

# Crystal Clear Speech

By Stephanie Bickel

*Articulation agility is developing the ability to effortlessly and believably utter clearly the most conceivably convoluted consonant combos in the world. Flexible lips and strengthened tongue-tips are needed to toss off Cowardian quips. And who can dispute a relaxed lower jaw for spewing forth the torrent of Shaw? It takes superlative diction to theatrically mumble and clearly be misunderstood in the jumble. Be it couplets or prose – be it “dese, dem or dose” from Shakespeare to Simon from Moliere to Mamet, it simply won’t do if they don’t understand it!*

Lilene Mansell

I heard someone say on television, “I’m going to have to go to the store.” However, it did not come out that way. It sounded more like, “AHM ONNA AFTA GOTUH STO.” Some might call that an advancement in speech. It is definitely less work when you omit and elide sounds and syllables. However, it is very hard on your listener.

We could all help out our listeners with a little articulation work. The articulators shape the breath as it passes out through the mouth and nose. The lips, lower jaw, tongue, and soft palate are known as the movable articulators. They work with the immovable articulators (teeth, upper gums, hard palate, and throat) to give definite shape to each separate speech sound. There are a few muscles around the larynx that could help you manipulate the length and width of the throat, but you’re only effecting minimal vocal change by doing so.

Voice coaches and speech pathologists focus on the movable articulators, because they can become lazy easily and obstructive to good speech. Also, they are also the ones we can control most easily.

Here are just a few exercises to help stretch and strengthen these articulators.

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### **The Lips**

Some people have very tight lips. Wake them up by blowing air through the lips on the letter “p”. Children play with this sound; horses do it, too. Then, try blowing air through the lips on the letter “b”. Try low pitches and high pitches.

### **The Soft Palate**

Create more space in your mouth by lifting your soft palate. Yawn and feel your soft palate stretch. The soft palate can be felt with the tongue by curling your tongue as far back as possible. Notice where the hard palate ends and the soft palate begins. Many let their soft palates sag. Great voices keep their soft palate lifted to create a richer, rounder vocal tone. Inhale air sharply on the letter “k”. If this is difficult, exhale and make a “k” sound. Now, try to make that same sound while inhaling.

### **The Jaw**

Most of us also have very tight jaws. Try to relax your jaw right now and let it hang open. Clasp your hands together and create tension in the hands and arms. Shake your hands violently causing your whole body to jerk in reaction. Concentrate on releasing the jaw joint and letting the jaw flop around and shake loose.

### **The Tongue**

We also hold a great deal of tension in the back of the tongue. It is a real effort to hold your tongue in your mouth all day. It would be much more relaxing to let it hang out like a dog’s. Stick your tongue out as far in front of you as you can. Reach for the wall across from yourself with your pointed tongue. Now, move your tongue tip like a clock hand. Point it to the ceiling. Then, move it to the right, point it at your feet, and shoot it to the left. Rotate your tongue tip in circles to the left and right. Then, relax.

These are just a sampling of articulator stretches to help strengthen your articulation and to create more space in your mouth. Not only will this help your words sound clearer, but it will impact your tone of voice.

To improve your articulation agility, try some tongue twisters. Here are some favorites:

Philological ability  
Eleven benevolent elephants  
Literally literary  
Will you William  
Brilliant Italian William  
Red Leather Yellow Leather  
Rural Ridicule  
Minimal Animal  
Unique New York  
Toy Boat  
Girl Gargoyle, Guy Gargoyle  
Abominable Abdominals  
Suzy Sushi Chef



Stephanie is the Founder and Director of Speak by Design, an executive coaching firm based out of Chicago. Speak by Design provides private and group trainings for people seeking to become crisp, confident, and credible communicators. Services include executive coaching, presentation skills, vocal image, accent reduction, and other custom training programs. Visit them at [www.speakbydesign.com](http://www.speakbydesign.com).

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