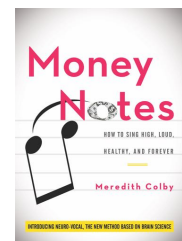




Making Them Stick

An Independent Voice Teacher's Guide to
Attracting & Keeping Singers of
Microphone-based Styles

by *Meredith Colby*
author of *Money Notes: How to Sing High, Loud,
Healthy, and Forever*



About the Author



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Meredith Colby teaches singing technique for microphone genres exclusively, and has for over 30 years. Meredith has a degree in Studio Music & Jazz from the University of Miami, over 20 years of experience as a busy freelance singer, a certificate of completion from the Neuroscience Academy, and has taken post-grad vocal pedagogical study as well as other continuing education. Meredith is a member of VASTA, The Voice Foundation, The National Association of Teachers of Singing, and the Speak Easy Cooperative for voice teachers. She writes for the VASTA Voice, Medium, and her own blog at MeredithColby.com.



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Introduction

You are awesome. You care about helping your CCM/Popular student. You want to learn how to best serve them, which is proof of your awesomeness.

Because I know you are awesome, I won't waste your time. We're gonna to talk turkey.

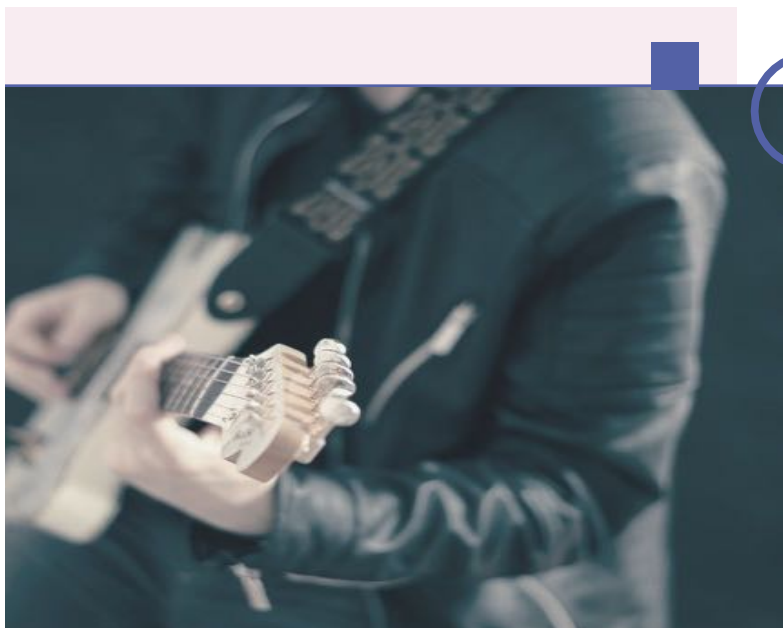
You've probably heard the adage;

"Never learn from your own experience what you can learn from someone else's."

I want you to learn from my experience, so you don't have to make mistakes that will cost you time, money, and maybe even good will.

In the following pages, you'll learn:

- What our landscape looks like
- Why you should read what I'm sharing
- Five power tools for being the best teacher possible for your CCM/Pop students
- Who your CCM/Popular student is, and what they want
- Why teaching CCM/Pop students can be a challenge
- How to scare away your CCM/Pop student
- The serious bottom line when it comes to CCM/Pop students



The World We Live In

As an independent voice teacher, you want to know what each potential student is looking for, and how to help them achieve the vocal freedom they need to express themselves. You want that for every student, regardless of the type of music they sing.

You also need to know what to teach them, and how, to make them want to stay with you. Your livelihood depends on it.

For most voice teachers, our jobs would be easier if our student rosters were populated only by people interested in classical and music theater. But it might also be less interesting. More importantly, as an independent voice teacher you know that's not the world we live in.

What those numbers mean to us – all of us music educators out there on our own – is that if we want to have prosperous studios we need to be able to attract and keep students who are interested in popular styles of music.

Voice professionals often refer to that kind of music as CCM (contemporary commercial music), pop/rock, or popular styles. I call that category by its common denominator: Microphone Music.



One of the lists curated by the data-collecting site Statista is for consumption of recorded music by genre in the USA in 2018. It put Classical (including all instrumental and vocal) at 1% and Stage & Screen (including movie music) at 2.7%. That's very consistent with numbers of the past several decades.

