

Breathing for a Better Band

Dr. David Earll, Willson Tuba Artist
Assistant Professor of Tuba, Euphonium, & Trombone
University of Wisconsin-Platteville, earlld@uwplatt.edu
www.davidearll.com

Purpose:

The goal of these exercises and this training is not only to improve the overall tone quality, coordination, and flexibility of your wind players, but to ultimately make playing and music-making an easier and enjoyable activity for your students.

Golden Rules for Breathing:

1. Always Stay Relaxed – Tension Kills Tone
2. Always Immediately Apply Exercises for a Musical Benefit
3. Don't Be a Hero! – Avoid Fighting through Dizziness

The 3 Categories of Exercises:

- I. **Stretches** – physical activity designed to ready the body for breathing
- II. **Therapies** – demanding exercises designed to extend or improve your capacity, strength, and stamina for breathing and make playing easier as a result.

Remember: Therapies do not use the same sort of air and effort that we use when playing, they are designed to overwork our breathing!

- III. **Flow Studies** – relaxed exercises designed to emulate the sort of air we use when playing our instruments.

The order of these exercises is important, and performing exercises in this order will help to set you and your band up for success!

When to Use Breathing Exercises:

1. A quick part of the band warm-up, especially if your percussionists are still getting set up for the rehearsal.
2. During rehearsal transitions, especially if it will take a few minutes for the percussion section to reset and move to new instruments.
3. For quick fixes and tone improvement in rehearsal (Seated Flow studies are best for this).
4. In pre-contest warm-ups, especially if your center is running behind or in those pesky 'hurry-up-and-wait' times.

Stretches:

General Concepts:

- Most stretches start from a relaxed position with your feet placed about shoulder-width apart.
- *The goal of all stretches is to reduce tension!* If you find yourself growing more tense or feeling pain as a result of a stretch, stop and try a gentler approach.
- While heavy or engaged breathing is not always necessary in stretches, sometimes it can be immensely beneficial to start some early exercises while stretching that will help lead you into the therapies.

Trunk Twist (Loosening the Torso and Lower Back)

- Raise your hands to shoulder level.
- Gently twist back and forth, striving to meet the same point behind you with each twist.
- Raise your arms above your head and repeat, then lower your arms and repeat.

Shoulder Stretch (Loosening the Shoulders, Arms, and Neck)

- Place your right arm across your chest, and pull further across your chest with your left hand.
- Begin to breathe deeply, and with each exhalation pull your arm a bit further across your chest.
- Repeat with the opposite arm.

Wrist Grab (Stretching the Upper Back, Shoulders, and Neck)

- Placing both arms behind your back, grab your right wrist with your left hand.
- Pull your right arm to the left, and allow your head to lean to the left.
- After taking a relaxing breath, allow your body to lean to the left.
- Now that you are leaning, continue with deep relaxing breaths and allow yourself to lean further to the left with each exhalation while keeping both feet planted firmly on the ground.
- After leaning as far as is comfortable, straighten and repeat the exercise with the opposite arm and in the opposite direction.

The “Ughhhh-I-Hate-That-Stretch” (Stretching the Lower Back, Mid Torso)

- Put your right elbow behind your head, patting yourself with an open hand between your shoulders.
- Grab your right elbow with your left hand.
- Gently pull your elbow to the right, and lean to the right with your pull.
- Take deep, relaxing breaths, and allow yourself to lean further to the right with each exhalation.
- When you just can't stand it anymore, repeat this exercise with the opposite elbow and in the opposite direction.

Two Way Stretch (Stretching Upper/Lower Torso, Shoulders, and Back)

- Plant your feet firmly shoulder width apart and reach as high as you can with your hands.
- Begin to take deep, relaxed breaths. With each exhalation, plant your feet more firmly on the ground and reach even higher.

Flop Over (Stretching Viscera, Chest, and Back) best from the Two Way Stretch!

- Bend over from your hips, allowing your arms to hang loose and your head to hang towards the floor (no need to lock your knees!).
- Breathe in and out deeply, and allow your head and arms to drop lower with each exhalation.
- You may notice a tendency for your upper body to rise as you inhale, which is totally natural.

Eee to Oh (Stretching out our Tongue and Jaw)

- Say the word “key,” and observe what happens to your tongue, then contrast and say the word “bow” and observe the difference.
- Work your way between these two vowel shapes with rapid and full inhalations and exhalations, ending on a relaxed and open “Oh” shape.
- Because we can't see what our tongues are doing while we play, join this breathing with hand gestures – Closed fist for the tight “Eee” shape to an open hand for the open “Oh” shape.

Therapies:

General Concepts:

- Therapies are designed to overwork you (in order to ultimately make breathing and playing your instrument easier). DO NOT approach your instrument with this type of breathing!
- Because these exercises are more strenuous than conversational breathing, it is important to make sure that you return to a *relaxed state of body* after each exercise. Some of these exercises will incorporate a bit of tension, don't carry that to your Flow Studies or to your instrument!
- Be very careful to keep your knees relaxed, and don't let them lock!
- After *every* Therapy, take a *deep, cleansing, and relaxing* breath.
- Therapies are some of the first exercises to cause students to get a bit dizzy, be careful to monitor yourself and don't be a hero!

