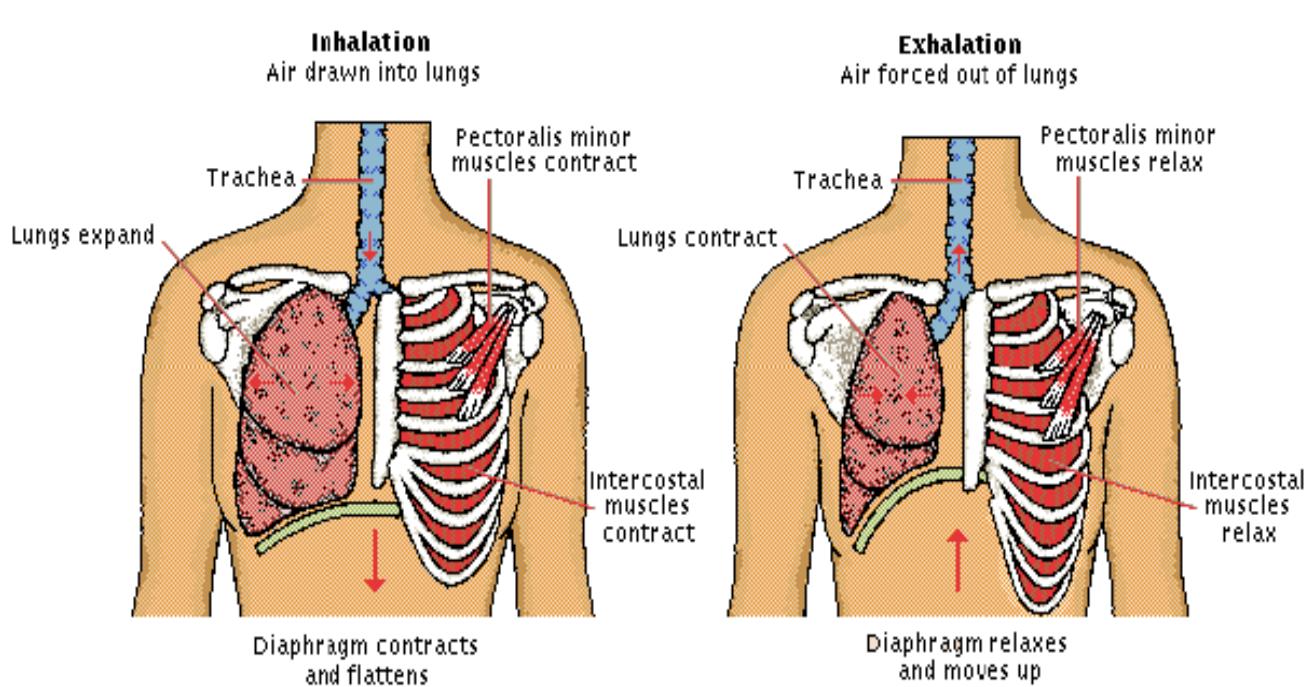


CORRECT BREATHING TECHNIQUES FOR BRASS AND WOODWIND PLAYERS

A) INTRODUCTION

- 1) The diaphragm is the primary muscle that controls breathing.
- 2) Even though there are other muscles involved, the diaphragm is the only muscle that you can and should control in this whole process.
- 3) For 'regular' breathing, it doesn't matter how much the diaphragm moves, or how much the chest expands.
- 4) However, in order to get enough air into your lungs to properly play a wind instrument, you must control the movement of the diaphragm and the expansion of the chest.
- 5) Improper diaphragm control will result in too little air in the lungs to support your sound, and improper use of the chest will result in the wrong muscles being used to blow the air through your instrument.
- 6) These problems result in poor sound quality, projection, articulation, intonation and endurance.
- 7) Even if you breathe correctly, the muscles must be stretched and strengthened in order to provide air in the necessary amount and force for you to play your instrument properly.



B) EXPLANATION

- 1) In the illustration above, you see normal everyday breathing. If you were to take a deep breath right now, this is what you would see – your chest would expand just like in the illustration. If you were to place your hand just below your ribs where your diaphragm is you would feel some, but not much, movement. This is fine for normal breathing but not nearly good enough for playing a wind instrument. Here's why:
- 2) When you breathe this way your lungs do not inflate to their maximum.
- 3) The muscles in your chest are not strong enough to properly power and control your instrument.
- 4) When you inhale correctly, your chest **does not** expand. Instead, your diaphragm continues to extend down into your abdomen, expanding there first. Then, and only then, your chest can inflate, but it isn't necessary. If you were to put your hand just below your ribs when you breathe this way you would feel your belly inflating, like a balloon, instead of your chest. The more you can achieve this, the better off you are. This is the proper way to breathe when you play and here's why:
 - a) When your diaphragm extends into your abdomen, your lungs can hold approximately three times as much air!
 - b) When the diaphragm pushes out the abdominal muscles they, of course, want to go back to their original position when you exhale. But, your abdominal muscles are many times stronger than your intercostal chest muscles, and you can therefore put much more air into your instrument with much more pressure.