You may not be all that thrilled about that reality. You may not feel confident about teaching microphone genres, and you may have those feelings for any number of reasons. You've responded to inquiries by students looking for voice instruction for singing microphone genres, and you may have struggled with those interactions.

It's possible you feel like a fake, you're embarrassed by your ignorance, or you intend to convince them that pop singing is bad for them. But don't worry.

The same inquiry that makes you feel unsure can turn into a loyal student and your biggest fan!

There's Marketing, and Then There's Marketing

There are a lot of people and businesses that will tell you how to make a cool website and get it in front of people looking for service businesses (like ours). There are YouTube tutorials for days about getting found on search engines. That's great, and a great big, smushy "mwah" to those nice people willing to give away all that info for free. They're great.

But they're not us.



They aren't voice teachers. They *fer-sher* aren't *independent* voice teachers. They don't know how we make a living, who our students are, why those singers come to the first lesson, or what makes them stay.

I'm Like You; a Voice Teacher

I was (originally) classically trained, and I have a bachelor's degree in vocal performance. I've been teaching voice independently for over thirty years. I feel ya. It can be challenging to create and keep a profitable voice studio.

I was also, for over twenty years, just like that person who calls you for lessons. I was a band singer. A microphone singer.

I've spent thousands of hours standing between a bass amp and a guitar amp, with a kick-drum eighteen inches from my butt. I sang as a freelancer, in jazz ensembles and acapella groups, live and studio, with big bands, really loud society bands, as half of a guitar duo, and other stuff. All kinds of everything. But not classical. Not music theater. Possibly not the kind of music you're probably comfortable teaching.

Before I was a successful freelance singer, I was a broken singer.

Breaking and Rebuilding a Singer

I had taken eight years of classical lessons. Not because I wanted classical lessons, and not because I listened to or loved classical singing (as I now do) but because it was the



only thing the teachers who taught me knew how to teach. They believed, and told me, that it was the only correct way to sing.

That singing style didn't match up with my career plans, though. When I got out of college and auditioned for bands I sounded weird. Just...inappropriate, strange, and clueless. I didn't know how to sing the music that I wanted to sing.

My first singing job out of college was with the Miami Opera Guild. It was fun. It wasn't what I wanted. And because back then you could do that kind of thing, I subsequently got a job with a Top 40 road band sight-unseen. That was what I *really* wanted to do. I was excited to go on the road. We gigged five to six nights a week, three to four hours a night in bars and clubs all over the Western US.

I kept up that schedule for nine months – sounding wrong and trying to figure out how to sound less wrong - until I was no longer able to make any sound at all. My voice was trashed.

Back to my parent's home I went, for a year of various therapies to repair my voice. Then I moved to Chicago to try my hand at being a freelance singer. Overall it worked out pretty well. I sang a lot, with a lot of different bands, in a lot of different situations, and for a lot of years.

I logged my 10,000 hours.

I was able to do that because my first order of business upon my arrival in Chicago was to find a voice teacher. After all I'd been through, I knew that it had to be the *right* voice teacher, and my college friend hooked me up with a voice teacher who was from my world. He was a jingle singer, a concert singer, and a band performer.

I still remember feeling, at a certain point in my study, that I was finally singing. Actually singing. Not just making the singing-like-noise.

Let me tell ya, that experience turned me into an evangelist. I took graduate-level vocal pedagogy for a year, sat in on other (generous) voice teachers' lessons, and read books and articles about vocal pedagogy. I wanted to know enough so I could "first do no harm."

Beyond that I wanted right the wrong I felt had been done to me. I wanted to save all the pop singers from (what I thought of at the time as) clueless classical teachers; classical singers who would teach their pop students

the wrong technique and hurt their voices and/or their souls. I wanted to save them from what had happened to me.

