



Crystal Clear

Articulation deconstructed

In this article I want to get into the articulatory kit and perhaps help you to deepen your experience of, and appreciation for, this incredible ‘company of performers’ that work away inside your mouth each time you speak or sing.

For some of you it will be a refresher and for others something that supports you further in your work, giving you that deeper appreciation of what is involved.

So this is where you need to see and feel and hear what’s what.

Seeing: The diagram helps you see... but so does a small mirror, so please make yourself comfortable in front of one for everything that we consider.

Feeling: Your tongue tip is going to locate various places as we focus on them.

Hearing: You will hear the contribution each part of the articulatory kit provides for you.

Lets start with the lips

- Try pushing them forward into a pout, then a smile (keeping your lips together and not showing your teeth). Alternate a few times.
- Now try a lip trill ‘horse-blow’ to see how relaxed they are. If this is difficult in any way, try gently brushing your lips up and down with a finger to help improve the trill. Watch what happens as you

say: P, B, M, W and follow on with F and V. One lip or two? What else is involved for F and V?

- You might like to try experimenting with ‘tight’ or ‘thin and frozen’ lips. What do you sound like? How does this affect the quality of your voice? Now release them and try saying the words again with very released lips.

The jaw would be a good place to move to next

- Try clenching your back teeth together and then releasing so that you have a small gap between the upper and lower molars. If you place a hand on your face, about where the back teeth are, you will feel the tension as it comes and goes. Try speaking without opening your mouth much at all, then gradually increase the amount that the jaw opens as you do so. You might hear that your voice is changed as you do so.
- A good exercise to help release jaw tension, is to use your finger tips to massage the area just in front of your ears (over where you can feel the hinge joint moving as you open and close your mouth). **NOTE:** Its important to make a forward-circling motion as you do this to help release muscular tension.

The tongue is key to your speech

- Try gently stretching it out of your mouth towards your chin, nose, then each ear.

Notice that I say ‘towards’ because it doesn’t matter whether you touch your chin and nose or not – but you would need medical intervention if you could touch your ears!

- There are many more exercises for the tongue which you will find in books or on a workshop that includes articulation. For our purposes, I want to increase your awareness of its movement and the sounds it produces. Move onto trilling a rolled R, if you can, and sticking your tongue out of your mouth while you try to write your name with your tongue tip.

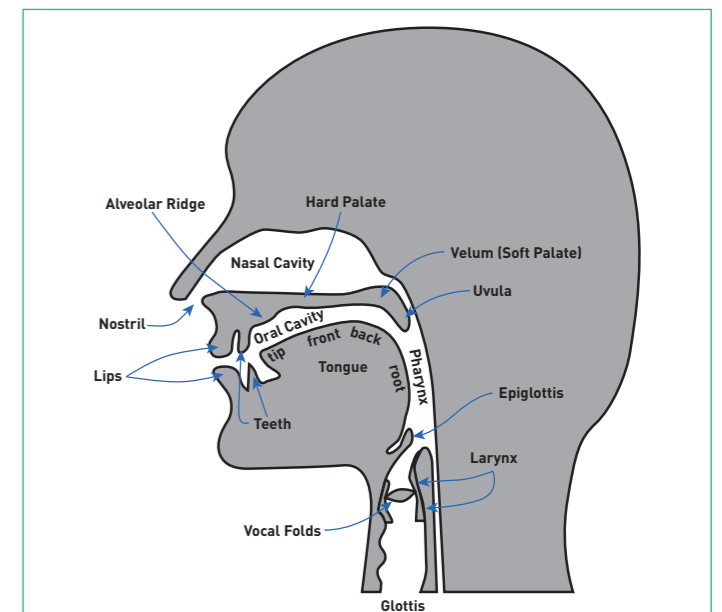
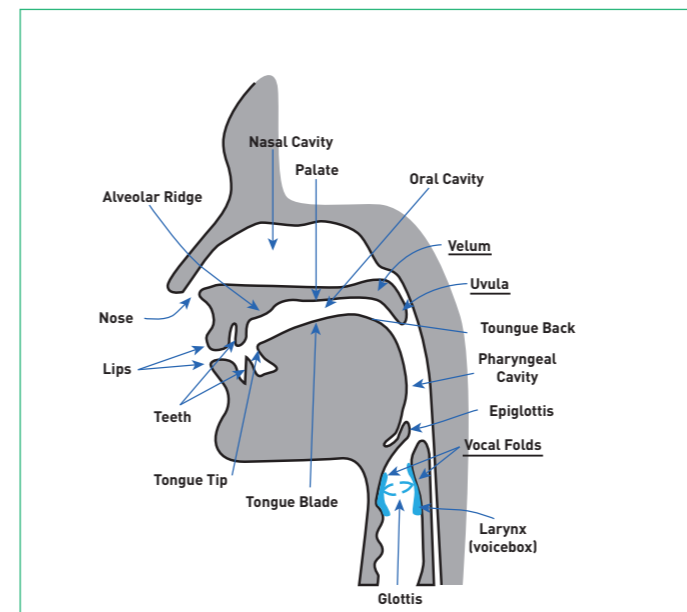
- Now try touching the gum above your top teeth (the alveolar ridge) with your tongue tip. Feel what happens as you say: T, D, L, N and then try a tapped or rolled R. Try S and Z – or perhaps you prefer to put your tongue tip down for these last two.

