# Breathing Exercises for Saxophone Players

*As taught to me by my singing teacher*



I have posted on the Café a few times about this over the last 6 or 7 years and I thought it was time to write it up as a proper resource item.

Playing a wind instrument shares a lot of attributes with singing, particularly breath-control. Long before I started to learn the sax, I started singing lessons in my early 30s. Through serendipity, the teacher I found was a retired opera singer, a counter tenor. He was a lay clerk (alto) in a cathedral choir, and he was head of a county music service.

The very first thing he taught me was the importance of basics: posture and breathing. Almost everything is equally applicable to playing the sax.

## Posture and Stance

If standing, you should stand with your feet shoulder width apart and relaxed. The knees should not be locked and you should be balanced. If you are unsure about balance, lean/rock backwards and forwards and feel where you are 'neutral'.

Your shoulders should be relaxed and 'down'. Your head should be level and centred over your spine. A common problem is people leaning forwards with their head forward of their spine (my osteopath call it 'PC Humpitis'). This puts your neck tendons (that hold your head) under tension.

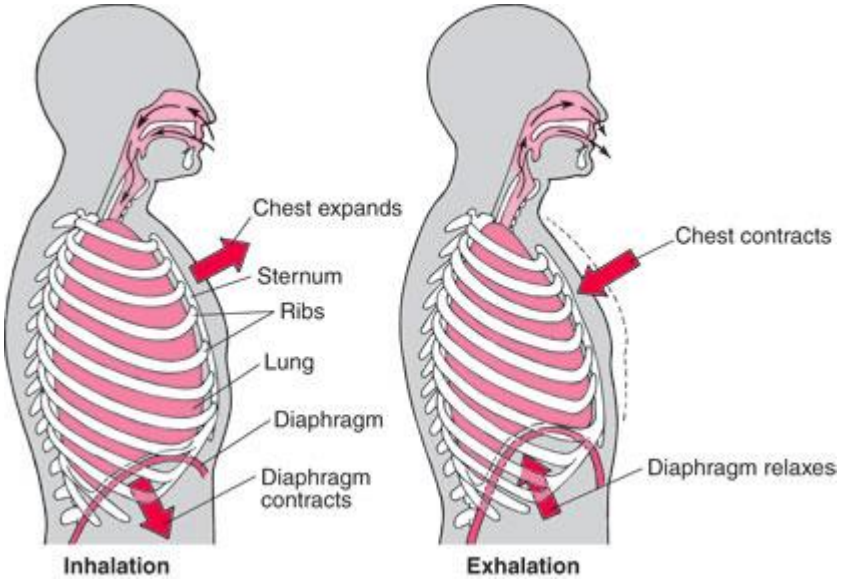
If seated, you need to make sure you have a chair of the right height for you. The angle between your torso and thighs should be slightly more than a right-angle (90 degrees). You may find sitting on a wedge cushion helps. It is very easy, especially if the angles are wrong, to develop cramp in the legs (usually my left leg). This is usually caused by chair being too low, or the angle between torso and thighs being too small (i.e. 90 degrees or less).

You need to sit forward on the chair, at the front edge, not sitting right back – sorry!

## Breathing Exercises

To sing or play well, we have to control how we breathe. A lot of people breathe very shallowly and only use air from the top part of the chest/lungs. Try breathing right out and taking in a deep breath over a count of 4 and feel which bits of you are expanding. You should feel your rib cage move, movement around the sides and in the abdomen. Your lungs occupy a lot of space inside you and go more-or-less down to your waist. We need to learn to use that space.

Your thoracic cavity is separated from the lower part of you and contains your lungs and various other bits. The separator at the bottom is your diaphragm, which is a very large plate-like muscle. When you breathe in, it bends towards the floor to allow the lungs to expand and fill more space. As you breathe out, and the lungs shrink, the diaphragm comes back up and helps push the air out.




If you are a singer or a wind player, you need to learn how to control these things so that they work to your advantage.

1. Lift your rib-cage

   The first thing we are going to do is to lift the rib-cage so that we increase the volume available to use.

