

How to Sing in the Barbershop Style



Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Manual Overview](#)

[How to Stand with Proper Posture](#)

[How to Breathe Properly](#)

[How to Create Space and “Perching” the Sound](#)

[How to Shape Your Vowels and Diphthongs /Triphthongs](#)

[How to Perform Choreography as Part of a Chorus](#)

[How to Perform with “Barbershop Face”](#)

[Glossary](#)

Introduction

Barbershop is a beautiful musical style created in America. It has been called the original glee club for men by Time.com. Very few people have discovered the barbershop style and know the joy of listening to it. Even fewer know the joy of performing barbershop and the humbling moment of seeing it touch the lives of others through the experiences we create with the audience.

Manual Overview

By the end of this manual, you will be able to:

- Stand in chorus position
- Take a proper singer's breath
- Create vocal space
- "Perch" the sound
- Shape your vowels
- Sing diphthongs and triphthongs properly
- Perform choreography as part of a chorus
- Perform with "barbershop face"

How to Stand With Proper Posture



How to Stand With Proper Posture

Posture is an important part of any singing group. If you don't stand properly, you won't be able to breathe properly, and this will affect the way you sing. Let's build your posture from the ground up.

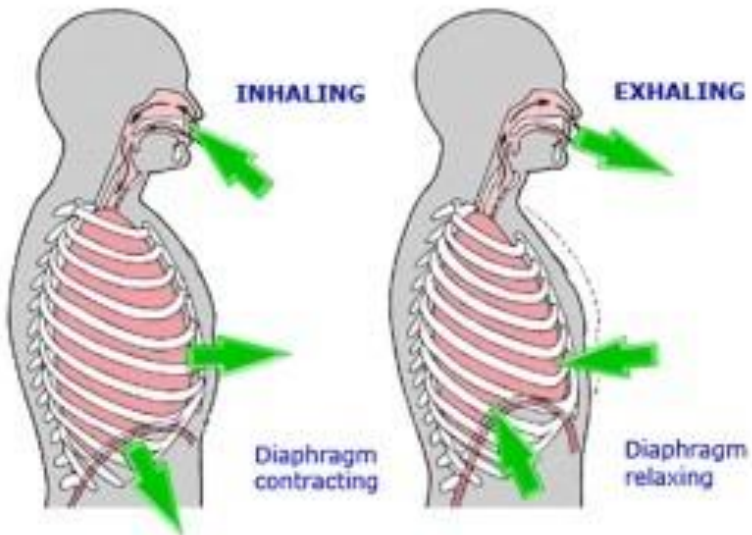
1. Stand with your feet about shoulder-width apart.
2. Place your **outside** foot slightly in front of the other pointing towards the director.
3. Angle your **inside** foot slightly towards the middle of the quartet/chorus.
4. Keep your knees in line with your ankles.
5. Keep your hips in line with your knees.
6. Bring your chest up and out slightly. This allows more room for your lungs to expand and makes you look proud of what you do.
7. Keep your head in line with your shoulders.
8. Shift your weight to the balls of your feet.

At the end, your posture should look like



this:

How to Breathe Properly



How to Breathe Properly

Breathing properly impacts more than just how long you can sing. It also influences musical phrasing, dynamics, and even your tuning. It's not a matter of learning, but rather re-learning, how to breathe properly.