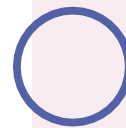
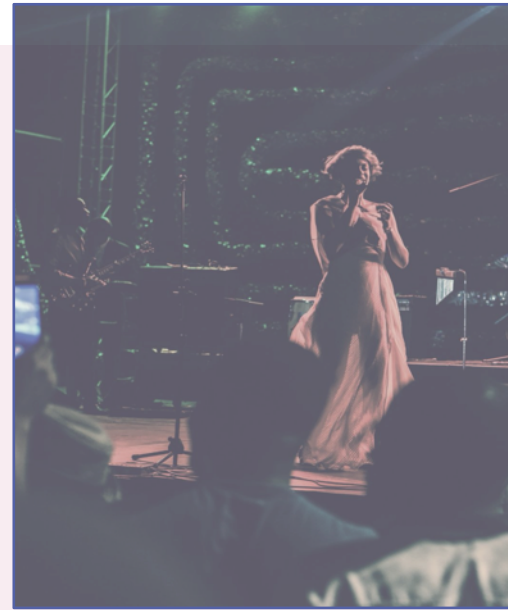
I was young and on a mission.

Let's Do You

So that's my story. Now I want to talk to you. You, the singer. You, the teacher. You, the person who has idealistically agreed to tend to the artistic souls of other people. You, the artist who believes in the power of song so much that you've embarked on the formidable task of teaching it to others.

Quick question: Does the next paragraph (kind of) describe you?

You went to college to study music and/or voice. Your bachelor's degree is in music. The music you learned about – execution, history, repertoire – was overwhelmingly classical with perhaps a bit of music theater thrown in. You're now a teacher who feels confident teaching classical method. You probably also feel pretty good about teaching most music theater technique. However, a student who wants to learn how to improve their singing of microphone genres makes your bicycle a little wobbly.



If that (more or less) describes you, you've come to the right place.

Since you're reading this, it probably means we'll be in touch. You're on my mailing list. Through that I'll let you know about things I think will be of value to you as a professional. Mostly things for voice teachers and vocal coaches. But sometimes things for singers, or for your students, or for you as a human being. Let's stay in touch!

In this little book-sicle, we're going to talk about your pop students, and about what they want and need from you.

The focus of it is what you, their teacher, want and need in order to have the tools to help your microphone-music students (as well as your contemporary music-theater students) realize their goals. What follows will inform - and maybe surprise - you.



Start By Shifting Your Focus

In college, you all sat around dishing about what was wrong with various singer's technique, and who was going to wreck their voices, and who should be singing a different fach. In order to help your microphone-styles singer you're going to have to change your mind.

What follows are five powerful ways to influence and inform your outlook on popular styles.

Google my video called *#1 Secret to Hitting Your Money Notes*. It's a three-minute time investment that will help you get started.

Your 5 Power Tools

1. Start with a new assumption

Listen to an established artist sing a few songs. Assume that the singer you're listening to is making their singing work. They've made a career of it. They're touring, singing every day (or every-other day) and they're singing 90-160 minute shows. The evidence shows that their technique is working for them. Instead of thinking, "What is this singer doing wrong"? think like a pedagogue and ask "What is this singer doing"?

Start picking apart what is actually going on with a singer so that you can put that together with your students.

You're also going to want to tune your ears to the music. You already do this, I'm sure,

in regard to opera vs. music theater. For instance, in an opera when somebody is dying or their heart is breaking, their singing is still beautiful. But in music theater when someone is dying or their heart is breaking, they're not required to sing beautifully about it. They can scream, gasp, growl, use glottal scrapes or Sprechstimme. Different music, different sounds.

With microphone styles, you're just going to throw your net wider; learn to be more sensitive to the different sounds that define different genres.

2. Throw Out Your Classical Rules

Popular musics don't have any musical rules, per se. The only rules you have to abide by are those that are important to the



individual singer. Really. You could name me any musical value - even something as basic as singing in tune - and I could name you a famous artist (or ten) who doesn't abide by that value and still has a prosperous career. Crazy, I know. But true.



When you're teaching students of microphone styles, it's important to keep checking with them about their musical values. Here's a for-instance that's so typical that I can almost guarantee you'll see it (if you haven't already):

Gerry writes songs. Gerry plays sitting down, and bends over his guitar, which inhibits his breathing. He writes in keys that are too high for him, cranes for the high notes, and is really pitchy. He also has horrible diction, so you have a hard time understanding his words. You're able to discern all this out in short order, and your inclination will probably be to start fixing Gerry.

But don't. Not yet.

Bear in mind that Gerry doesn't know that he's writing in keys that don't flatter his voice. He may not even have much of a concept of keys at all, never mind keys in relation to voice. (More on that later.) He doesn't know how his posture is affecting his breath and

tone. He also knows the words he's singing, so probably thinks his diction is just fine.

