the vowels faster on each note.

Extra challenge! To add another challenge to this exercise, try adding some vibrato. If you're not sure how to do it, listen to some opera singers. Hear how it sounds. It's essentially just a way to manipulate the air flow to make it sound more dynamic. Do it whatever way works for you and eventually you will develop your own vibrato. You can also change volume levels, start soft, get louder, and end soft, or start soft and end loud and vice versa. Also, try changing how you end each note or phrase. Is it a sudden, short ending or a gradual fade out? Play around with your options. How you end your notes is something most people dismiss, but it's just as important as how you start them!

4. Long notes

This is similar to the previous exercise, the biggest difference being starting on a vowel sound instead of a consonant sound. It is a lot easier to start on a consonant because it defines when the sound starts. Try singing “maaah”, then just “aahhh” and notice the difference. You might even start your “aaahh” with a “glottal stop”. This is a bad habit. If you can't feel the difference, sing “aaah”, then keeping your mouth open, stop the sound by cutting off the air using the muscles at the back of your throat. This is the muscle we DON'T want to use to start our vowels. Now try stopping the air just by controlling how much comes out of your lungs. Now try again, sing “aah”, and try to stop and start the sound purely by manipulating the airflow with your diaphragm, sort of like flexing your ab muscles. This may feel weird and tricky, but it's important if you want to sing properly. This takes time so have patience with yourself. The other bad habit, is starting the vowels with “h”, like “haaa”, especially once getting into higher vocal ranges, but the “haaa” sound is better than the glottal stop, so if you need to do one for now, choose the “haa”.

You may have noticed that as you go higher in pitch your voice quality changes. For women we call this the difference between the lower (chest) voice and higher (head) voice. Your chest voice is your normal speaking voice and your head voice is the upper range that one would imagine opera singers and Disney princesses singing in. For men, the upper voice is called falsetto and has a very different quality. Singing in falsetto comes and goes in popularity, but there are a lot of singers who use it today. It was very popular among black male R&B singers in the 60's through to the 80's, think “Earth,Wind and Fire” or the end of “Stairway to Heaven”.