C) APPLICATION

- 1) This part is really pretty easy if you inhale properly. Just make sure that you squeeze from your abdomen and not your chest like you usually would.
- 2) Keep your abdomen very firm. It should feel tight, like it does when you do crunches.
- 3) Keep your throat open and relaxed, just like when you yawn. If your throat closes up, even a little, it will interfere with your air stream, and this would be a waste of all of the effort in trying to breathe properly!
- 4) You **MUST** keep your embouchure as relaxed as possible. The reed and/or mouthpiece will do all of the work for you; just keep out of their way! Intonation and sound quality **ARE NOT** controlled by embouchure tension. It can play a part, but it is not something you should consider as a normal part of your playing.
- 5) Remember to start and end your notes with your diaphragm. This does two things:
 - a) It gives you complete control over the length of your notes.
 - b) It allows you to 'set' your air before the note begins. This makes articulation and accenting much easier as well as much better!
- 6) Don't breathe until you're out of air, or until the phrase calls for it. Learn to hold the air pressure in, especially in articulated passages.
- 7) If you still have air left in your lungs when you breathe again, remember to try to get rid of it first. Otherwise it will just go stale in your lungs, and that is very uncomfortable!



- 8) When you get really good at breathing this way you will be able to control the amount of pressure you exert with your abdominal muscles and with your diaphragm separately. This is when your control of your sound will really take off! It takes time to get there, but it really is worth the trouble.

- 9) A few pointers here:
 - a) Tonguing is somewhat different for each instrument, but the breathing technique listed above is very effective. Don't let someone else's tonguing concepts interfere with this.
 - b) Even though it takes some time to master this type of breathing, you should notice an almost immediate improvement in your sound.
 - c) You might find yourself playing louder than normal. This is to be expected. When you're playing in concert band (indoors), you may have to hold back a bit, but when you are practicing at home – BLOW!! The more you use this technique, the better you get!
 - d) Woodwinds, you should expect your reeds to start to go crazy in about a month. When you start squeaking and losing control that means it's time to go up a reed size. You will probably end up about a full size stronger within 6 months.

D) PRACTICE EXERCISE

- 1) This exercise is really easy to do, and only requires about a half-hour a day. The best time to do it is while you're watching TV. Why? Because it is boring. It is very effective, but it is also boring (how's that for being real???).

- 2) You have to be consistent! You don't have to do the exercise for a long time to get results, but you have to do it 5-6 times a week for at least a month. Any less and success can't be guaranteed.

- 3) When you can, work in your tonguing with the breathing. Make each breath a series of stops and starts, instead of just one long exhalation.

- 4) This exercise is designed to strengthen your diaphragm and abdominal muscles. You will need to get some form of weights in 5 pound increments. It doesn't matter what you use – dumbbells, books, cans of food, bags of rice, small animals, shoes, whatever. ☺

- 5) Lie flat on your back and inhale. In this position, as your diaphragm extends into your abdomen, it (your abdomen) should go out instead of in (keep thinking of inflating a balloon – your abdomen is the balloon!). When you exhale, your abdomen should go in instead of out. At first, this will feel strange. Trust me, you'll get used to it!

- 6) All you need to do is breathe slowly and deeply, nothing else. When you work out your tonguing system, add this way of breathing, but make no other changes.

- 7) Your breathing will feel very shallow since you're no longer fighting the resistance of your ribcage. Don't worry; you're getting plenty of oxygen. In fact, you're getting more than you're used to getting. You might get dizzy, light headed or feel a "head-rush" while doing this exercise. This is normal. It goes away in a few days. In the mean time, hold on to something or someone when getting up!



- 8) For the first couple of days, just make sure that your abdomen is the only thing moving. Your chest **MUST** remain still. If your chest starts to move, stop and exhale! That's as far as your diaphragm can go for now. As it strengthens and stretches you will notice much deeper breaths. Be patient! If **you do this wrong you are wasting your time.**
- 9) When you're sure everything is moving properly, put 5 pounds of weight on your abdomen just below your ribs; nothing else changes. If you don't have any weights at home, a 5 pound bag of flour will work...so will any other household item that weighs 5 pounds.
- 10) When you remove the weight, you should feel a sense of relief. When the sense of relief stops, increase the weight by 5 more pounds.
- 11) When your abdomen is fully extended, you will feel the stretch all the way around to your back. Don't rush it! If you strain your diaphragm, you'll be in real pain for a couple of weeks.
- 12) By the end of one month or so you should be up to around 40 pounds of weight! If you're past that, it's ok. The more the better. That's why it's better to use heavy flat weights. You don't want a huge pile of books to come crashing down on your face! ☺
- 13) Remember to stay relaxed. The only tension should be in your abdomen. When the weight starts to go up you'll need to keep the muscles here tighter. That's a good thing. By the end, you should be able to tighten your abdominal muscles VERY strongly. You will also eventually be able to do this with your diaphragm as well. That takes a bit more time, but it does happen.

E) CONCLUSION

- 1) Remember to keep your abdomen tight when you play your instrument. How tight depends on the situation. The low register generally takes less pressure but much more airflow. The high register is the opposite, less airflow but much more air pressure. Notice I said "air" pressure, not "lip" pressure. This is where control of your diaphragm and abdominal muscles separately comes into play. You will learn through playing.
- 2) Remember to keep your embouchure relaxed. Try to let your air flow control everything.
- 3) Don't be afraid to experiment with this as you play. Since you learn by doing, the more different things you try the faster you'll learn.
- 4) Remember to always fill your instrument with air. A full sound is the only good sound. Any Band Director would rather have to ask you to play a bit softer than constantly be on your case to blow more.
- 5) You can do these exercises any time you feel the need to. If you ever have doubts that you're breathing correctly, just do the exercises again for a few days.
- 6) You may find that you stop breathing into your chest altogether. This is normal. In fact, it's the way you were designed to breathe so it's really better for you!