If you start fixing Gerry without giving him agency in how he's presenting his songs, he'll probably quit lessons.

If you talk to Gerry in a way that leads him to think that he's the only one having these issues, he'll probably quit lessons.

If you point out Gerry's inability to understand and apply basic music theory, he'll confirm, inwardly, that he's musically inept and should not try to learn from trained musicians. And he'll probably quit lessons.

Approach Gerry in a way that says, "You and I are both musicians, and I know a lot about singing. I can share some information with you that will give you more choices about how you're presenting your songs." And then do that. Take it one step at a time.

3. Use Other Artists As Examples

It's helpful and respectful to use examples of other artists when you're addressing his issues. Let's use Gerry for an example.

If you show him a John Mayer video and talk about how John is holding his guitar and what that does to his posture, and then why that posture makes it easier for John to sing five shows a week, then you'll have Gerry in your corner. That gives him agency.

4. Be Aware of Context

Let's say you teach Gerry about how his breathing works, and how his breathing works with his voice, and how his posture aids or inhibits vocal ease. Let's say that, based on your brilliant teaching, Gerry decides he's going to stand instead of sit when he sings, and adjust his guitar strap in a way that allows him to play his guitar without draping his body over it.

Gerry's feelin' good. His singing is feeling easier and the high notes don't feel so high. But you notice that he's still craning on his high notes. Not a lot, not as much as before, but there's still some craning. Enough to make your little voice-teacher-heart worry for his

vocal health. So you start nagging him about it.

Before you become a dog that won't let go of a bone, think about what Gerry does.

Is Gerry in a band that plays out several times a week? If so, let him know that the little craning is something he should be aware of, and if he's getting vocally tired, you and he will want to address that habit to see if it's the source of his fatigue.

Is Gerry playing short sets in a songwriters group, or at open mics? If so, that habit is *not* urgent. It's not going to hurt him. Let it go for now.

Is Gerry bringing you his home recordings of his songs and you can hear that his high notes are consistently flat? Time to talk to him about both the power of keys for a singer, and how reaching for high notes with your head can squish your sound.

Context matters in popular styles.

5. Get Trained Your Own Self

Healthy singing is healthy singing, but what sounds good in a given genre might sound really inappropriate in another. So, good singing is not necessarily good singing.



I'd suggest you do one or both of the following things (if you're not already):

A. Get a voice teacher who specializes, and with the intention of getting gigs.

You don't have to start wailing like Pink, but getting control of your vibrato and learning to sing some-flavor-of-pop/jazz songs in an aesthetically appropriate style would be both fun and educational. Also, working on your singing with someone who's an expert on a different kind of singing will definitely inform your teaching in a positive way.

B. Take a class, or get certified, in a teaching technique specific to microphone styles.

In case you haven't figured this out by now, I don't believe that one technique can be applied to every kind of singing. I'd recommend looking for a method that is specific to popular styles

I hope you want to explore Neuro-Vocal Method. It's easy, effective, and instantly applicable. Also delightfully science-y, if you like that kind of thing.



The Dish on Your Microphone Singer

It's more than likely that your microphone singer is not like the singers you're used to hanging around. That singer inhabits a different world with different values, cultures, skills, and beliefs.

Below is a bullet-point description of your microphone singer. (These are generalizations, so they assume exceptions.)

Your Microphone Singer.

The beginner:

- He doesn't read music.
- She's embarrassed about the fact that he doesn't read music.
- He doesn't consider himself a "real musician" because he doesn't read music.
- She may play an instrument by ear, and not at an advanced level or...
- He doesn't play an instrument.
- She has a lot of songs memorized, and sings along with the artist.
- He may or may not practice with karaoke tracks at home.
- She's very attached to between one and three artists, and would like to sing like them.
- He's taken a stab at writing some lyrics, but may not have told anyone and won't tell you unless you ask.

