Head Voice vs Falsetto: What's the Difference?

The terms Head Voice and Falsetto make people think that singing is happening outside of their voice.

But with the help of modern science, we know that in head voice, the voice is not really coming from the top of the head.
And falsetto isn't false or wrong; it's actually a very real and useful sound.
So let's talk about the difference between these different vocal registers and more importantly, learn how to use them to sing high notes.

Before we start talking about the differences between head voice and falsetto, let's talk about the two main registers in your voice.
Here's what you need to know:

As mentioned there are two main vocal registers in singing: the chest voice and the head voice.
The chest voice is the range of notes at the bottom of your voice.
And head voice is the range of notes at the top.

But even though these terms can be confusing, here's all you need to memorize:

The chest voice is created by thick vocal folds.
And head voice is created by thin vocal folds.
The definitions of the falsetto voice and head voice are bound to become a stumbling block for a beginning singer.

So here's all you need to know about the difference between Head Voice and Falsetto.

Falsetto Voice Definition

Falsetto is a mode of singing that sounds breathy, flutey and hollow.
It's usually found in the upper registers of male and female singers.

We've all heard someone sing in falsetto voice at some point in our live. Some of the time, the breathy quality of falsetto is used for effect to sound otherworldly and beautiful or young.
Some of my favorite singers have used falsetto for effect.

But falsetto isn't always used for effect.

Sometimes, falsetto is the result of the voice breaking that is completely undesired.
We've all heard this too.
The voice cracks as it is rising and a breathy, cracky sound is all we hear-- usually with a drop in volume.
But in order to completely understand what causes falsetto, we need to take a look at the vocal folds.

The Mechanics of Falsetto Voice

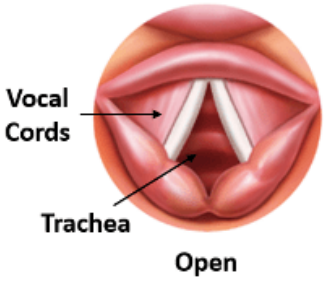
When we sing, the vocal folds (or cords) come together to vibrate.
This vibration is caused by resistance to the air coming from your lungs.
This vibration is rich in harmonic frequencies and creates the raw material of singing.
There are 3 modes in which the vocal folds can resist air from the lungs: pressed, breathy and flow.
Now each of these modes create a very different sound.
Here's what you need to know:

1. Pressed Phonation -- Pressed phonation is when there is an excessive amount of resistance to air at the vocal fold level.

Closed

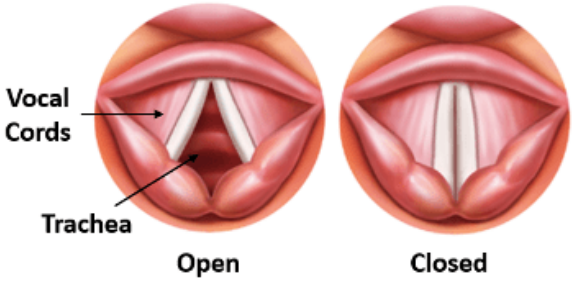
Since the cords are pushing hard against the air from your lungs, the resulting sound is "pressed" with a bright metallic tone.
Pressed Phonation is similar to singing with chest voice.
It results in a lot of sound, but can be a strainy if taken too high.

2. Breathy Phonation -- Breathy phonation is a mode where there is a lack of resistance to air flow at the vocal folds.



Since the vocal cords aren't pushing to resist the air, breath escapes and the sound is "breathy" with a flute-like tone.
Breathy Phonation is similar to singing with falsetto.
The breathy, fluty tone doesn't have the strength of the chest voice.

3. Flow Phonation -- Flow phonation is the perfect balance of air and muscle at the vocal folds.



The vocal cords are neither pushing nor giving too much so the sound is neither too pressed or breathy.
But it's still strong and resonant.
Flow Phonation is similar to singing with a mix of the chest voice and head voice.

Basically, falsetto is just a breathy version of head voice. Often when a singer is straining and too pressed in their singing, the muscles in the vocal folds can simply "give up" and disconnect.

So rather than having an even, balanced tone at the top, the voice goes from pressed to too breathy.

How Can I Put This to Use With My Own Voice?

Practice the head voice exercise given in this session and if you feel any pain or strain, stop and contact us immediately.

Use Warm-Ups to Strengthen Head Voice

Every warm-up that starts on the top and moves down develops your head voice. Using the ‘w’ also helps lengthen the vocal cords before you start singing, setting you up for a cleaner sound. My favorite exercise combines the two:
sing ‘we-e-e-ah’ on a simple arpeggio 1-5-3-1.
That would be C-G-E-C in a C-major scale.
Make sure to connect each note. Sing up the scale as high as possible without hurting your voice.
Once you feel you have mastered a simple arpeggio, you may also sing a 5-note scale beginning with ‘w,’ as in ‘we-e-e-e-e,’ on 5-4-3-2-1 or G-F-E-D-C in a C-major scale.

The key is to really close your lips as you produce the ‘wuh’ sound.