



Plenty of air *and* a smoother freestyle

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In my last article, [Inside-out breathing: Get the air you need](#), I covered breathing fundamentals. In this installment, we'll examine the specific techniques of breathing in rhythm with your stroke. The three most common breathing technique errors I see among unskilled or uncoached swimmers include:

1. **Lifting the head for air.** This hurts your body position and leads to use of the arms to "brace" or support the head's weight, when they should be lengthening the body or "holding on to your place" in the water.
2. **Turning *only* the head for air.** This awkward action increases strain and torque in the neck and spine, and hurts your form.
3. **Losing your front end.** Having the lead hand collapse while breathing is almost universal among unskilled or unbalanced swimmers. When it happens you become less hydrodynamic and much of the propulsive potential of that stroke is lost.

The best way to imprint an efficient breathing form -- one that provides all the air you need *and* keeps your stroke long and efficient -- is to practice the Skating, UnderSwitch and ZipperSwitch drills from the TI Freestyle progression, but you can also improve your form with Mindful Swimming -- whole-stroke practice of focal points that specifically address breathing mechanics. Here are those I practice most often myself.

Breathe with your belly button. Not literally, but rolling to the air as if you intend to do so will help overcome #2 above. You should attempt to feel as if you roll your body to the air and your head goes along for the ride.

If you think of keeping your chin and sternum aligned -- then allow your chin to travel a bit farther on its own -- you ought to get ample body rotation and avoid the strain of just turning your head while your body remains prone. I also sometimes imagine that my breather is on the side of my rib cage, six inches below my armpit. If I take that part of my torso to the air, I always get plenty.

Keep the top of your head down. Between breaths, your balance is best if you point your nose at the bottom and lead with the top of your head. While doing so, get a sense of having a laser beam, shining from the top of your head, at the leading edge of your "head-spine line." You should keep that laser beam pointing straight to the horizon, or at the end of the pool, both between breaths and during your breath. You can work at this in three ways:

1. Keep the top of your head as close to the surface as possible, while rolling to breathe.
2. Press in the side and back of your head as you breathe.
3. Tuck your chin toward your shoulder as you breathe.

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