The experienced singer:

- She doesn't read music.
 - He's embarrassed about the fact that he doesn't read music.
 - She doesn't consider herself a musician because she doesn't read music.
 - He's a little afraid of being judged by you, a trained musician.
 - She believes that she's not singing "correctly" but also fears changing the way she sings.
 - The way he sings is his trademark, his identity. He's not looking to change it. But also he is.
 - If you played five classical sopranos for her, back-to-back, she wouldn't be able to tell the difference between them. Her ear is focused on things your ear is not.
 - He may play an instrument by ear, and not at an advanced level or...
 - She doesn't play an instrument.
 - He may or may not practice with karaoke tracks at home.
 - She doesn't take care of her voice in a traditional sense. (e.g., warms up by singing songs in the car at full volume, doesn't take vocal rest unless suffering acute laryngitis, etc.)
 - At rehearsals or gigs, he can probably hear himself enough to hear his pitch, but not enough to get any information about timbre.
 - She sports a "one of the guys" attitude, and doesn't like to complain or ask for special treatment from the band.
- He probably believes that only people who can't sing take singing lessons.
 - She has waited too long to call you (see previous).

The reality to the microphone singer's world, and the thing that should inform everything you do to help them is this: they generally cannot hear themselves when they sing.





They may be able to hear their pitch in the monitor. Maybe. They may be able to hear literally nothing of what they're singing. If they have really nice, in-ear monitors they'll be able to hear their pitch and some of their timbre. But even with in-ear monitors they cannot hear all the nuances that an acoustic singer can hear.

To use a painting analogy, what you hear when you sing acoustically is van Gogh's *The Starry Night*. What they hear is a five-year-old's drawing of a star.

These singers are calling you for the same reason any singer calls you. They want or need to express the way they need to express. But something is in the way. Specifically, you'll be able to break down your assessment to:

- They want to improve their singing skills and confidence to they can embark on

their musical journey.

- They are suffering from their lack of technique and knowledge, i.e., they want to conquer their break, or they're suffering from some manifestation of inflammation of the vocal folds.

A third reason would be that they are going to tour and are worried about losing their voice. In this case, though, it's more typical that their manager or label will be contacting you, and in that case you have to know how to talk to a manager or label, not a singer. We're going to stick with singers for now.

You need to be really cognizant of these two reasons. **You need to be aware that they are not calling you to learn how to sing the way you think they should be singing.**

You Again

I'm going to continue to assume that you were classically trained.

In classical voice, as Princess Fiona sang, "there are rules and there are strictures". This is not a bad thing in any way. It's true of all classical art. It defines the genre. In fact, from the beginning of your study, your end game is to both follow those rules *and* sing musically.

When you studied voice, your teacher was

trying to teach you how to sing classical music with the right technique for opera, lieder, and oratorio. If she was willing to teach you music theater, it was classically oriented music theater. It wasn't Legally Blonde.



In teaching you the correct technique for classical music, she didn't keep telling you that is was for classical music. She just told you this was proper technique. It's possible you had a voice teacher who told you that the technique used in classical voice was the only correct way to sing, and that singing in any other manner would do damage to the voice. But even if your teacher was accepting of other ways of singing, he was charged with teaching you classical voice. So he taught you the rules of classical voice. That teacher taught you how to reproduce the aesthetically acceptable sound of classical singing. No small feat on either her part or yours.

In a typical college music school or department, there's a lot of talk about what's "right" and "correct." There is dissection of singing into "good technique" and "bad technique." There's an assumption that good singing is the type of singing that the voice faculty would recognize and approve of, and that people who "belt" are in danger of "ruining their voices."

An aside...

If you had a voice teacher who loved the Backstreet Boys and Jennifer Hudson, then this stuff doesn't completely apply to you. If you went to a college with a progressive and more diverse music department, then this stuff only marginally applies to you. If these descriptions match your experience to any degree, though, then look for the seed of what can help you. Look for the thing you didn't know.

So there you were, a college senior, singing as well as you ever had, feeling sure about what constituted good singing, and what bad singing sounded like, and you got your diploma, and you were free to fly.

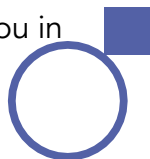
And now you're in the real world, teaching voice lessons. The people who contact you for lessons are decidedly *not* the same kind of people you left behind in college. They're primarily music theater singers, exploring beginners, people who want to sing microphone styles in pure chest mix, or gigging musicians who need help.

Your New Client

Here's some stuff you may, or may not, know about this client:

- If you tell those band singers that the way they sing is wrong, they won't come back.

