

Coaching Corner



How low should you go?

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People who speak lower have more authoritative voices, right? They command more respect, right? There are all those research studies, right? Wrong. There are no authoritative studies that prove anything of the kind.

Research on voice pitch

There have been several research studies showing that women may prefer men with lower voices when looking for a mate. So if you're a man and you're mate shopping, have fun trying to speak lower and see if the women come flocking to your door. But if you're wondering what pitch you should use when speaking in public, you should use the one that produces optimum resonance, clarity, and natural believability. In short, you should use the voice that you were born with (or at least the one that puberty left you with).

Pitch versus resonance

Unfortunately, many educators in the public speaking field mistakenly confuse pitch with resonance. They are not at all the same thing. And resonance is what keeps your audience engaged. I have personally done research on

the pitch range of the most successful public speakers, both in politics and in commercial public speaking. With very few exceptions, the most successful and well known speakers use their own natural pitch range and use it well. In male speakers, there are many more successful tenors than baritones. And almost no successful basses. The case in women speakers is a little less clear. See the section on women speakers below.

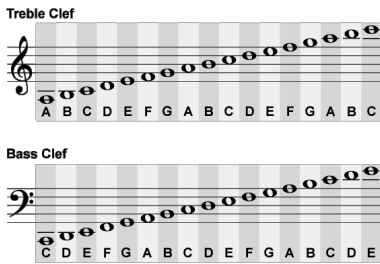
Voice-over business

The one exception to these results is the professional voice-over business. I don't know how much actual research has been done in that field, but voice-over buyers clearly prefer deep baritone voices over tenors, altos, or sopranos. So if you're looking at commercial voice-over work but your natural voice isn't one of those deep voiced baritones, perhaps another area of public speaking is for you. But for all other public speaking, producing your natural voice with maximum resonance is the surest path to success.



Pitch

Contrary to popular wisdom, most American males and many females speak too low. While we were growing up, we were sub-consciously (and mistakenly) taught that a deep voice (rather than a resonant voice) is more authoritative. Consequently many of us stress our voice by speaking at the lower limit of



our comfort range, producing low-grade fatigue day in and day out. This is bad for our speaking voices and actually reduces our believability.

Find your optimal range

There are several good ways to find your optimum speaking range. One that I especially like is to listen to a friend talk and give him or her regular “mm-hmm” (active listening) feedback. Unless you intentionally force this out of range, the pitch of the “mm” is a good lower limit for everyday speaking and the “hmm” is a good upper limit. Find these notes on your piano or a pitch pipe. Then practice speaking within this range on a regular basis.

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Pitch variation

Every good speech instructor will tell you not to speak in a monotone. It bores your listeners. But it also stresses your voice in the same way that tensing any body muscle all the time does. Varying the pitch of your speaking within your optimum speaking range helps keep your voice relaxed and effective and your audience engaged.

Contextual variations

Part of good verbal communication is to take your audience on a journey, and your voice can help you accomplish that goal. When you want to be serious and reflective, a slightly lower pitched and more measured delivery will give your audience cues to your intent. When you are bringing more excitement to your topic and your audience, a slightly higher pitched and rapid delivery can be extremely effective. And the changes between such deliveries help your audience understand where your speech is going so they can go there with you.

Women’s pitch range

A well known woman speaker pointed out to me that women have a real challenge in building their credibility in a male dominated speakers’ world. She said that speaking more in a man’s pitch range

may be something that is necessary to establish that credibility. After researching pitch ranges of successful women speakers, I have found a number of successful women speakers that have taken that approach and



actually speak lower than many male speakers. But the most successful women speakers, to my ear, are those that can successfully navigate the lower pitches when contextually appropriate but can also use their natural pitch range as their default or when in the adding excitement as mentioned above.

Summary

Finding your optimum speaking pitch range is easy to do. Using pitch to key your message can be very effective. But using your voice in that range and context takes regular practice. Investing in such practice will help you become a truly effective speaker as you bring your content to life.