

## READING POEMS ALOUD: 2

### Warm-up Exercises

#### Breathing

In all exercises, as in rehearsal and performance – don't forget to breathe!

Nerves can sometimes make us overlook the necessity. Practise breathing in a conscious, controlled way. If you heighten your awareness and practise breathing, you should never find yourself running out of breath before the end of a line again.

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Relax your tummy muscles **outwards as you breathe in.**

Let your **rib cage swing open and outwards**, keeping shoulders down.

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Use the muscles between your ribs to **control exhalation** as you **breathe out.**

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Place your hands over your rib-cage to **feel the difference** between controlled deep breathing and gassy, shallow, upper-chest breathing.

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#### Ridding Yourself of Tension – Loosen

Visualise the tension flying out of hands, feet, pelvis, ears, elbows.  
Go wild!

Shake each part of your body in turn, and then all together. Now make a full upwards stretch of each arm in turn. As you raise your right arm, come up on the toes of your left foot. Then reach a little higher into a full stretch (you'll feel it at your waist) and move your fingers, as if to grasp cobwebs just out of reach.

#### Tense and relax

Continue to move and stretch isolated parts of your body.

Roll your head to the left, then to the right, then all the way round in both directions. Trace a full circle and feel your neck muscles working. Rotate arms, hands, chest, pelvis.

Shrug your left shoulder as high up as you can, and let it drop. Then the right. Then both together. Hold for a slow count of 5, then drop: feel the tension flow right down and out through your feet.

From standing (or preferably lying down), tense and relax each muscle or muscle group in your body, one by one, from your head to your toes. For example, tense only your face muscles very tight for a count of 5, and then relax, allowing all the tension to flow out. Then shift your attention to your head and neck muscles only, then only shoulders and upper back, chest, and so on, in turn, all the way down to your toes. To finish, tense *all* your muscles at once, so that your body is completely rigid, hold for a slow count of 5, then release, feeling all your tension flow into the floor and away. This exercise, though lengthy, allows you to locate, identify and rid yourself of physical tension, and as a quick-fix, can be carried out simply on the areas that cause the immediate problem. The full exercise can also be a good aid to sleep.

If you have plenty of time, roll a tennis ball under the sole of each of your feet in turn for a few minutes. Press down as hard as you can on the ball; really massage your foot muscles. This exercise is a good pre-performance relaxer and its effect extends as far as your face and the pupils of your eyes. Do one foot, then check in a mirror!

Now, when you stand, you should be able to feel yourself well-connected with the floor. But don't be rooted there. Try this:

## A Relaxed Balanced Posture for Reading Aloud

Stand with feet shoulder-width apart, so that shoulders, hips, knees and feet are aligned.

Keep your knees 'soft' – not rigid, which induces bodily and therefore vocal tension. Visualise a cord that runs, from way up in the stars, down through your head, the centre of your body, all the way down through the floor between your feet (as if you're 'kebab'd!') to the earth's core. Imagine yourself suspended and light, rather than rooted heavily to the spot.

Let your arms hang loosely by your sides. Now, as you inhale deeply through your nose, allow your extended arms and hands to rise gradually in front of you. At chest level, allow them to float out and up to the sides so that your chest opens and expands and your arms stretch your body into a 'Y' shape. (This allows for maximum lung capacity and rib-cage movement.) Hold this position and your breath for two or three seconds. Make sure your shoulders are down and relaxed, then exhale slowly, bringing your arms down to your sides again. Repeat several times, trying to match your inhalation to the upwards movement – hold – and then complete your exhalation with the downward movement.

Now, for that fully alert and engaged feel and look – rise up very slowly onto the tips of your toes. (If your balance wavers, focus on a vertical line in the room: a perpendicular door, window or wall-edge.) Very, very slowly, lower your heels to the floor but imagine *leaving* the top of your head where it was in space. Don't actually try to 'do' anything; rather, think to yourself, 'forward and up'. Check that your shoulders and chest are down and relaxed. Repeat a few times, again, breathing in through your nose on the rise, and blowing out gently through the mouth, with control, as you lower again. If you find





focusing on correct breathing difficult, imagine the air you inhale as coloured (a positive, mood-enhancing colour you favour), filling your body, all the way right down to your toes, and then up and out again.

## **Warming Up Your Voice**

Puff your cheeks out, suck them in. Stretch your face muscles: open your mouth wide, stick out your tongue as far as it will go, make funny faces. Patter your fingers over your face and massage gently.

Humming tunes not only helps prepare your vocal chords but can also remind you to use a good range of tone in your speaking voice:

-  *The lips, the teeth, the tip of the tongue, the hard palate, the soft palate, and where the hard and the soft palates meet.*
-  *My fine-fettled but ferocious friend Frank feeds on fritters and frequently frightens my fluffier friend Fifi into fainting fits.*

Use tongue-twisters, nursery rhymes, or the cornflakes box, or even your chosen text to explore and warm up vocal tone, colour and range.

Try reading a section of text in a range of different ways, from over-enunciated to soft and tenderly, as a tub-thumping politician or a voice-over artist.


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And when there's no time for a full warmup, a good short cut is:

**hum high, hum low**  
**stretch your face**  
**roll shoulders back**  
**stand tall, and**  
**breathe deeply**

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*If you would like to attend a practical group 'Poems Aloud' workshop, please contact Lili Fraser, Reader Development Officer at the Scottish Poetry Library, for availability and further information.*

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