



# Ask a Conductor

## Question 8

How do you assess your middle school singers to determine vocal range?

Welcome to the “Ask a Conductor” section of *ChorTeach*. In this reader-generated Q&A format, readers submit questions related to teaching, conducting, rehearsing with, or singing with K-12 students. Educators who either currently work in K-12 or who have past experience in K-12 will answer the question, with a new question appearing in each issue. Our goal is for this to be a very practical section that applies directly to current concerns in the choral classroom. Readers can submit questions via the link in this Google form (<https://forms.gle/oVcamzqp4KwXfo5M9>) or by visiting the QR code below.

Ask a Conductor Submission Form



**Question: How do you assess your middle school singers to determine vocal range?**



Brian Jones  
Choir Director at Canton Middle School and  
Canton High School  
[bjones@cantonschools.org](mailto:bjones@cantonschools.org)

It can be difficult to find the time to assess your middle schoolers’ vocal ranges. They’re frequently being pulled in other directions for assemblies, make up work, special schedules, testing, or extracurriculars, not to mention all the things that are on our plates. In this article, I will suggest several options that could be used to achieve this goal.

I have found that the most efficient way to determine vocal ranges with my students is during rehearsal/class time. I teach 7-12 choir, and when I meet my 7th graders for the first time, I spend the first few weeks of school prioritizing vocal range exploration. During warm-ups, I go through a large part of the vocal range, from high soprano to low baritone (roughly C3-C6). I have everyone try to sing through everything, while emphasizing self-regulation, telling my students to challenge themselves without causing strain. We explore chest voice vs. head voice/falsetto, and I state clearly and frequently what a typical range is for a soprano, alto, or baritone, using terms like “comfort zone,” “hitting your ceiling,” or “bottoming out” to give the students an idea of how they might feel when singing certain notes, and therefore in which section



they should most likely sing.

Another method is to use accessible repertoire when helping students explore and discover their voice part. I pick a short, easy rote song voiced in either three-part-mixed or SAB, and teach every part to the whole choir. We explore how each part feels in their voice to help them decide in which section they'd feel most comfortable.

Some cases will arise where you will need to meet with a student one on one to check their vocal range, especially in guiding males through their voice change. It is in these instances where finding a common free time would be helpful, like having a group of baritone friends come down to the choir room for lunch and sing together, even when you only need to hear one of them. This small group environment can bring a level of comfort for the students, especially if it's early in the year and you are still building relationships with them.

Throughout this entire process, there are a few rules that I try my best to follow:

- Make each voice part sound appealing. Advertise each voice part in a way that students can get on board with. The ultimate goal is for students to avoid choosing one voice part over another for the wrong reasons (popularity, friends, etc.) You want to try and make each voice part seem equally as enticing.
- Stress the importance of open communication and self-advocacy. It's crucial that students feel comfortable enough to approach you about their vocal health, and hopefully have some basic terminology to describe how their voice is feeling when they sing. Then you can ask them questions to guide them to a diagnosis and proper steps moving forward, whether it is an issue with technique, vocal health, or switching voice parts.
- Avoid using gendered terms. Especially in younger choirs, not all sopranos or altos are female. It needs to be normalized that males can still be sopranos or altos in middle school, and that everyone's journey through the voice change is different. It doesn't need to be made into a huge deal, just casually mentioned that males can be altos/sopranos at this age too.



Karla McClain  
Illing Middle School Choral and  
General Music Teacher  
kmclain@mpspride.org

For a sixth-grade or seven/eight treble group, I actually don't assess their ranges. I just assign students to parts randomly. However, I ensure that everyone has a chance to sing the top or bottom part over the course of the year.

For TB groups, it is more integral to look at ranges. I usually do it organically: I have all students sing a simple folk song, and then listen for students who should be singing the bass versus tenor as we sing the song all together. Middle school students are so self-conscious, and I feel strongly about helping them feel safe in my classroom. Having them all sing alone can be anxiety-provoking and also is difficult in terms of management, so that is why I choose to do it in this manner.

For my select groups, I do hear students individually, and I will use vocalises to hear their ranges. In addition, I will have students sing "America (My country tis of thee)" in different ranges to see where their voice might fit best in an ensemble. 