

Staying On Track: Vocal Use Points Tracker

by Thersa Brancaccio

As a voice teacher at the university level, I have become acutely aware of how balancing the demands of elite vocal training, academics, and life in general is a challenge and an acquired skill. Of course, this challenge is by no means limited to college students but extends to young professionals as well as teenagers and adult avocational students.

At the middle and high school levels, teenagers who are passionate about performing may find themselves taking voice lessons, singing in their school's large choir, vocal jazz group, acapella group, musical, talent show, and church choir. This was my own son when he was in high school, only add a rock band to the mix, in which he sang (and continues to sing) lead vocals.

At the university level, students must navigate voice lessons and independent practice, as well as song literature classes and repertoire coaching. There are choir rehearsals, opera rehearsals, sometimes extra-curricular acapella groups, and social groups such as sororities and fraternities. Many students find it necessary to earn income with church jobs.

The adult avocational singer or young professional singer may not be aware that the demands of his/her day job as a teacher, retail salesperson, waiter, or receptionist can tire the voice well before he/she has ever sung a note. The fact that human beings use the

speaking voice as a means to communicate and connect with other human beings adds to the challenge of being a singing artist. It is easy to forget that the singer's voice does double duty as a utilitarian tool of communication and as a highly refined musical instrument capable of deep artistic expression. (Just imagine an alternate universe where our primary means of communicating would be to play phrases on a trumpet!)

Since so many students and young professionals are often unaware of the actual workload their vocal folds manage on a daily basis, I created a simple tool. Inspired by weight-loss programs which assign points to each food as a way to tally ones daily intake, I came up with the Vocal Use Points Tracker (printed below) as a guide. It is designed to have singers take into account not only the actual number of hours of vocal use but also the conditions under which they are using the voice. My singers' assignment is to track their total daily voice use for one week. At least half the students are surprised at how much voice they have "spent." Making the correlation between how much vocal energy one uses and how ones voice functions as a result is a valuable lesson for every singer.

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Vocal Use Point Tracker

- ▶ Assign points to each hour of every kind of vocal use
- ▶ Have a Maximum Daily Target
- ▶ Take several "vocal naps"* in your day- mini rest periods 10-15 minutes of total quiet
- ▶ Different point value for different task
- ▶ It is essential to space out your more intense sessions of vocal use

POSSIBLE POINT ASSIGNMENTS: (This is a rough guideline which must be customized.)

90 minutes choral/small ensemble/operarehearsal (with 10-15 min break)	= 30 points
1 hour voice lesson/coaching	= 20 points
1 hour of voice practice (with breaks)	= 20 points
1 hour of intermittent talking at relaxed, comfortable level (in person and on telephone)	= 10 points
1 hour of talking more intensely or in a somewhat noisier environment	= 20 points

(Add points for louder, more intense voice use, loud laughing, noisier environments)

On a normal, healthy day:

Aim for maximum use of 100 points per day

If you are vocally tired, sick, or affected by premenstrual syndrome:

Adjust to 50 points or fewer per day, building up gradually until recovered. (Reduce points accordingly, if level of sickness or fatigue is greater)

*Term "vocal naps" credited to Dr. Robert Bastian, Bastian Voice Institute