

Marek Urbanowicz

Marek Urbanowicz has been published in a number of poetry magazines: *Frogmore Papers*, *morephrog*, *Poems on the Hill* (a Lewes anthology), *South* and also previous issues of *Agenda*. He attended the first 'Becoming a Poet' with the Faber Academy. He has been a qualified acupuncturist since 1979. He is currently completing an MA in Voice Studies at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London.

HOW TO IMPROVE READING YOUR POETRY

Here are a few basic voice-coaching tips that will improve the quality of a reading. This can be divided into three areas: preparation, practice and performance.

Preparation.

1. Remember to breathe since breath powers the voice.
2. Work on your alignment since posture affects breathing and vocal delivery.
3. Keep well hydrated by drinking 6-8 glasses of water per day and limit caffeine and alcohol intake.
4. Don't smoke as this will affect the health of the vocal folds.
5. Keep dairy products down to a minimum as this tends to produce catarrh which makes the voice sound more nasal.

Practice.

1. Do regular breathing exercises to improve breath control. An indicator of good diaphragmatic function is the ability to hold the breath for a minimum of 40 seconds.
2. Observe your alignment in a mirror. Is one shoulder higher? Are you twisted with the head to one side? Go to regular yoga, Pilates or Feldenkrais classes to improve your posture and musculo-skeletal organization.
3. Observe how your feet are placed. They should be hip width apart and parallel rather than splayed. Find a balanced and grounded position on your feet.
4. Practice regular vocal exercise warm ups which loosen the neck, spine, shoulder muscles, jaw and tongue. These are the instruments that help produce the voice.
5. Remember that the vocal folds (cords) are muscles and need exercise to keep them toned. Do regular voice exercises with the repetition of vowel sounds, consonants and tongue twisters.
6. Record yourself reading some poems and listen to them.
Read to friends with an objective ear who can give you constructive criticism.
Play with pitch, intonation, speed, pause and volume.
7. Familiarise yourself with the poem so that you 'connect' with it and can communicate the essence of it to the audience. Ideally learn it by heart but don't worry if this is beyond you.
8. Go to readings of poets and listen with a critical ear. Note what you think worked and what didn't.
9. Do plenty of readings. Practice makes perfect!.
10. Read Betty Mulcahy's excellent book *How to Speak a Poem* available on Amazon or other books on voice (Houseman, Berry, Carey etc.)
11. See a voice coach to improve your reading.

Performance.

1. Remember to do a ten-minute vocal warm up before the reading. If you can't do it at the venue, then allocate the time just before you leave or even do some basic vocal exercises in the car on the way to the reading.
2. Check out the venue before the reading. Get a friend to stand at the back of the room to make sure that you are audible. Outdoor venues are more challenging vocally as the sound has nothing to bounce off so you will need to speak more loudly.
3. Keep hydrated but remember that it takes 2 hours after you have drunk any water for it to affect the vocal folds. Don't drink alcohol before a reading (though enjoy a few afterwards!).
4. Above all enjoy reading. Engage with the audience and they will reciprocate.
5. After the reading, if you have gone with a friend, get their critical feedback. There's always room for improvement but don't be overly self-critical.

Marek Urbanowicz MA. MAc. MBAc. ICAK(UK)