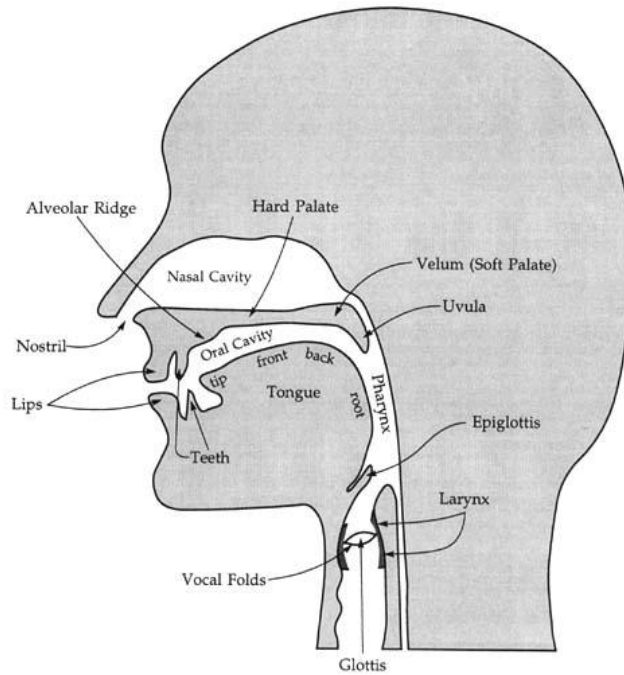
1. Place your hand on your stomach.
2. Expand your lungs downward as you breathe.
3. Feel your stomach expand outward as you breathe. You may also feel the expansion along your sides or in the small of your back.
4. Keep your shoulders still.

If you do this properly, your stomach will bulge out while your shoulders remain still. This will allow your lungs maximum room to expand and fill with



air.

How to Create Space and “Perching” the Sound



How to Create Space

Space is very important when you sing. It provides resonance that carries your voice throughout whatever space you’re singing in. It also makes your voice sound bigger. To create space, perform the following steps:

1. Lift your soft palate.
2. Open your throat.
3. Keep your larynx low.
4. Lower your jaw. Some vowels require this extra space sound that they sound correct to the audience and also match with the rest of your group.

The above steps can be replicated by yawning. Practice recreating the way that feels when you sing. For practicing keeping your larynx low, it can be helpful to practice in front of a mirror to watch it move.

In addition to this space, you also have smaller resonators in your nasal passages under your cheeks and forehead. You want to use these when you sing to get a rich, full sound out of your voice. Activating these resonators is very simple:

1. Lift your eyebrows.
2. Lift your cheeks.

This may feel funny to you at first. However, most of the time when you’re singing barbershop, you are also emoting, usually smiling or expressing sorrow. These steps can easily be incorporated into your facial expressions and will be covered in a later chapter.

“Perching” the Sound

Space is not enough on its own to create the kind of sound that is desired in barbershop. You will also have to **“perch the sound.”** In barbershop, you want your sound to be more forward than other singing styles. The following are some exercises that can be used to find the proper position in your mouth.

1. Sing as far back in your throat as you can.
2. Sing as nasally and as far forward as you can.
3. Sing about halfway in between the above steps. This should feel like the words are coming from the back of where your top teeth meet your gums.

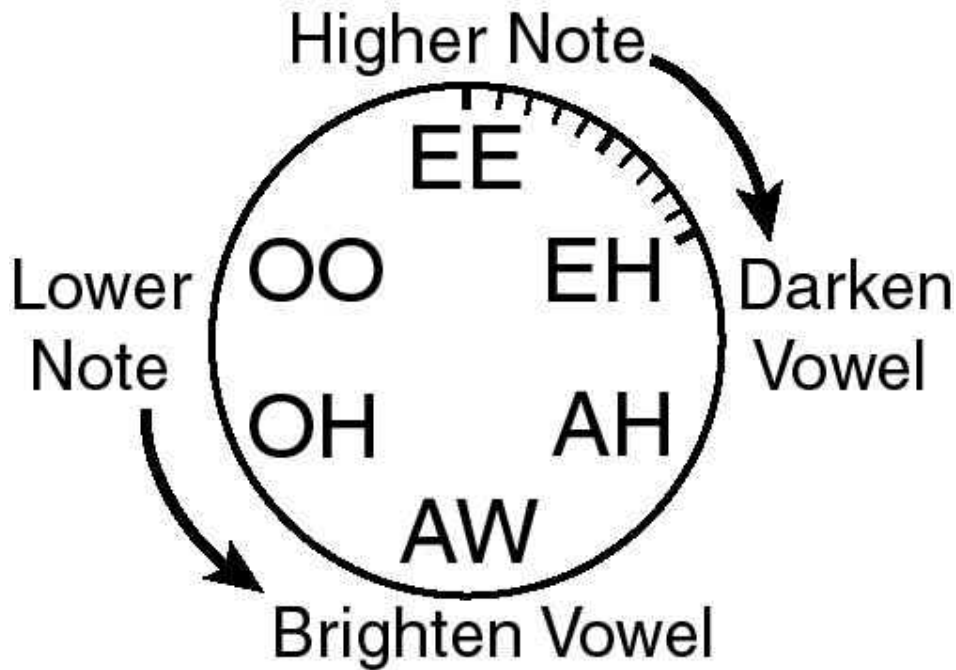
Another technique you can use is called bubbling.