It’s what I call the ‘instant diction fix’ and can give you a magical and instant clarity boost.

- With the tip and front edge of the tongue a little further back in the mouth you should find the place where you make: CH, J, SH and ZH

(e.g. Dr Zhivago or the S in measure, leisure and Asia).

- Next put your tongue tip gently against the cutting edge of your upper front teeth and breathe out – this is an ‘unvoiced’ TH (e.g. think, thin, fourth and thank you). If you add a ‘hum’ while keeping your tongue in the same place, the sound becomes more resonant and turns into a ‘voiced’ TH (e.g. this, that, those, weather, with).



The soft palate is right at the back of the mouth

- Take your tongue tip on a journey starting at the alveolar ridge above your front teeth, feel how bumpy it is. Now move the tongue back and feel the shape and hardness of the roof to your mouth (your hard palate). If you continue moving back, you will feel it get softer and spongier (don’t go too far or you may gag!) This soft part to the roof of your mouth is your soft palate. It moves. Its one of our best kept secrets when it comes to articulation. Try saying: K, G and then NG (in a standard English accent). You might be able to sense the movement.

- Looking in a mirror is helpful at this point to watch the soft palate in action. Try moving from NG to an energised G. Try also repeating K and G a few times. You will need to make sure there is enough light in your mouth to see the canopy over the back of your tongue moving up and down. The soft palate diverts everything from air and voice to food and drink via your mouth and/or nose. (Yes, there are certain people out there who do tricks with spaghetti that I would rather not go into here!)
- When you look straight ahead in the mirror you see two arches (the ends of your soft palate) from which a little finger-like ‘something’ hangs. This

is your uvula. It is used in French and many languages but not when we speak standardised English.

- So a key function of the soft palate is its ability to divert traffic from outside to inside via the mouth or the nose. When

you sustain NG the sound is traveling down your nose (try gently pinching your nose a few times as you make the sound – which should be blocked on and off in turn); when you sound K or

G a few times the sound is more likely to travel out of your mouth. Perhaps you need to sound either more nasal for a character voice or less nasal? Try experimenting.

You face as a whole is key

- Your muscles of facial expression provide clarity of thought and expression as you speak. Sometimes we notice people who say one thing – but who don’t seem to mean it judging by their facial expression and overall body language.
- Try letting all the facial muscles become heavy and un-energised. Now say a simple phrase. You should sound quiet and bored – or even depressed. Now try frowning and hear what happens to that same phrase. Next, explore a range of expressions – and don’t forget to include a warm smile with positive expression

in your eyes. Your vocal energy and tone will be influenced by these different expressions. So its essential, as you will appreciate, to mark your script appropriately for the product name and ‘sell’ it with a smile.

Finally: keep fit

- So you need to keep everything in shape with a good work out for the articulatory muscles, including good old fashioned tongue twisters. Try speaking them slowly and very clearly; try to feel the range of movements within every word as each phoneme is sounded. Now try gently touching your front teeth together to stop your jaw moving and speak your tongue twister or phrase using just your lips and tongue for 5 or 6 times before letting the teeth go and speaking ‘normally’ again. Did you feel the difference? It’s what I call the ‘instant diction fix’ and can give you a magical and instant clarity boost.

There are many more exercises to get your fitness up and to promote your articulatory agility. Perhaps I will see you at a workshop in the future where we will explore the articulation kit in more detail for you to produce optimum results and be not only very versatile but crystal clear.



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