5-15-5 (Designed to expand your usable vital capacity)

- Inhale for 5 counts, getting as full as is comfortably possible, and then suspend that air.
- Sip in air for an additional 15 counts, expanding beyond your initial "comfortably full," without going to a point of pain.
- Release the air with a relaxed breath for 5 counts.

Leaky Chunks (Designed to train your inhalation/exhalation muscles)

- Exhale all of your air until you feel completely empty.
- Using the back of your hand, create a loose seal at your lips and inhale against this barrier while getting as full as you can in 4-7 counts.
- Release the seal and fill up completely.
- Take two further sips of air, and then blow out the air firmly using 2 big chunks.
- When you feel as though can no longer support a full breath on the exhale, push your remaining air out with a hiss.

In, Sip, Sip – Out, Push, Push (Expanding usable vital capacity)

- Inhale to your full capacity in 1 count and then sip beyond your “comfortably full,” capacity for 2 more counts, lifting your arms higher and higher with each count.
- Exhale as much as possible in 1 count and then push beyond your empty capacity for 2 more counts, pushing your arms lower and lower with each count.
- Repeat this exercise 5-10 times in direct succession.

Sumo Breath/Power Breathing (Training inhalation/exhalation muscles)

- Plant your feet firmly “sumo-width” apart.
- Start with your hands together in front of you, and pull them outwards and apart as you inhale to your full capacity in 1 count.
- Clap your hands back together as you exhale all of your air in 1 count.
- Repeat the exercise 4-8 times in direct succession.
- *Beware! This therapy has a knack for making people dizzy!*

The Body’s Natural Breath (Demonstrates a healthy and relaxed oral shape)

- Start by taking several deep, relaxed, and cleansing breaths.
- Exhale all of your air, getting as close to completely empty as possible.
- Count out loud to 20, pushing more air out with each count.
- After you reach 20, allow yourself to take a deep breath.
- Observe what you naturally do when you “need” a big breath:
 - Where is the tongue?
 - How does the throat feel?
 - How does the jaw feel?
- Aim to maintain the feeling of that “needed” breath and bring that same relaxed shape into your flow studies.

Flow Studies:

General Concepts:

- Flow Studies are best for finishing your exercises, and should be followed directly with playing for the biggest effect on tone quality.
- These exercises emulate the same sort of air that we use to play our instruments, and as such should be performed with the focus of remaining relaxed.
- Flow Studies are most beneficial when we learn to treat our general breathing state as our new musical sensation of being empty.
- There are 4 noteworthy components to focus on in a healthy breath:
 - Relaxed “Oh” Shape in Oral Cavity
 - Making the Inhale/Exhale Even and Steady
 - Keeping your Air in Constant Motion
 - Focus on the Gentle Transition from In to Out
- Try using the stretch “Eee to Oh” as a way to make sure that your oral shape is open and relaxed before doing Flow Studies.

The Windmill (controlling slow moving air)

- Breathe in for 6 counts and out for 6 counts.
- Slowly raise your arms out from your sides and above your head as you inhale, until they are directly above your head when you’ve reached 6.
- Lower your arms in the same motion as you exhale, reaching your sides again when you have finished the 6 counts of exhalation.
- Repeat this exercise again for 7, 8, 9, and 10 counts, slowing the breath rate with each repetition of the exercise.

Practical Dynamics (simulating the motion of air for different dynamics)

- Start off with *p* and *pp* dynamics, and imagine that you are using your breath to keep a paper airplane aloft. Draw your breath in and release in a long, steady stream of gentle air.
- Next, try *mp* and *mf* dynamics, simulating the energy it would take to throw a ball or a dart. Draw the breath in and release in a mid-energy burst.
- Lastly, try *f* and *ff* dynamics, and think of the power behind a bow and arrow. Draw your breath in and release a powerful torrent of air with one smooth motion.

Monitored Flow (musically driven exercises that allow for measured success)

- While inhaling, place your index finger across your lips. This interference will allow for you to hear the deep resonant sound that comes with a healthy and relaxed oral shape.
- While exhaling place your palm in front of your air flow and feel carefully for consistency in your column of air. It should almost feel like you are washing your hands.
- After getting the hang of this motion, begin breathing in and out for 4 counts.
- Slowly alter the number of counts to longer and shorter lengths (even subdivisions like eighth notes and sixteenth notes), focusing on the 4 components in a healthy breath and striving to remain totally relaxed.
- A great tempo for this exercise is between 68-76 bpm.

Wind Patterning (direct musically driven air study)

- Using the type of air we have been practicing in the exercises above, model how you would play musical passages. Incorporate tonguing, musical gestures, phrase shapes, and more.
- This exercise is great for improving ensemble rhythm, attacks, and building uniform crescendi and decrescendi.
- Of all the studies in this packet, this is the easiest to quickly use in rehearsal for an immediate effect in less than a minute.

Many of these exercises come from The Breathing Gym and the pedagogy of Arnold Jacobs. For even more information and resources regarding these techniques, pedagogies, and publications, please go to www.focus-on-music.com.