1. Hum a pitch.
2. Switch to bubbling your lips.
3. Sing “wah.”

One of our coaches, Tony DeRosa, phrased it another way that was quite helpful: “sing above your [top] molars.” There are two ways to achieve this and you can use either one:

1. Visualize your voice staying above your molars.
2. Place your hands above your molars when you warm-up. Somehow, this automatically places your voice where it should be.

How to Shape Your Vowels and Diphthongs/Triphthongs



How to Shape Your Vowels

Vowel shape is very important. It affects how words sound, how you blend with the rest of your group, and even your tuning. Using some of these shapes may feel or sound strange to you, but the words will sound correct and clear to the audience. In any kind of singing, your goal is to sing the vowels for as long as possible. The consonants are only there to break up vowel sounds. There are currently twelve target vowels used in barbershop. These are the vowel sounds that you will hold.

- “Aw” vowel (as in “law”)
 1. Lower your jaw to create space.
 2. Keep the corners of your mouth tucked in.
 3. Keep the back of your tongue low.
 4. Keep your tongue at the base of your bottom teeth.
- “Ae” vowel (as in “hat”)
 1. Lower your jaw to create space.
 2. Keep the back of your tongue low.
 3. Keep the corners of your mouth tucked in.
 - i. Resist the tendency to make your mouth wider.
- “Ah” vowel (as in “calm”)
 1. Lower your jaw to create space.
 2. Keep your tongue at the base of your bottom teeth.
 - i. This vowel will feel slightly more forward than the “aw” vowel.
- “A” vowel (as in “may”)
 1. Lower your jaw to create space.
 2. Keep your corners tucked in.
 - i. Resist the tendency to make your mouth wider.
 3. Keep the back of your tongue just above your molars.
- “Oh” vowel (as in “rose”)
 1. Pucker your lips.
 2. Keep your lips rounded into a circle.
 3. Keep the back of your tongue low.
 4. Keep your tongue at the base of your bottom teeth.
- “Oo” vowel (as in “tune”)
 1. Pucker your lips.
 2. Keep your lips rounded into a circle. This should be a smaller circle than the “oh” vowel.
 3. Keep the back of your tongue low.
 4. Keep the front of your tongue at the base of your bottom teeth.
- “Oo” vowel (as in “book”)
 1. Keep your mouth small.
 2. Round your lips.
 3. Keep the back of your tongue low.
 4. Keep the front of your tongue at the base of your bottom teeth.
- “Ee” vowel (as in “king”)
 1. Keep the corners of your mouth tucked in.

2. Bring the back of your tongue towards the roof of your mouth to create a smaller opening.
 3. Keep the front of your tongue at the base of your front teeth.
- “Eh” vowel (as in “head”)
 1. Keep the corners of your mouth tucked.
 2. Keep the back of your tongue just above your molars.
 3. Keep the front of your tongue at the base of your bottom front teeth.
 - “Ih” vowel (as in “sit”)
 1. Start with the positioning for an “ee” vowel.
 2. Lower the middle of your tongue slightly. This may still sound like an “ee” vowel to you but will sound like “ih.”
 - “Uh” vowel (as in “love”)
 1. Start with the positioning for an “aw” vowel.
 2. Vocalize “uh” as in “sons” instead of “aw.”