- If you're not aware that their lack of formal music training can often make them feel dumb or inferior, you may inadvertently insult or put them down, and they won't come back.
- If they take between two and six lessons and then disappear, it probably means that they were giving you a chance, but realized that you don't understand their music and/or what they need.
- If, when talking to those band singers on the phone, you use your college words like "technique," "correct tone," or "classical" they won't schedule Lesson No.1 with you. (Or they'll schedule it and blow you off.)
- If you profess, in the copy on your site, that you're equally good at teaching any and all kinds of singing, those people might feel suspicious and won't call you in the first place.



What The Microphone Singer Needs from Lessons

In the real world of the independent voice teacher, you are very seldom in the role of "technique developer," as your college voice teacher was. You're in the role of "problem solver," as most freelancers are.



Your new student has come to you to solve a problem. It would be nice to think that they're trying to reach a goal. In fact, they may use the language of goal-setting, and you would be well-advised to use the language of goal-setting, but the truth is that your goal – at least initially - is to solve a problem.

Their problem will be, from their perspective, one of the following three things:

- Their voice gets tired or hoarse from speaking or singing
- They can't hit all the notes they want to
- They can't hit notes in the manner they'd like to

From *your* perspective, their problems are one or both of the following two:

- Inefficient phonation leading to vocal strain
- Inability to sing in a high chest mix*

* I choose not to use the term "belt" to describe a "mixed-voice" or "blended" sound because the vocal pedagogy community lacks consensus on the exactly what "belt" means.

This can present some challenges for the classically trained voice teacher.

- The things that sound good to you will (very likely) not sound good to them
- The values of the music styles they want to emulate do not adhere to the values you have learned
- They have a sense of urgency; they do not want to work for years to achieve healthy singing
- You probably don't sing in a high chest mix (unless you're a tenor), don't know what it feels like, and therefore don't feel confident teaching it.
- You may or may not be familiar with the artists or songs they listen to.
- You may have a strong dislike or distrust of popular singing. You may believe that singing in a high chest blend will hurt your student's voice.

Solving the Problem

If you looked at my exhaustive list of the two things your microphone singer needs from you, you might feel at a bit of a loss. Solving those problems may not be the way you've ever thought about vocal training or development. If so, you're in good company. The good news is that you're now conscious of things it might otherwise have taken you years to figure out!

You're awesome, and you can help your CCM/Popular student if you're willing to occasionally inhabit their world.



If you want to improve on your methods of teaching - or learn how to teach - popular styles, you can start by getting my book ***Money Notes: How to Sing High, Loud, Healthy, and Forever.*** It's written for the student, so that you're free to disagree, modify, or amend based on your experience and knowledge. You'll be able to see how I talk to that singer, and what I tell that singer. I promise you'll learn a lot. You can also take my online classes that will definitely rock your voice-teaching world! Look for the links that follow!

Wrapping It Up

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, says that in order to mature you must pass through the First Half of Life. You can't skip it, but must pass through it.

The First Half of Life is the time in which we learn the rules. We learn traditions, steps, and how to think. That's good stuff and completely necessary. As musicians and voice teachers we know that we can directly link our education, whether formal or not, back through centuries, teacher to teacher. We stand on the shoulders of great musicians every time we open our mouths.

But we can't get stuck there, reiterating the rules we've learned and re-teaching what's been taught before. If we get stuck there, we're through. If we get stuck there, everything dries up; our creativity, our income, our love of what we do.

To mature we need to embrace mystery, paradox, and shades of grey. We need to follow our curiosity out of our comfort zones and embrace what we do not know.

So kudos to you for being curious. You will explore, you will expand, and you will prosper. You'll have a kick-ass studio that people in your community talk about. Because you're just that fabulous!



Neuro-Vocal Method, which I use to teach technique for singing microphone styles, is based on brain science. It teaches the singer to exploit existing neurological tendencies to achieve a healthy phonation and authentic sound. **Money Notes** by Meredith Colby is available on my website and through Amazon.com.

If you're interested in Neuro-Vocal Method, here's your chance to take look. My online course *Introduction to Neuro-Vocal Method* is available at MoneyNotes.Teachable.com.

Use code **MAKINGTHEMSTICK** for \$25 off the already-low price!

A course in NVM Certification runs twice a year. Sign up for my not-too-often e-notices to find out when registrations begin!

Go to MeredithColby.com for more information!

