

# How to Get the Most of Your Voice Lessons

It is my goal as a voice teacher, to help you develop your voice to its fullest potential. With the right guidance and daily practice, your vocal coordination can be improved and strengthened. I will teach you how to use, care for, and get the most out of your instrument. Yes, the voice is an instrument. It is probably the most precious instrument in existence, because it cannot be replaced. Like any other instrument, the voice requires proper care and maintenance. Together we will develop a vocal workout routine specifically for your voice. As with any workout, consistent practice balanced with rest is essential to see progress. Some students are really efficient in their learning, and for others I feel as though I am repeating the same thing week after week after week. Over time, I've noticed some characteristics that my best students (the ones who make the most progress) seem to have in common. I've also thought of some suggestions that would help some other students to improve more quickly.

**Arrive a few minutes early to your lesson.** It's hard to focus and control your breathing if you're gasping for air and feeling anxious or sweaty from sprinting over! If you do happen to be late for class and are feeling flustered, go ahead and take a minute or two to centre yourself and regulate your breath before coming into the studio. Your vocal exercises will be much more effective if you are physically and mentally ready to do them.

**Come to lessons well rested, fed, hydrated and ready to learn.** Make sure you are comfortable- well fed, dressed comfortably, not physically ill or in mental distress over an emotional event in your life. Bring room-temperature or warm water to class to keep your mouth and throat from feeling dry. It's best to avoid sodas or caffeinated drinks while singing. As a singer, your body is your instrument. You don't want to bring stress and exhaustion into your singing, because then you will not play it nearly as well- and perhaps you will even introduce bad habits due to tension, stress, or trying to over-compensate for a temporary physical weakness (e.g. sore throat, exhaustion, etc.). Do what you can to prevent physical and emotional stress on the voice as much as possible.

**Bring your Music.** Do I need to say more? I'm afraid I do. Bring your music. BRING YOUR MUSIC! Your music should become like a dearly loved friend to you. You should make observations about this friend, spend time with her often, get to know her deeply and passionately, and want to bring out the best in her every time you see her. Your teacher can help you learn how to do this. If you are not bringing your music to your lesson, it is almost pointless to try to study the song, unless you are already very well equipped to do so independently. It does you no good to have your teacher make notes in his or her own copy for the week.

**Take notes and/or record your lesson.** More frequently than I like to admit, I have come home from a lesson realizing I forgot what it was my teacher said about a particular passage, or what the pronunciation was for this or that French word, or the name of a certain performer who I was supposed to research. If I had only brought a notebook and pen, a tape recorder, or- (here's an idea for all you tech savvy people)- turned on the recorder on my smartphone, I could have had a record for the week that I could easily return to in order to answer my questions. It's so much more efficient than waiting another week to ask again about what you were supposed

to be practicing all along. Bring some kind of recording device so you can record the exercises and practice what you learnt at home. Learning how to sing is like going to the gym – those abs aren't going to show up if you only exercise once a week! It's also important to listen back to yourself too. Ear training is a crucial part of developing your vocal technique. It's amazing how much you can learn by listening to yourself vocalize as if you were an 'outsider'.

**Practice consistently.** I have had students who I can tell have not practiced all week long. This produces a lesson that is inefficient, and, frankly, a waste of their money. I have students who may only practice the night before lessons. This is better than nothing, but still far from ideal. If you can only practice ten or fifteen minutes a day, that is far better than an hour at the end of the week spent in a "cram" session. Consistency is key in cementing a new concept.

**Practice purposefully.** Don't just run songs aimlessly- all that will do is lock in bad habits. Rather, ask your teacher for specific exercises that you should rehearse to help you improve vowel quality, blending of the registers, expressive techniques, etc, as well as how to improve the problem sections in your songs. When practicing your repertoire, make sure you spend the most time addressing the troublesome passages. Slow them down and get them perfect. Merely singing songs over and over will not help resolve vocal challenges.

**Let your teacher teach you.** Allow your teacher to pick vocalises, sight-reading-exercises, and repertoire that he or she thinks will be the most beneficial to your vocal development. Respect his or her suggestions. Do not insist on singing only the songs you want to sing. You will grow more as a singer if you are open to doing the foundational work necessary to progressing forward. It will do you little good to pay a teacher to practice radio songs with you that you could be singing in your car. (I began to write a whole rant on this topic, but it's since moved over to a future post. I may one day still share my craziness.)

**Learn how to take constructive criticism.** When your teacher points out something that you might be able to improve on, don't get upset or think that they're saying you're a bad singer. Have you ever heard of the phrase 'constructive criticism'? Well, that's what they're doing. Just because they're picking out one thing that's wrong, it doesn't mean the whole song was bad. They are simply helping you realize that there might be a better way that you'll be able to sing that note, or there might be a technique you can use to get the song as beautiful as it can be. After all, that's how you improve. And, if you still can't hear what on earth they're going on about, you can record yourself singing and listen back to it. Chances are, you'll be able to hear it. Once you get past the whole 'hating the sound of your recorded voice' thing, like every singer has to go through.

**Be patient and enjoy the learning process.** Learning how to sing well takes some time and effort, and certainly does not happen overnight. Just like how it takes a piano player many years before he or she is able to be great at playing the piano, so it will also take us a certain period of time before we are able to master our singing voice! Even professional singers take regular singing lessons to keep their voices in top form, and to keep improving in their vocal technique! One reason for a longer learning curve is because our voice learns through what we call 'muscle memory'. Many of the functions of our vocal cords and voice box are involuntary reflexes that we cannot control consciously. In order for us to correct our singing habits, we need to practice positive reinforcement through muscle memory, using the correct singing methods often so that our voice and our brain remembers them and uses them each time we sing!

**Have Fun!** Leave your worries at the door and have fun! A voice lesson is your “me time.” To make real progress you need to enjoy your vocal singing lessons. Don’t treat your singing like a chore. Don’t overdo it and it should remain motivating and fun. With the right attitude and mindset you will gain a lot from your lessons but just remember not to get so wound up in it that you forget to have fun!!

**What you can bring to the table? Curiosity, Passion, Persistence and Focus.** My favorite students come to their lessons with lots of questions. Then they take the ideas I give them in the studio and go home and experiment. Unlike a guitar or piano, singer’s bodies are our instruments – and every one is unique. Yes, we have the same basic components, but the sensations we experience may be interpreted differently by different people. Also, the way a teacher explains a concept may not help a student until they’ve actually experienced it. So when a student comes back and tells me what they’ve learned and what still confuses them, it’s the perfect segue into a lesson that is truly customized to meet their needs. Your job as the student is to explore and experiment – several times a week – and walk into your next lesson with questions. Be passionate, be persistent!