Diphthongs and Triphthongs

A **diphthong** is when you have one vowel but two different vowel sounds. Think of the word “rose.” If you say the word slowly, you will notice the two vowel sounds: initially “oh,” the target vowel, and “oo,” the actual diphthong. Similarly, a **triphthong** is when you have one vowel but three vowel sounds. Think of the word “child.” If you say it slowly, you will notice three different vowel sounds: initially “ah,” the target vowel, then “eh,” the diphthong, and finally “ee,” the triphthong. There are very few words in English that don’t have diphthongs or triphthongs.

How do you handle diphthongs and triphthongs? The same way you handle consonants.

1. Hold the target vowel as long as possible.
2. Turn the diphthong/triphthong at the last second.
3. Continue to the consonants.

How to Perform Choreography as Part of a Chorus



How to Perform Choreography as Part of a Chorus

When you sing in a barbershop chorus, your chorus will most likely want to compete in district competitions to win a coveted spot in the international competition. When you compete, you will perform a **ballad** and an **up-tune**. The up-tune will always have choreography. If your chorus isn't interested in competing, they may still want choreography in one or two songs for when they perform to make it more interesting.

I can't tell you exactly how to perform choreography because your individual directors will probably want different things. However, I can provide a few tips that will help you perform better:

- Your mind will take your voice wherever it goes.
 - a. If you start thinking about, "I have to move my hand on this word, up to this angle, etc.," your singing will suffer. To prevent this, practice outside of rehearsal so that the choreography becomes second nature to you. Something else that helps solve this problem is the next tip.
- Perform with purpose.
 - a. If you do not have a reason behind the move ("because I have to do it" doesn't count), it will just look like a move. If there is passion and meaning behind your moves, it will add to the performance. The audience will know the difference.
- There is only one move.
 - a. Each move leads into the next, even if it's one move leading back into chorus position.

The following links will show you two different kinds of choreography. The first one is a song that the Vocal Majority sings regularly on their shows. The choreography for this song is fun and free at times. The second link is the up-tune they sang at the international competition in 2010. You'll notice that this has a lot more choreography than the first one.

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoiQUbcp8_M
 - a. Vocal Majority, "I'm On My Way"
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZP0mYTE8dw8>
 - a. Vocal Majority, "When that Midnight Choo Choo Leaves for Alabam"

How to Perform With “Barbershop Face”



How to Perform With “Barbershop Face”

Whether you are performing a ballad or an up-tune, you are never just singing. Barbershop is as much a visual art form just as much as a musical one. When we perform for others, we are telling a story. It is your job as a **barbershopper** to share this story with the audience, through both your vocal performance and visually with facial expressions.

This is the quality that sets barbershop apart from all other genres. Greg Clancy, musical director of the Vocal Majority Chorus, told us during one of our shows, “People don’t come to the shows to hear you sing. They come to see you perform.” People want to see us experiencing the emotions of the songs. It creates an aura during the shows, a feeling that brings the stories to life. When done properly, you aren’t just singing a song to the audience; you are sharing an experience with them.

The number one most important quality about “**barbershop face**” is believability. The emotions you are trying to convey must be authentic. The audience will know if you are faking your emotions.

1. Decide what the song is trying to convey. What is the overall message of the song?
2. Find a way that this message means something to you. If you have a memory relating to the song’s message, great. If you don’t, create a story that means something to you. The more emotional the story is, the easier it will be for you to convey the story in the song.
3. Practice visualizing your story while you sing. The more you practice emoting while you sing, the easier and more natural it will be when you perform.
4. Always be in the moment. Even when you’re not singing, emote what is being sung around you.

Glossary

Ballad – a song that usually has a slower, freer tempo; also considered to be more emotional

“Barbershop Face” – the general term used for emoting visually while you sing barbershop

Barbershopper – a person who sings barbershop music

Diphthong – a word that has one vowel but two vowel sounds

Inside – the arm or leg that is closest to the middle of the quartet/chorus

Outside – the arm or leg that is closest to the audience

“Perch the Sound” – a phrase that refers to a certain singing position that helps create the iconic barbershop sound

Triphthong – a word that has one vowel but three vowel sounds

Up-tune – a song that has a faster, more rigid tempo