   Stand upright in relaxed neutral position, with your hands at your sides. Exhale fully. You are now going to breathe in over a count of 4 and raise your arms in front of you to be at shoulder level, parallel to the ground, in your best Curse of the Mummy impersonation…



   What you should have noticed as you did this was feel your rib cage lift. When you get to the end of the count of 4, you are going to hold that for a count of four, then you are going to exhale slowly over a count of 4 whilst lowering your arms back down to your sides.

   You should repeat this several times, but increasing times, something like this:

   - Breath in for 4, hold for 4, breath out for 4
   - Breath in for 4, hold for 4, breath out for 8
   - Breath in for 4, hold for 4, breath out for 12

   You can breathe in for 2 and breathe out for say 12 or 16.

   The lifting and lowering of the arms will help you to lift the rib cage. As you lower your arms, you are aiming for the ribs to stay ‘up’

2. Breath Control

Now that we are feeling our rib-cages lift and lungs expanding, we now need to look at controlling the air-flow.

We are going to repeat the exercise above, but this time we are going to be 6 years old again and we're going to hiss like a snake on an 'sss' sound as we breath out. So the exercise now becomes:

- Breathe out
- Breathe in over a count of 4, raising arms
- Hold for 4
- Breathe out, hissing on an 'sss' sound for a count of 4 whilst lowering arms, remembering to keep ribs lifted

If you've been playing a while, that will be easy, so quickly move on to 12, 16, 20…. What we are doing here is developing the ability to control the flow of air. The problem most people have is that they breathe very shallowly only filling and using the air in the upper air tract. We need to get to the habit of breathing diaphragmatically and using all of that capacity.

3. Variation

Now that we've got the basic exercise under our belt, we're going to add a variation to make is more useful.

Rather than exhaling a continuous stream of air on an 'sss', we're going to break it up so that the hiss starts and stops: sss…sss…sss…sss so roughly one second hiss, one second silence etc for the duration of the exercise.

4. Singing

Now you're going to do something scary – sing! If you can do this with your voice, you will be able to transfer the skill to the sax and it's a useful skill.

We're going to keep it simple, we are going to sing on a nice open 'ah' vowel sound using 'la'. Basic singing technique is very similar to what we have to do as a sax player. The throat needs to be relaxed – if it isn't relaxed, what we get is 'tuned shouting' not singing (this is the mistake a lot of pop/rock singers make, which is why they tire quickly). The throat needs to be open as well. So no tension in throat. We can help this by lifting the soft palate – you do this naturally when yawning. So open mouth, with relaxed jaw, and yawn. Make a note of how that feels.

What we're now going to do is similar to before, but we're not going to lift and lower the arms – you should be able to lift the ribs without having to do the arm lifting bit.

- Breathe out
- Breath in for 4
- Hold for 4
- Sing a nice 'la' sound on a nice resonant note in the middle of your vocal range (for men this will probably be around G below middle C, for ladies probably the G above middle C – lower voices (bass/alto) it might be a bit lower, higher voices (tenor/soprano) it might be a bit higher)
- Try to keep the note steady without any vibrato, with even pitch, and even volume
- Do this to counts of 4, 8, 12, 16…

Once you've got that sorted, we're going to add a twist and try singing mezza di voce. A 'mezza di voce' is a singing technique where you start soft, get louder, then get softer, i.e. a gradual crescendo then a gradual diminuendo. To do this you have to control the flow air and how much 'push' from the diaphragm there is.

- As before, breathe out
- Breath in for a count of 4
- Hold for 4
- Sing 'la' on a note in the middle of your voice as before, but start quietly, increase volume, then decrease volume
- Do this over counts of 4, 8, 12, 16…

You will probably find getting quieter harder than getting louder – it requires more control.

5. Variation

There are two obvious variations:

- Start soft and get louder
- Start loud and get softer

These are both useful skills, the latter is much harder.

## Conclusion

I hope you can see that the techniques outlined here are very applicable to playing the sax or other wind instruments. Relaxing the throat, being able to breathe correctly and to control the flow of air are very important to sax players and singers.

I hope what my singing teacher taught me is of some use to others.